

STEVE BURCHETT

*the*  
**MOST**  

---

**POWERFUL**  

---

**WORDS**

*a* PRIMER *on the* PUBLIC  
READING *of* SCRIPTURE

STEVE BURCHETT

*the*  
**MOST**  

---

**POWERFUL**  

---

**WORDS**

*a* PRIMER *on the* PUBLIC  
READING *of* SCRIPTURE

*The Most Powerful Words:  
A Primer on the Public  
Reading of Scripture*

Copyright © 2025 by Steve Burchett

CHRISTIAN COMMUNICATORS WORLDWIDE  
P.O. Box 12045  
Parkville, MO 64152

Purchase additional copies of this book at [www.ccwtoday.org](http://www.ccwtoday.org).  
For information about this and other  
publications write [info@ccwtoday.org](mailto:info@ccwtoday.org).

Scripture taken from ESV® Bible (THE HOLY BIBLE,  
ENGLISH STANDARD VERSION®), copyright © 2001 by  
Crossway, a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers.  
Used by permission. All rights reserved.

ISBN 978-0-9820968-8-8

ALL RIGHTS RESERVED

No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a  
retrieval system, or transmitted in any form by any means —  
electronic, mechanical, photocopy, recording, or otherwise —  
except for brief quotations in printed reviews, without the prior  
permission of the publisher. Subject to USA copyright law.

# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<b>Chapter 1 - Extraordinary Power</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>Chapter 2 - Thoroughly Biblical</b>	<b>15</b>
<b>Chapter 3 - Benefits</b>	<b>25</b>
<b>Chapter 4 - More Benefits</b>	<b>37</b>
<b>Chapter 5 - Passages and Readers</b>	<b>49</b>
<b>Chapter 6 - Reading Well</b>	<b>59</b>
<b>Chapter 7 - Listeners</b>	<b>69</b>
<b>Conclusion</b>	<b>79</b>
<b>Endnotes</b>	<b>81</b>

---

*\*For those who wish to work through this book in a group, I suggest that you read one or two chapters aloud each week and then discuss the questions at the end of each chapter. Chapter 7 can be read with the conclusion.*



# CHAPTER 1

# EXTRAORDINARY POWER

Jackson was a newly married young man who had been converted as a teenager and had eagerly participated in his local church ever since. One Saturday evening, as he and his wife were finishing a documentary, he got a call from one of his pastors. "Hi Jackson, this is Matt. How are you, brother?"

"I'm great, Pastor Matt. What's going on?"

"Well, Lucas was going to read Scripture tomorrow in our meeting, but he has a fever and won't make it. So I was wondering if you'd be able to take his place. We're up to Mark 8, which is kind of lengthy, but it

seems as if everyone is starting to enjoy hearing a chapter each week, and I think you'd do a good job reading. What do you say?"

As butterflies suddenly appear in Jackson's stomach, he squeaks out, "Uh, yeah, um, sure."

"Great! Be sure you get there early and read a little into the microphone to know what it will feel and sound like. And read through Mark 8 a few times before tomorrow, even out loud. If there is a word you don't know how to pronounce, there are videos online to help with that. Thanks so much, brother. I'll see you in the morning! Have a great rest of your night."

"Ok. Uh, see you tomorrow, Matt. Thanks again for the, um, opportunity."

As Jackson hung up the phone, his wife, Alyssa, noticed he looked pale. "What was that about?"

Jackson explained the call and then said, "Honey, can we pray about this? I've been asked to read in Bible studies, but never at the main meeting."

Jackson and Alyssa prayed together, asking God to calm his nerves and to make his reading clear and compelling. Alyssa even prayed something that Jackson thought was a little audacious: "Lord, make this the most gripping Scripture reading this church has ever experienced. Stun people and change people with your truth!"

After praying, Jackson got his Bible, went down to the basement, read through Mark 8 quietly, and then out loud. He stumbled over the word "Dalmanutha," unsure how to say it. A quick online search gave him a little more confidence. He read the chapter out loud again, prayed once more, and went to bed.

The next morning, Alyssa asked Jackson if he wanted to practice reading Mark 8 to her. He took her up on the offer. About halfway through, she interrupted, "You're reading really fast. I think you might want to slow it down a bit." At first, Jackson was frustrated, but he knew she was right and took her advice.

Quicker than seemed possible, Jackson was standing before the church. He forgot to mark his place in



Mark 8 (rookie mistake), so he fumbled around a few seconds (which felt like five minutes) before announcing the chapter, took a deep breath that sounded funny through the sound system (a few children giggled), and rapidly began, “In-those-days-when-a-great-crowd-gathered . . . ” He could hear his wife’s voice internally, “Slow down, Sweetie!” He calmed his pace and kept reading. He was doing so well but then pronounced “Dalmanutha” incorrectly — so much for listening to it online! He pressed on.

As he neared the end of Mark 8, Jackson came to Jesus’ words, “If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me” (v. 34). It was at this moment that he sensed something in the room — complete stillness. He felt tears coming to his eyes as he continued, “For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake and the gospel’s will save it” (v. 35). He thought he heard some sniffles. Perhaps he was only imagining it, but maybe, just maybe, Alyssa’s unusually bold prayer from last night was being answered.

Once he finished and sat down, Jackson heard little of what came next because he kept reviewing his reading and rebuking himself: "How could you mess up Dalman . . . Dalmu . . . Dalmanutha? Why didn't I have the passage ready to read? Why am I such an idiot!" But then he prayed quietly, "Lord, thank you for letting me read your word this morning. Please use it." The tension in his body started to leave.

At this point in the story, you might think I would now create a scene in which several people came up to Jackson after the meeting and talked about how "powerful" and "helpful" his Scripture reading was. But, in my fictional story, that's not what happened. Of course, Pastor Matt thanked him and told him he did a terrific job. Also, a sweet older lady named Margie gushed over him, but she does that for *anyone* who does *anything* in the church.

So what happened? As soon as Jackson and Alyssa were home, Alyssa hugged Jackson tightly and said, "Thank you, Honey, for serving us so faithfully this morning and honoring Christ so well. You made me want to read my Bible more. I love you so much." That's all that transpired, as far as Jackson knew.

But across town, the Reinhold family was hosting the Springers for lunch. While eating, Mr. Reinhold commented, "When Jackson was reading Mark 8 this morning, I heard Jesus say to 'beware of the leaven of the Pharisees,' and I thought, 'What exactly is he talking about there?' What do you all think?" The following 30 minutes were full of lively, fruitful interaction about Mark 8.

On the college campus close to the meeting place of the church, Crystal was back in her dorm room. She could not stop thinking about Christ's words at the end of Mark 8, "For whoever is ashamed of me and of my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, of him will the Son of Man also be ashamed when he comes in the glory of his Father with the holy angels" (v. 38). As Jackson read those words that morning, it was as if Jesus was there, speaking right to her. She had professed faith in Christ since she was nine but never sincerely stood for him. Christ's words convicted her deeply. A year later, when she was standing in a local lake to be baptized, she told the church that the day of the reading of Mark 8 was when she truly repented and began following Christ.

And what about the children who giggled at “breathy” Jackson that morning? Nothing noticeable happened in their lives that Sunday, or the next, or the next. But they all would conclude later in life, “We grew up in a church that took the Bible seriously.” Some eventually became believers, but if you were to ask them, none remember Jackson’s reading of Mark 8. However, if you could talk to the Lord about it, he would say, “I was there that day. Jackson was reading, but it was my word that those boys and girls heard. I made sure of that.”

---

Here is the truth: Jackson’s story could be your story, whether you read the Bible in the church’s main meeting or a Bible study with just a few other people. It does not matter if you are a well-studied fifty-five-year-old pastor or a new believer in college. We have the most powerful words in the history of the world at our disposal. And when we read Scripture to others, our omnipotent God speaks through us, animating the sentences coming out of our mouths so that those listening are helped immensely, if not changed for eternity. This is extraordinary.

As you will see in the following pages, this book is a primer (pronounced with a short “i” sound) on the public reading of Scripture.<sup>1</sup> There are better or worse ways to read the Bible publicly. We will think carefully about the basics and seek to improve.

But even if we read Scripture poorly, God might do something significant in the lives of those listening. His word is powerful, not the reader. That is no excuse to read badly, but remembering God’s sovereignty is a great relief when we do. The Holy Spirit is always far ahead of us, often doing surprising and life-changing work through even the weakest believer, including those who mispronounce words like “Dalmanutha.”

## Questions for Discussion

1. What is the current approach to the public reading of Scripture in your church's main weekly gathering? Has this pattern changed over the years? If so, how?
2. Have you been asked to read Scripture in a gathering of believers? If so, explain what thoughts you had and emotions you felt as you prepared and once you finished reading.
3. Who comes to mind as an exemplary public reader of Scripture? What makes this person stand out?
4. What do you hope to learn from reading this book?



## CHAPTER 2

# THOROUGHLY BIBLICAL

The US Naval Academy recruited Bill to play quarterback, though he was not a starter his freshman year. Following his first semester in school, he was in an automobile accident that permanently paralyzed him from the waist down. His football career was over.

After the wreck, Bill, who grew up attending a Catholic church, initially contemplated the God of his youth but soon rejected him and even wondered if he even existed. Futile attempts for purpose ensued, like purchasing a building and starting a nightclub. Depression settled in. He contemplated taking his own life. And then a man Bill believed



"had everything I thought would make one content" committed suicide.

Now what? More sin. But something else was going on in Bill's heart. As the sins mounted, so did the moral guilt. It was time to end his own life. He wheeled toward the bathroom to secure enough pills to overdose. As he passed a bookshelf on his way to the medicine cabinet, he saw a New Testament given to him in 1974. It had been in his possession for over two years, but he never read it until that day. What he read confronted his false views of Jesus, but he still was not persuaded of Christ's true identity. That would soon change.

I read through the New Testament in a few days, and then began reading it again. One day as I sat in my apartment pondering the things I had been reading, a great sense of guilt came over me. Not merely guilt feelings, but a genuine sense that my lifestyle was rebellion against God and his law. I did not know how to identify it at that time, but now I realize that God was "convincing me of sin." I saw with great clarity

that the source of my weariness with life was not my physical handicap. The source was my own sin and turning from God. At that same moment, the thought “Christ died for our sins” came to mind, and everything became clear. Who Jesus is, why he had come and died, what the true meaning of the resurrection was — all this made perfect sense.

That day, I became a Christian.<sup>2</sup>

The Bible is an awesome book! And think about this: if you have a copy in your language, you can read out loud to others the most powerful words ever written — words that speak eternal truth into momentary lives, words that save, words that sustain the weary and humble the proud.

We should not be surprised, then, that Paul charged Timothy, “Until I come, devote yourself to the public reading of Scripture, to exhortation, to teaching” (1 Timothy 4:13). When people think of the key verse regarding public Bible reading, this one almost always comes to mind. But did you know that God expected his people to hear his word read publicly

*throughout* the Bible? Below are most of the references to passages and verses on this topic, with some brief comments. I am concerned that some might read too quickly through this next section of the chapter. I would encourage you to slow down and read each portion of Scripture and my simple explanations of each passage or verse. You will not regret it.

## **A Concise Biblical Survey**

*Exodus 24:3-7* – The first public reading of God’s word in the Bible happened after God gave Moses the law. “Then he took the Book of the Covenant and read it in the hearing of the people” (v. 7).

*Deuteronomy 31:9-13* – Every seven years, all Israelites (v. 12, “men, women, and little ones, and the sojourner within your towns,” not just the men [cf. 16:16]) were required to attend the Feast of Booths to hear the reading of God’s law.

*Joshua 8:30-35* – Once in the Promised Land, the Israelites were defeated at the city of Ai (7:1-5), but then, with God’s help, they were victorious over Ai

(8:1-29). Israel subsequently renewed their covenant with the Lord, and Joshua read God's law to the entire assembly of Israel.

*2 Kings 23:1-3 and 2 Chronicles 34:29-32* – During King Josiah's reign in Judah, the high priest, Hilkiah, "found the Book of the Law in the house of the Lord" (2 Kings 22:8). He gave it to Shaphan, the king's secretary, who read it. Shaphan then read God's law to Josiah. The king then read God's word to "all the men of Judah and all the inhabitants of Jerusalem and the priests and the prophets, all the people, both great and small" (23:2).

*Nehemiah 8:1-8* – After returning from Babylonian exile and finishing the wall around Jerusalem, the people asked Ezra to "bring the Book of the Law of Moses that the Lord had commanded Israel" (v. 1). Ezra then read God's law to the people "from early morning until midday" (v. 3). Explanation accompanied the reading (v. 8).

*Luke 4:16-17; Acts 13:15; 15:21* – Scripture reading was a staple of the synagogue meetings, providing a strategic opportunity for Jesus and Paul to preach the gospel.

*Colossians 4:16* – Paul not only wanted his letter to the church in Colossae to be read to all the believers in that town, but he told them to “have it also read in the church of the Laodiceans.” As an apostle of Jesus Christ, he knew his word had authority beyond a typical letter of that day.

*1 Thessalonians 5:27* – Paul used the strongest language possible to ensure that all the believers in Thessalonica heard his letter. They were obligated to obey what Paul taught them by word or letter (2 Thessalonians 2:15).

*1 Timothy 4:13* – On his way to Macedonia, Paul charged Timothy to stay in Ephesus to confront false teachers and strengthen the churches in that city and the surrounding region. In a culture of people turning away from Christ “by devoting themselves to deceitful spirits and teachings of demons” (v. 1), Paul commanded Timothy, “Until I come, devote yourself to the public reading of Scripture, to exhortation, to teaching” (v. 13).

*Revelation 1:3* – Blessing is promised to the one reading Revelation aloud to a group of people

and to those who hear it read orally and respond appropriately (cf. 22:18).

## **A Consistent Practice**

This brief survey of Scripture reveals that throughout biblical history, God was very interested in his people hearing his potent word when they came together. They did this often, sometimes at length. When we read the Bible in our gatherings, we do what God has always expected of his people and what they have consistently done. Yes, 1 Timothy 4:13 encourages this critical activity, but so does much more of the Bible.

You might wonder at this point, "What about singing Scripture? Does that count?" I am not addressing that good practice in this book. I am not even thinking primarily about "responsive readings" (when one person reads a portion of a passage, followed by the whole group reading the next verse or section, going back and forth for perhaps a paragraph of Scripture). This book is about one person reading God's word in the presence of God's

people (as well as any unbelievers present), just as happened throughout the Bible.

## **A Logical, Loving Inclination**

Bible teacher Geoff Thomas joined a pastor friend who was visiting a mother and her newborn daughter. When they arrived at her home, her pastor asked, "Did you have a good night?"

She replied joyfully, "Not bad at all. The baby woke about half past five, and I fed and changed her and then it was half past six — too late to go back to bed. So I had my quiet time."

But it was not just *her* quiet time. She continued.

I picked up my Bible and said to the little girl as she lay in my arms, "Now God has given us this book. This is the word of God, and we Christians every day read it." So, I read the Bible to the child.

Then I said to her, "You know, after we've read the word of God, we pray. We speak to the

Savior who has given us this word." So I put her little hands together, and I prayed with her.<sup>3</sup>

This mother knew that the Bible contained the powerful words of life that would hopefully one day save her daughter's soul and give her direction and joy all her life. It was logical and loving to do what God's people have done throughout history and read this book to her daughter.

Pastors and Bible study leaders should have the same inclination when gathered with those under their care, echoing that mother's words: "Now God has given us this book. This is the word of God, and we Christians, every [time we are gathered together], read it."



## Questions for Discussion

1. What verse or passage of Scripture mentioned above, other than 1 Timothy 4:13, is most helpful to you in thinking about the public reading of Scripture? Why?
2. What other settings, besides your church's main weekly gathering, include public Scripture reading? Who reads in those settings?
3. What public Bible reading practices have you observed in other churches? Does anything stand out as worthy of implementing or avoiding?

# CHAPTER 3

# BENEFITS

We often think about familiar verses of Scripture in isolation from their context. A classic example is John 3:16. 1 Timothy 4:13 is in the same “contextless” category. Here is that verse again: “Until I come, devote yourself to the public reading of Scripture, to exhortation, to teaching.”

What prompted the Apostle Paul to command Timothy to do this? By answering this question, we will have a fuller understanding of that verse and see how beneficial it is to obey Paul’s charge today.

## **The Context of 1 Timothy 4:13**

In telling the fictitious story of Barnabas Sackett coming on a ship from England to America in the

1600s, Louis L'Amour describes Sackett's shipmates like this: "They were rascals, no question of that, and a dirty, poisonous lot, enough to kill the fish for miles if dumped into the water."<sup>4</sup>

In Ephesus, some false teachers had fallen into the "waters" of the churches in that city and region,<sup>5</sup> and they were having a poisonous and potentially deadly effect. This is why Paul began his first letter to Timothy with these words.

As I urged you when I was going to Macedonia, remain at Ephesus so that you may charge certain persons not to teach any different doctrine, nor to devote themselves to myths and endless genealogies, which promote speculations rather than the stewardship from God that is by faith. (1 Timothy 1:3-4)

There were men in Ephesus, possibly former elders in the church (cf. Acts 20:30), who taught a "different doctrine" that did "not agree with the sound words of our Lord Jesus Christ and the teaching that accords with godliness . . ." (6:3). Their teaching was a "depart[ure] from the faith" and demonic (4:1),

focusing on the law and externals (1:4a, 7; 4:3). They suppressed the gospel as they majored not only on the minors but the obscure. "Weirdness" became the norm, and Christ was overshadowed.

Though supposedly biblical, the teaching of these men went beyond what Scripture plainly says, both in its original context and its connection to Jesus. They were obsessed with speculative theories (1:4) that became "vain discussion" (v. 6). Those who fell prey to their teaching were led away from salvation by grace through faith in Christ and the love that flows from that (v. 5). Instead, embracing the "different doctrine" of the false teachers produced "envy, dissension, slander, evil suspicions, and constant friction" (6:4b-5a).

The church in Ephesus was in big trouble, and Timothy had to command the troublemakers to stop. But Paul not only wanted Timothy to rebuke the false teachers, he was to strengthen the church in multiple ways, including by reading the Scriptures to those believers. So Paul commanded Timothy, "Until I come, devote yourself to the public reading of Scripture, to exhortation, to teaching."

## **The Content of 1 Timothy 4:13**

Two preliminary thoughts on this critical verse will be helpful. Notice, first of all, that Paul says, "Until I come . . ." That does not mean that the practices mentioned in that verse would end once Paul arrived, as if Paul was saying, "Do this 'until I come,' and then stop." Instead, the idea was, "Make sure that you are devoted to the public reading of Scripture, to exhortation, and to teaching all of the days leading up to my arrival." Those practices would have continued once he came.

Second, Paul's words to Timothy seem to imply that the verbal ministries of "exhortation" and "teaching" are to immediately follow the Scripture reading, similar to what took place in synagogue meetings (cf. Luke 4:16-17; Acts 13:15; 15:21).<sup>6</sup> Even if we assume that was Paul's expectation, the public reading of Scripture does not always require further encouragement from and explanation of the text just read. That typically will happen at least once, if not multiple times, in a meeting, but it does not have to happen each time the Bible is read. In Colossians

4:16, Paul said the letter to the Colossians was also to be read to the church in Laodicea, indicating that Scripture can be read publicly without accompanying exhortation and/or teaching. It is also possible that, even though in 1 Timothy 4:13 Paul was talking about reading Scripture at the main meetings of the church, the exhorting and teaching he was calling Timothy to would have also happened throughout the week as he ministered among the people.

### **The Benefits of Obeying 1 Timothy 4:13**

Why was the public reading of Scripture so strategic for Timothy's ministry in Ephesus? The answers to this question will reveal a few benefits of the public reading of Scripture for our churches.

*First, the public reading of Scripture demonstrated the priority and authority of the Bible.*

When Timothy gathered with believers, the Bible was to be central. It might have seemed as if the false teachers were focused on the Bible because they read from the law, including (and perhaps especially) the genealogies. But that was it. Scripture was just

a springboard that launched them into promoting their strange ideas and telling of far-fetched stories that lacked any authoritative appeal flowing out of the Bible's true meaning.

In contrast to the false teachers, Timothy would have read not only the Old Testament but any apostolic writings he could find. His commitment to the public reading of Scripture told his listeners that there is a voice that must be heard and obeyed above all — God's — and that *all* of what the Lord says is "profitable" (2 Timothy 3:16).

Nothing has changed today. Reading from all over the Bible with care and even at length, and sometimes reading the same passage multiple times *before* any exhortation and teaching, says to those listening, "We *must* hear from God, and reading his word is the fundamental way to do that." And when exhortation or teaching does follow the reading of Scripture, the speaker communicates to his listeners, "What I am about to say is based on what this book says. I am just a messenger of the Lord, communicating 'as one who speaks the oracles of God' (1 Peter 4:11)."

Additionally, including more Scripture reading from multiple places in the Bible conveys the centrality of Scripture for the church not only in its meetings but all of life. It is a way to publicly agree with Jesus when he said (quoting Scripture): “Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God” (Matthew 4:4).

*Second, the public reading of Scripture protected against heresy and promoted unity in the truth.*

The false teachers were “devoting themselves to . . . teachings of demons” (1 Timothy 4:1), but Timothy was to “devote” (same word as 4:1) himself to a Bible reading ministry out of which would typically come exhortation and teaching. By doing this, Timothy confronted the distortions and falsehoods of the false teachers and preserved the unity of God’s people in the truth. It is difficult to know if this included Timothy calling those men out by name. What is clear is that the commitment to the Bible called for by Paul would have proactively strengthened, protected, and united the believers in the face of the grace-denying message of the heretics.



Timothy would have read the law these false teachers seemed to love so much, including the genealogies, but he would not have stayed there. The storyline of Scripture finds its fulfillment in Christ, and Timothy would have made sure the believers knew the Bible's redemptive trajectory, helping them to keep believing and proclaiming the gospel of grace. This perseverance in the truth was essential if Timothy was going to be the human instrument through whom God protected and preserved his people in Ephesus and throughout Asia (see 1 Timothy 4:16).

False teachers are still a problem in our churches; some even arise from within. Unlike the first century, we also have to deal with heresy coming into the lives of God's people through technological platforms. The consequences are sometimes devastating and eternal. We need *more* Scripture coming into our minds and hearts if we are going to persevere. J.C. Ryle warns, "Ignorance of the Bible is the root of all error, and a superficial acquaintance with it accounts for many of the sad perversions and defections of the present day."<sup>7</sup> It was true in Timothy's day. It was true in Ryle's day (the 1800s). It is still true in our

day. We are foolish to skimp on the Scriptures in our meetings.

*Third, the public reading of Scripture blessed people who could not read and/or had little access to God's word.*

I have ministered numerous times in the countryside of Ethiopia. I recall walking into Sunday morning gatherings well before the main meetings and seeing people listening intently as someone up front read Scripture over an extended time. This usually happens because the literacy rate in the community is low. Also, access to Bibles is sometimes limited, so this is a weekly opportunity to hear God's word. Seeing the Scriptures read like that in the presence of spiritually hungry people is a memory I cherish.

A similar dynamic was undoubtedly at play in Ephesus. Access to Scripture was limited, and illiteracy was common. The public reading of Scripture was critical to their spiritual well-being.

You might argue that today, in your context, literacy is the norm, and Bibles are ubiquitous, so there is no

need to emphasize the public reading of Scripture. However, it is worth it if only a small minority cannot read. You also must not forget that reading Scripture publicly has other benefits, such as the first two explained in this chapter. And keep reading because, in the next chapter, we will consider even more benefits.

## Questions for Discussion

1. Throughout this chapter, I mentioned that false teachers were a problem in Ephesus, Timothy's base of operations in Asia. What do you remember about how Timothy was to respond to this challenge? In what ways are we faced with a similar situation today?
2. Consider again the word "devoting" in 1 Timothy 4:1 and "devote" in 4:13. What is a different word or phrase that expresses the meaning of that word? Have you ever seen or heard about such devotion? Share that story.
3. Read aloud the three benefits of obeying 1 Timothy 4:13. Which benefit seems most urgent in your church setting? Why?



## CHAPTER 4

# MORE BENEFITS

A young man once sat with his back to the pastor as he spoke. The pastor pressed on in his sermon. A few moments passed. Finally, the pastor *could not stand it anymore* and asked the youth to turn around and pay attention. He knew this young man would benefit deeply — maybe eternally — if he listened.

No believer would dispute that Bible teaching is critical for both unbelievers and believers. But so also is “the public reading of Scripture” (1 Timothy 4:13). Just as the pastor in the above scenario was not just “going through the motions,” those who read the Bible with others present should consider it an unusually weighty responsibility that might change the lives of those listening.

So far, we have considered three benefits of the public reading of Scripture. First, it demonstrates the priority and authority of the Bible. Second, it protects against heresy and promotes unity in the truth. Third, it blesses people who cannot read and/or have little access to the Bible. All of those benefits are primarily tied to the context of First Timothy. In this chapter, we will aim to think more broadly than that specific book of the Bible and consider additional benefits of the public reading of Scripture.

## **Benefitting Believers**

A fourth benefit of the public reading of scripture is that *believers living in a culture full of godless sound bites will hear from the one true God who always speaks the truth.*

Through multiple sources, our wicked and perverse age communicates meaningless mantras and questionable quips meant to frustrate and enrage. Rabid audiences gorge themselves on scandals and gossip. Even mature believers sometimes

struggle to avoid the hysteria. They also find themselves wondering, "Who should I believe? Who is trustworthy?"

Church gatherings are a respite from this chaos, but only if God's truth fills our minds. "The words of the LORD are pure words, like silver refined in a furnace on the ground, purified seven times" (Psalm 12:6).

*Fifth, Scripture read publicly speaks to believers' lives, sometimes in specific ways.*

We should never forget that if God chooses, he can do more in a believer's life through a single verse read out loud than a lengthy sermon. I am not speaking against solid, extended teaching. I am emphasizing the uniqueness of Scripture and God's power and omniscience.

The Spirit of God sometimes moves through the public reading of Scripture such that people listening might even think the person reading knows something about their lives. Joanne Shetler, a Bible translator among the Balangao people in



the Philippines, shares what often happened when a finished portion of the translation was read publicly.

People were offended by the Scriptures often enough that the elders made it a practice to announce before reading from the Word, "You're going to think we know something about you and we're exposing it. But, honestly, nobody's told us anything. This Book just uncovers hidden things. It's just the nature of the Book."<sup>8</sup>

If we more often remembered that this sometimes happens, we might read with more care and anticipation.

*Sixth, hearing Scripture audibly sometimes makes something stand out in a way that it might not when read privately.*

Sometimes, I hear Scripture read and think, "That word is in there?" It is as if I need to listen to a familiar portion of Scripture read by somebody else to know that a particular word or phrase is used or emphasized. We might also privately read a passage

with a specific tone but then hear it read publicly and conclude, "That is a different vibe than what I have always thought, but it makes more sense."

*Seventh, the public reading of Scripture causes believers to hunger for more of God's word.*

In the first church I served as a pastor, a member was a regional leader for an organization called Girl Scouts. They are especially famous for their annual sale of different types of cookies. One year, this church member was responsible for giving away many boxes of cookies not sold during that year's sale. She asked if it would be okay to stack the boxes on a table in the church's fellowship hall, "And you would be free to eat as many cookies as you want." I could not agree to this arrangement fast enough!

The following week, I decided it was time for a treat. I ventured into the fellowship hall, beheld the mountain of cookies, and thought, "This is going to be a problem." You see, it seems humanly impossible to eat just one or a few of those cookies. I attempted to limit myself on most trips to the summit, but failed miserably.

Believers who hear the Bible read have a similar experience. God has changed us; our affections are now different than before Christ invaded our lives. Therefore, hearing the Scriptures read whets our appetites for more beyond the gatherings of the church. Sure, like a car sitting outside all night in frigid single-digit temperatures, we are sometimes cold and stiff. But the heat of the Scriptures has a way of thawing us out.

An eighth benefit of the public reading of Scripture is humbling to those tasked with giving the main message: *if the teaching is weak or confusing, at least those in the gatherings have heard something clear and substantive (especially if a longer portion of Scripture is read).*

I am not seeking to give Bible teachers an excuse to prepare lazily and teach poorly. I am only speaking from experience because, as hard as I try to communicate the Bible well, I sometimes fall short. There are those Sundays when, as I heard one man say, a pastor feels like “becoming one with the road pavement” after finishing his sermon. I am not even

sure what that means, but I have felt it! But here is the encouraging thought: when the teaching is weak, at least those in attendance can hear at length from Scripture. When God speaks, he never fails.

One final benefit to consider is this: *for some believers who are currently not disciplined in Bible reading, the public reading of Scripture becomes critical for their perseverance.*

Even though most believers have heard numerous sermons about the importance of “daily devotions,” they often find themselves in too much of a rush in the morning to slow down and read the Bible, and then are just too tired at night. They might have committed to a Bible reading plan at the beginning of January, but failed by the end of February. They wish for more and should be more disciplined, but it is a struggle. A true believer in this state will recognize this lack of discipline and seek to make changes. In the meantime, the public reading of Scripture may be the key way a weak believer hears from God.

If you are a church leader, do you read much Scripture in your gatherings? If not, why is that? Is it because you are in too much of a rush to “finish on time” or to get on to “more important matters” (like that sermon you spent hours preparing that week)? Be honest in your assessment. To relegate reading the Bible in our meetings to something secondary or brief fails to recognize that there are weak believers present who have not been in the Bible much on their own. These people need more Scripture to hydrate their dry souls like a dehydrated person needs more water and may not even know it. Furthermore, going light on Scripture reading demonstrates the very behaviors we discourage in the lives of believers throughout the week.

## **What About Unbelievers?**

How does the public reading of Scripture benefit those who do not know Christ? The following story will provide the best answer to that question.

Before Deb knew Jesus, she had a heroin addiction.<sup>9</sup> While staying at a friend's place, she found a small

New Testament when she was looking for matches in a drawer. She started reading it while high. She testified, "I saw in the Bible that I was in real trouble with a real God." Deb concluded that she needed to get to a church.

It was Good Friday when Deb entered a church building for a service, "sitting at the back of the church . . . ready to make a quick getaway." She shares what happened next.

But then they started reading from the gospel of Matthew about Jesus' crucifixion. And I just sobbed because what I heard was that he had died on the cross for me; that all the things I had done and the punishment that was coming my way, he had taken on the cross. And when he cried out on the cross: "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" I realized that it was for me that he was forsaken. He had taken my forsakenness.

And I just sobbed. I just burst into tears. He'd done that for me so that I could be not forsaken — and I just knew that I was God's daughter.

I was sobbing, absolutely sobbing. I don't know what people thought, but I didn't really care, because I walked out (of) there knowing that God is my Father and life has just changed from that moment on.

Though the public reading of Scripture is primarily about the believers in attendance, do not forget what God might already be doing in unbelievers' lives before they arrive. And remember how the Spirit might use the reading to save lost people — even those who, like Deb, grew up in the home of atheists and are addicted to a deadly drug that is ruining their lives.

## Questions for Discussion

1. Read aloud the six benefits for believers of the public reading of Scripture explained in this chapter. Which benefits have you experienced personally? How?
2. Are there any additional benefits of the public reading of Scripture that come to mind? Share and discuss.
3. Is there ever a reason to have less public Scripture reading?





## CHAPTER 5

# PASSAGES AND READERS

The entire Bible takes approximately 75 hours to read. How do we choose what to read in our church meetings from this thick book? Also, is any believer allowed to read Scripture publicly?

### **Choosing Passages**

Some churches are highly structured in their approach to the public reading of Scripture, while others are intentionally diverse. Both strategies have advantages. Wherever you fall on the spectrum, here are some ideas for selecting Scripture to read publicly.

First, you may aim to be *systematic*. For example, you could have Old Testament and New Testament readings each week, going through particular books of the Bible consecutively. Or you might read a single book of the Bible, one chapter a week, and move to another when finished. This significantly organized approach has the advantage of helping people to become familiar with a particular book (or books). It also might cause people to grow in their knowledge of the *whole* Bible.

Second, you may try a *thematic* approach. One way to do this is to pick portions of Scripture related to a particular subject (e.g., the love of God) and read those passages for several weeks. Another way is to choose Scripture to read that complements the sermon and/or music, though this approach requires significant coordination before a meeting.

Third, you may prefer *spontaneity*. You could choose a different portion of Scripture each week without reference to anything previously read or the teaching and singing that week. In some settings, you could utilize this approach by asking people to

read a portion of Scripture from their personal Bible reading in the past week. I once taught something from Habakkuk 3, and then in the following "open session," when people were free to share about matters like recent evangelistic experiences and prayer needs, multiple people read from different places in the Bible that fit well with what I had taught that evening.

Some churches may choose to combine the above approaches in some way. I recommend that strategy, especially if you have various types of gatherings, formal and informal. The Bible does not give us any prescribed expectation beyond, "Read it!" We are free to vary how we do this.

Whatever approach you take, at some point, you will find yourself asking, "Is this portion of Scripture wise to read in a church gathering?" For example, 1 Chronicles begins with nine chapters of genealogies! If we read chapters like those, not only will we have difficulty pronouncing all the names, but even the most mature believers might be distracted and fail to stay alert. Perhaps the better strategy for such

long genealogies is to read *selectively*, highlighting and reading a few things in those lists of names, and then moving on. Some genealogies, though, such as at the beginning of Matthew 1, seem critical to read word for word.

Just as there may be times not to read specific passages, there will also be occasions to read Scripture *extensively*. For example, if you are starting to teach through a book of the Bible, you might choose to read the entire book at the start of your series. If the book is too long for that, you could at least read multiple chapters. This lengthy reading might occupy the bulk of your teaching time that first week, but it is one way to give people a feel for the message of the whole book and how it fits together. You might even do this at the end of teaching the book.

## **Choosing Readers**

Who may read Scripture in the church's meetings? Only designated leaders? Any church member? Just men? What about women and children?

Every church should obey Paul's admonition, "I do not permit a woman to teach or to exercise authority over a man; rather, she is to remain quiet" (1 Timothy 2:12). Yet one church might believe that if a woman is asked by a pastor to read, that verse is not disobeyed and, besides, "In 1 Corinthians 11:5, Paul talked about women praying and prophesying in the church meetings." However, another church might understand 1 Corinthians 11:5 differently. Or they might agree with that understanding of 1 Corinthians but argue that it is better to have men do the reading in the main meeting in order to promote male leadership.

This debate is reasonable for those who want to honor the head of the church. Leaders of local churches need wisdom and courage regarding this delicate subject. My purpose in this book is not to be polemical about this issue but to encourage better public Bible reading.

We all could agree, though, that restrictions observed in the main weekly meeting may not be necessary for other meetings, such as a ladies' Bible study or

a youth meeting. Perhaps even the location might change things. In my church, our main meetings are in homes most Sundays, but every six weeks or so, the entire church comes together in a rented space. When in someone's living room, sometimes several people read Scripture throughout the night — men and women, and sometimes the youth (with only men leading and teaching). Yet, when we gather as a whole church, we see that as a unique opportunity to emphasize male leadership and utilize the men (pastors, but also other men) as the readers. You may disagree, but before judging too quickly, make sure you are basing it on careful study of the relevant passages of Scripture, plus consider the freedom we each have in this matter.

## **Developing Readers**

In the next chapter, we will consider how to be better public Bible readers. However, I will conclude this chapter by giving leaders three practical ways to develop individuals who will read the Bible publicly.

First, ask others to read in “smaller” settings. Leaders tend to dominate. They call everyone together. They

pray. They explain how things are going to go. They read the passage. They teach. In some meetings, that makes sense. However, allowing others to read in smaller settings, such as a men's Bible study at a coffee shop, is wise. It is as easy as saying, "Brett, read for us (fill in the passage)." Some men are not smooth readers, but that can change over time. Even if a man never reads the Bible in a larger meeting, at least his family will appreciate his growing ability in this area when he reads Scripture at home.

Second, give some individuals an opportunity to read in larger gatherings. Thinking of men specifically, if we are going to train them so that some become leaders in the church, this is an easy entry point into potential future ministry. They probably will not do as well as a seasoned believer or pastor would, but that has never stopped the Lord from using his powerful book.

Third, have a Bible reading seminar. Include some teaching, but the aim is not for people to just sit and listen. Give people opportunities to practice reading with one another. Depending on the size, you could



have them work on a passage privately, and then each participant could read it in a small group. You could end the time by having each person read to the whole group. Developing this skill and hearing so much Scripture sounds like a beneficial way to spend a morning or day together!

## Questions for Discussion

1. List the various ways mentioned in this chapter for choosing passages of Scripture to be read publicly. Which have you seen most often? Which do you prefer? Why?
2. Regarding reading *selectively* (reading a portion of a passage or even skipping an entire section), what do you believe is the best practice? Why?
3. What are your thoughts about reading some passages (i.e., Song of Solomon) that some would say are inappropriate to read publicly?
4. What could be done to develop more good Bible readers in your church?



## CHAPTER 6

# READING WELL

"To read well, is a rare accomplishment. It is much more common to excel in singing, or in public speaking. Good preachers are numerous, compared with good readers."<sup>10</sup> That quote from pastor and seminary president John Broadus is not meant to discourage but to spur us on to work hard to become better readers of the Bible in public. What follows is intended to help us toward that goal.

In this chapter, I am thinking primarily about the public reading of Scripture at a church's main weekly meeting. However, some of these ideas should also be utilized in other settings.

## Before Reading Publicly

What can you do to be ready to read publicly?

*Observe the text.* Read the passage multiple times. What is emphasized? What type of literature is this, and how does that help to understand the passage's tone? What is the author conveying to his original audience? How can we apply it today? Even if you are only going to read the text (without exhorting or teaching), accurately interpreting the passage will aid the reading. Listening to others read the same portion of Scripture on a Bible app is an additional way to observe the passage and will provide further understanding of the text's emphases.

*Read the text out loud.* Find a private place and do this multiple times. This practice is critical. You will often come across names to look up online to learn the proper pronunciation. You might also practice in front of someone in your family.

Once at the meeting location, if using a microphone, practice reading with it. We sometimes hear musicians

warm up before the meeting starts. It is reasonable that Scripture readers would get a few minutes to prepare.

*Hold the text.* When I say “hold,” I am encouraging using a paper Bible. Make sure the font size is easily readable. I understand if someone must have a device because of poor eyesight. Even then, I strongly recommend taking a physical Bible to the front (in a traditional setting) as a tangible reminder of where these powerful words come from.

*Pray about the text.* Even though you are about to be saying God’s words out loud, that does not guarantee that the people seated before you will even be listening, let alone moved and helped. God’s words are effective, but only if accompanied by his presence. Pray for God to open ears and hearts.

The British evangelist John Blanchard took his responsibility of reading Scripture publicly very seriously. On those Sunday mornings that he was to read at the church meeting, he would get alone in his

bedroom beforehand, pray, and then intensely study and read his passage first in the version he would read at his church but also in other translations. He also consulted commentaries to learn the passage's overall direction and tone a little better. Blanchard would eventually practice reading by placing his Bible at about the same height as it would be at the morning service. "If I made so much as a single slip of the tongue, a single mispronunciation, I would stop, walk back across the room, and start again, until I had read the whole passage word perfect perhaps two or three times." He practiced so hard that he sometimes stained his white shirt with sweat!

In sharing his approach, Blanchard asks the following.

Does that sound like carrying things too far? Then let me add this: I was told that there were times when after the reading . . . people wanted to leave the service there and then and go quietly home to think over the implications of what God had said to them in his word.<sup>11</sup>

## **When Reading Publicly**

The time has come to read. Now what? Let's think this through somewhat chronologically.

Some people think a slow walk to the front (if in a traditional setting) and a somber spirit are necessary. A normal pace seems more reasonable and less likely to draw attention to yourself. You might even be expected to move fairly quickly to the front. Sobriety is appropriate because we should not appear to be doing something cavalierly. However, a smile to begin is often helpful, though never to be forced.

Start with a clear announcement of the text and pause to allow people to find the passage. The text probably needs to be announced louder than you would think, and the pause should perhaps seem longer than you might prefer. If using pew Bibles, announce the page number for those without their own copy of Scripture. Sometimes, you may not announce the text, but just begin reading. However, I am speaking about the typical approach.



Should any introductory words be given before reading? This may depend on the setting and the one doing the reading. For example, if a lady reads with men in the meeting, it would not be appropriate for her to teach even in an introductory way (cf. 1 Timothy 2:11-14). And sometimes, I have observed men who were not supposed to be teaching and exhorting along with the reading spend far too much time explaining the text, distracting people from the Scriptures themselves. Yet there are other occasions when introductory words and/or a brief comment after reading is profitable.

Once you are reading, do not speak too quickly or too slowly. Think about varying your speed. Let the text guide you. Some verses should have a quicker pace. Those who are older will appreciate it if you slow down sometimes. The goal is to be heard clearly. It might also be helpful to pause once or twice and look up at the hearers, but beware of overdoing this.

I am not suggesting being overly dramatic, and you should seek to use your natural voice. However, if

you read Scripture without some feeling and variety, you will often miss the tone that is appropriate to the passage, and you might come across as if the Bible is boring. Author Bryan Chapell illustrates what I mean: "You do not convey the meaning of the words *Jesus wept* if your voice makes it sound as though he did not care."<sup>12</sup>

You also should aim to read loud enough that you are heard. After all, that is the point! Nervousness, a product of lacking confidence, often leads to speaking too softly or trailing off the last quarter of each sentence. Some might object, "Quietness communicates reverence." Not always, and probably not often.

Here is an idea for pastors and other Bible teachers: consider reading your passage multiple times before you begin explaining and exhorting from it. Let's be honest: *you* may not even hear yourself read your text the first time! Somehow, we can read it out loud and carry on another conversation in our minds — "Huh. Susan isn't here today. What is going on with that window? Oh man, I should have

gone to the restroom before we started.” And those are just your thoughts, but what about everybody sitting there who is not reading? So, there is often a need for the text to be reread (or at least a portion of it, if lengthy). You might even encourage people to listen for something the second time through (e.g., repeated words or phrases, pronoun shifts, contrasts, tone, etc.)

### **When I Wondered if I Even Needed to Teach**

I was the guest speaker at a church one Sunday. I had been to this church more times than I could count. I knew they would have a set time for one of the men to read from the Bible. When that Sunday’s reader stood before the congregation, I could almost feel the moment’s importance. He began to read from one of the Psalms. Everyone in the room could tell he was reading something that he treasured. Tears fell from his eyes, forming streams down his white beard. We heard from God that morning. I remember thinking, “I’m not even sure I need to teach after *that*.”

Here is something that I hope will be an encouragement to you: if I were to walk through the ideas I gave above about how to read the Bible well publicly, the man in this story was below average on several of them. It is a good reminder that as much as we might practice and as hard as we try to read well, the kind of people the Lord uses in this critical ministry will always be those who first are “humble and contrite in spirit” and who “tremble at (his) word” (Isaiah 66:2). Ministry that flows out of communion with God is powerful, even if it is not polished.

## Questions for Discussion

1. Discuss John Blanchard's approach to the public reading of Scripture. Does his preparation seem excessive? Why or why not?
2. What have you seen done well or poorly when people are reading Scripture publicly?
3. Read Psalm 1 quietly. Once everyone has read the text, share brief answers to the following: What does the text emphasize? What is the tone? Is there a portion to read with a quicker or slower pace? At what point might you pause when reading? What is the overall point of Psalm 1? As time allows, take turns reading. Discuss what you appreciated about the readings.

# CHAPTER 7

# LISTENERS

One of the worst effects of always accessible entertainment options and social media is that our attention spans are shrinking. We all feel it and experience it almost daily. In pastoral work, I commonly hear people say, "I used to be able to sit and read at length, but I'm not very good at that these days," or, "My ability to listen to a sustained argument has gotten worse." These moments of honesty are typically followed by a statement like, "I've got to quit spending so much time online."

We must not ignore the reality that people are showing up to church meetings not only changed by online habits but distracted, more easily agitated, and more eager than ever to question authority.<sup>13</sup> This should not keep us from the public reading of

Scripture, but it should cause us to ask this question: How can church leaders help people thrive under the public reading of Scripture?

## **Preparation**

*Teach what the Bible says about the public reading of Scripture and its benefits.*

Perhaps more often than most leaders realize, believers must be reminded why we do whatever we do when we come together as a church. Just because people have observed the public reading of Scripture does not mean they know how biblical and critical it is. I would not suggest you teach about this often, but consider if you have neglected to explain and model this as you should have.

*Encourage physical and mental preparation before arriving.*

Young people especially need to be challenged to consider the importance of a good night's sleep. Also, a gentle reminder about the effects of too much technology might be helpful. If we are not

careful, we can bemoan this issue too often, but periodic discussions about it tend to be worthwhile.

*Recommend listening to Scripture throughout the week.*

Encourage church members to listen even to large sections of Scripture privately while doing other tasks and when just sitting and relaxing. Your aim in promoting this is not primarily so that they will listen better at church meetings but because the Scriptures will feed their souls. However, the person who makes this a habit privately will enjoy the same publicly.

I remember author Jim Elliff's story about his wife, Pam.<sup>14</sup> One day, he noticed that she was listening to something while vacuuming. "WHAT ARE YOU LISTENING TO, HONEY?"

(The vacuum turns off). "Romans."

"How many times have you listened to that?"

"I don't know, maybe 50."



Fifty?! I am confident of three things. First, Pam Elliff knew the content of Romans very well. Second, her soul was fed. And third, she listens well to the public reading of Scripture at church meetings.

*Ask them to pray.*

We need God's help. Encourage the believers in your church to pray for themselves related to their participation at the meeting, including while listening to the Bible, and let them know how important it is to pray for their fellow brothers and sisters in Christ who will be sitting with them.

## **Reception**

What are some ways to help people to listen better to the public reading of Scripture?

*Ask those in attendance to listen either with an open or a closed Bible.*

For the reading of the text that will be taught during the sermon, it is preferable for people to have an open Bible and follow along. Make sure that guests

and those who forgot a Bible can access a copy (if not using a phone) and know where to turn. Telling them the page number, if you have pew Bibles, is a kind way to avoid embarrassing someone not good at navigating Scripture.

For Scripture reading without teaching, some people listen better by looking at the reader. This is especially true if they have a different translation. You might have to convince some people who have been told all their lives, “Make sure you look in your own Bible while I read!” that it is not only acceptable but might even be advantageous to simply look and listen. Others, however, pay attention better if they employ multiple senses — hearing and seeing the text.

*Encourage those in attendance to sit up and even stand up if necessary.*

Some traditions automatically have people stand during the public reading of Scripture — a practice described in the Bible (Nehemiah 8:5)<sup>15</sup> but not prescribed. Whatever your practice, good posture

(whether sitting up or standing up) promotes better listening.

Perhaps you wonder, "Would it be appropriate for someone to stand during the reading if nobody else does?" Yes, as long as it is not distracting. I can imagine a couple of reasons why someone may want to stand. First, the text may move the individual so much that it is a way for him to honor God's word physically. I have seen this happen multiple times in churches, including my own. Another reason a person might stand is because he is very sleepy, but he knows just how critical it is to hear Scripture. Standing aids alertness. We have proactively encouraged this practice in our church. It does not happen often, but when it does, people appreciate someone taking the Bible so seriously.

*Urge the use of a paper Bible.*<sup>16</sup>

I once watched a man leading the Sunday morning meeting at a church sit down in the front row (during the offering) and pull up a social media app on his phone. Then, while we were singing, he was checking

his email! Perhaps he had an urgent situation in his life. But I am probably being too kind.

For a small percentage of people with poor eyesight, screens are helpful because of the ability to increase the font size and brighten the screen. But most of us do not need all of the distractions that come with using a Bible app. There is also the benefit of having a “location memory” when we use the same paper Bible over and over versus a scrolling digital Bible. For example, I can tell you what side of the page some chapters and verses are in the Bible I have used for many years. This sometimes benefits me when thinking through a particular subject or counseling someone. Regularly using the same paper Bible in a church meeting will only increase that kind of stored knowledge.

## **Slow and Steady**

If you are in a church with very little public Scripture reading, you might be inspired to introduce more. Beware of overdoing it. Too much, too quickly, may frustrate most of those in attendance. A better

strategy would be to increase the amount of reading over time. For example, if you have no readings other than before the message, you could start with a paragraph of the Bible at the beginning of the meeting. If you already have an established time for reading, perhaps the next step would be to add something substantive before one of the songs.

You can also strategically incorporate public reading in other church meetings. You could begin the weeknight prayer meeting by saying, "Let's start by having a few people read something from Scripture that you've been thinking about or thought was helpful that came out of your Bible reading this week. Let's first be quiet for a few moments to consider what you might read. That way, once we start hearing from one another, you can listen more carefully."

After a few minutes, you could say, "Let's take time now and have some Scripture read. Just let us know the passage, and don't share anything about the text; just read it. Who would like to go first?" To ensure this goes well, prepare two or three people

*before the meeting to jump in once the time for reading arrives.*

Lastly, do not forget to pray. Ask God to give those under your care a growing hunger for more Scripture and a loss of an appetite for the trivialities of this world. And lead the way. Demonstrate a love for the Scriptures in your own life. Improve your Bible reading skills. And remember to encourage others as they seek to improve in this strategic practice. Do what it takes to become a church that loves to hear the Bible read, even at length.

## Questions for Discussion

1. Do you ever find it challenging to pay attention to the public reading of Scripture? If so, why do you think that is the case?
2. Under the heading "Reception," review aloud the three ways to listen better to the public reading of Scripture. Is there one way that would prove helpful to you personally at your church's next main gathering? Why?

*\*Read the conclusion to this book on pages 79-80.*

3. In what ways has your view of the public reading of Scripture been changed or refreshed by reading this book?
4. For leaders: is there anything you need to do immediately to increase and/or prioritize the public reading of Scripture in your church?

# CONCLUSION

When given the responsibility to read Scripture publicly, I sometimes find myself thinking, “I’ll do fine reading that passage. I don’t need to prepare.” Even worse, I might not even look at the Scripture I am to read until I am standing in front of people to read! I have needed to be reminded of what the Bible says about the public reading of Scripture, better ways to accomplish this, and the numerous benefits of this practice. And then to remember — this is God’s powerful word! Why would we keep such a treasure from God’s people?

Pastor and author Jim Orrick shared a story he heard about a professor at a university in the Bible Belt of America. This popular teacher once professed to be a believer but then apostatized. He sometimes had classes with around 1,000 enrolled. In one of his classes, he asked the students, “How many of you believe the Bible is the word of God?” Most students raised their hands.



The professor then asked the students how many had read all three volumes of a very popular and current work of fiction. Once again, almost all of the hands went up.

Finally, the professor asked, "How many of you have read the Bible from cover to cover?" Only a few students raised their hands.

The professor then stated, "See, you do not really believe the Bible is the word of God. If you did, you would read it."<sup>17</sup>

What that professor said is correct, not only regarding our personal lives but also when we gather with the body of Christ. If we really believe the Bible is God's word — the most powerful words the world has ever encountered — we will, we *must*, read it publicly. Not in a few Sundays. Not even a couple of Sundays from now. *This* Sunday.

## Endnotes

- 1 A “primer” is a brief introductory writing on a subject.
- 2 “From Suicide and the Wheelchair to Christ,” at <https://www.ccwtoday.org/2025/05/from-suicide-and-the-wheelchair-to-christ/>, accessed May 12, 2025.
- 3 “Daniel 9: The Prayer of Daniel,” at <https://geoffthomas.org/index.php/gtsermons/daniel-9-the-prayer-of-daniel/>, accessed April 15, 2025.
- 4 *Sackett’s Land* (New York: Bantam Books, 1975), 71.
- 5 Timothy was not a pastor of the church in Ephesus but an apostolic representative serving under the direction of Paul in the church of Ephesus and in the surrounding region, which would have included multiple churches. For simplicity, I will typically refer to just the church of Ephesus without always qualifying that Timothy also ministered as Paul’s delegate in additional churches in the area beyond Ephesus. For further reflection, see Steve Burchett, “The Role of Timothy and Titus: Apostolic Representatives, Not Pastors,” at [www.ccwtoday.org](http://www.ccwtoday.org).
- 6 Two translation notes: (1) “Scripture” is not in the Greek text but is typically accepted as the object of the three

practices mentioned. Initially, the available Scripture would have been the Old Testament (taught in light of the coming and teaching of Christ and his apostles and prophets) and perhaps Paul's letters and some extant Gospel accounts (see 1 Timothy 5:18 where Paul quotes both an Old Testament passage, Deuteronomy 25:4, and then Luke 10:7), but soon would have included other New Testament writings as they became available. (2) "the public reading" could be translated, "the reading," but this single Greek word (*anagnosis*) is translated "public reading" because, first, it is placed alongside "exhortation" and "teaching," both public ministries of Timothy, and second, the same practice occurred in synagogue meetings (Acts 13:15).

7 *Warnings to the Churches* (Monergism Books), 98, at <https://www.monergism.com/thethreshold/sdg/ryle/Warnings%20to%20the%20Churches%20-%20J.%20C.%20Ryle.pdf>, accessed February 29, 2024.

8 *And the Word Came with Power*, 5th ed. (Wycliffe Bible Translators, Inc., 2006), 123.

9 The following story and quotes are at <https://www.christianityexplored.org/what-is-christianity/real-life-stories/debs-story/>, accessed February 29, 2024.

10 John A. Broadus, *A Treatise on the Preparation and Delivery of Sermons* (New York: A.C. Armstrong and Son, 1894), 479.

11 Quoted by New Covenant Baptist Church in a pdf, "Public Scripture Reading Workshop," Appendix B.

12 *Christ-Centered Preaching: Redeeming the Expository Sermon* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1994), 337.

13 This is one of the consequences of an online world in which everyone can have their own platform with their own voice that is assumed to be "equal" to all others. For more on this, see Chris Martin, *The Wolf in Their Pockets: 13 Ways the Social Internet Threatens the People You Lead* (Chicago: Moody Publishers, 2023), 140-3.

14 As Jim Elliff's assistant, I have heard him share this story in various ministry venues.

15 See also Luke 4:16-20 which shows Jesus standing up to read Isaiah in the synagogue at Nazareth on the Sabbath day. Once he finished, he "rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant, and sat down." After sitting down, Jesus taught them the meaning of Isaiah. This was the normal pattern in the synagogue meetings — stand to read, then sit to expound what was read.

16 See Steve Burchett, "3 Reasons to Prefer a Paper Bible Over a Digital Bible at a Church Meeting," at <https://www.ccwtoday.org/2025/05/3-reasons-to-prefer-a-paper-bible-over-a-digital-bible-at-a-church-meeting/>, accessed May 9, 2025.

17 I heard Jim Orrick tell this story in a sermon at a youth camp in Salina, Kansas, in June of 2023. According to an email exchange with Orrick, the quotes may not be exact, but the overall gist of the story is accurate.



Please visit our websites:

**[www.ccwtoday.org](http://www.ccwtoday.org)**

This is our main site, with numerous articles, ministry tools, audio messages, and information about ordering our publications.

**[www.bulletininserts.org](http://www.bulletininserts.org)**

This site provides timely and instructive bulletin inserts, handouts, and tracts. We offer free, downloadable inserts (also available in A4) for every Sunday of the year.

# THE MOST POWERFUL WORDS

If you have a Bible in your language, you have the most powerful words in the history of the world — God's words — at your disposal. What are we to do with these words, especially when gathered with other believers? Paul told Timothy, "Until I come, devote yourself to the public reading of Scripture" (1 Timothy 4:13). But how is this practice beneficial to those listening? And what are some better ways to read Scripture publicly, whether in a church's main weekly meeting or when asked to read in a group Bible study? These questions and more will be answered in this book, which is meant to say to you, "You can be a conveyor of powerful, living words designed to accomplish great things that will matter for eternity."

Questions for group study are included at the end of each chapter. Though this book's subject may initially seem to address church leaders only, all believers will benefit from reading and discussing this book.

---

Steve Burchett is an assistant to the president of Christian Communicators Worldwide. He also serves as an elder in Christ Fellowship of Kansas City.



Kansas City, Missouri, USA  
[www.ccwtoday.org](http://www.ccwtoday.org)

ISBN 978-0-9620966-6-2



9 780982 096888