

The Public Reading of Scripture

“Until I come, devote yourself to the public reading of Scripture, to preaching and to teaching” (I Tim. 4:13 NIV).

In many hi-tech church services today, clips from popular movies are used to get the congregation’s attention and point to spiritual lessons. In an effort to win a hearing with unbelievers contemporary art is used as a “hook” and many times more than a hook. Film clips and other art forms sometimes become the basis of a pastor’s message. I have seen film excerpts used very effectively, and on occasion I have used a film clip or the words of a popular song to make a point. While this is sometimes valid, I’m afraid that by neglecting the centrality of Scripture the real meat of a church service is omitted. One thing is clear, throughout its history the church has made the public reading of Scripture a central pillar of its worship services. The fact that this strikes some as novel, too formal, or even boring, demonstrates how far the contemporary church has strayed from historic and Biblical practice.

Some groups are thoughtlessly drifting toward making a message from contemporary art the actual focus of their worship services. While this may be entertaining, it cannot be a good thing in the final analysis. A couple of years ago on a trip to Croatia, I bought a nice imitation silk rug. Nice and cheap, that is. If you’ve ever seen a genuine hand-crafted oriental silk rug, you know they are beautiful, durable, and exquisitely made, not to mention expensive. The genuine article just grows more attractive with age. The imitation in my office grows more ragged and wrinkled with age. I’m afraid those churches and pastors who are depending on Stephen Spielberg and Tom Cruise for their primary message are going to find their investment in people’s lives devalued in the end. We can go for something cheaper and more entertaining, but those who cherish the Scriptures will see their value increase continually over time. It’s like a sign hanging in a local jewelry shop, “The bitterness of poor quality remains long after the sweetness of low price is forgotten.”

C. S. Lewis, writing about the fourth century bishop Athanasius and the lasting value of sound teaching, put it this way,

He stood for the Trinitarian doctrine ‘whole and undefiled,’ when it looked like all the civilised world was slipping back from Christianity into the religion of Arius – into one of those ‘sensible’ synthetic religions which are so strongly recommended today and which, then as now, included among their devotees many highly cultivated clergymen. It is his glory that he did not move with the times; it is his reward that he now remains when those times, as all times do, have moved away. (C.S. Lewis, “Introduction,” to *St. Athanasius on the Incarnation*, MacMillan, 1946, xvii-xviii).

Scripture is the very voice of God speaking to the church. Public reading of Scripture has as much or more validity in the church’s historic practice than any other form of public worship. Singing of psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs, inspired utterance, testimony, fervent prayer, and sermons are to accompany the simple reading of

Scripture, not replace it. As stated in the book of Hebrews, *“The word of God is living and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart”* (Heb. 4:12). God’s word written is the primary means by which the Holy Spirit speaks to our souls today. That’s why we should make the reading of the Bible a personal habit, a family practice, and a corporate discipline. When an elder, the pastor, or a member of the congregation reads from the Bible in a service, we should be especially attentive for the voice of God to each of us. *“Thy word is a lamp unto my feet and a light unto my path”* (Ps. 119:105 KJV).

We are fortunate to have many good Bible translations today. Some translations, known as paraphrases, may help us to understand the message of Scripture. Among these are The Living Bible, and The Message. While these may be helpful to us, they should not be our primary source for Bible reading. I recommend the New International Version (not the new Revised NIV which bends the gender of Biblical language), The English Standard Version, the New American Standard, or New King James as your best sources for regular Bible reading. As a church, we have pew Bibles in place to help you follow the sermon or corporate reading of Scripture. We often place Bible readings on our overhead screen during church services to assist in corporate reading. If you do not possess a Bible we would be glad to assist you in getting one.

The apostle Peter put it this way, *“And we have the word of the prophets made more certain, and you will do well to pay attention to it, as to a light shining in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star arises in your hearts”* (II Peter 1:19).