

Reading Scripture in Church

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“Till I come, give attention to the public
reading of scripture.”
I Tim 4:13

“So they read distinctly from the book”
Nehemiah 8:8

These verses form the Biblical background for the important place of public reading of scripture in the church. They also explain the prominent place we give to the public reading of scripture at Hope Baptist Church.

The apostle Paul made it clear that the churches should give attention to the public reading of scripture. This practice has gone somewhat out of style these days as people prefer more entertaining methods. Media raised people are not used to long readings. They prefer short sound bites and rapid image changes in their communication fare. So, a general observation of the churches I am familiar with, is that we have lost patience with reading scripture.

This is a terrible mistake and church leaders should either make sure they continue it regardless of the pressure for more hip methods, or if it has been lost, to recover it. We dare not let it go out of use, no matter what contemporary media addicted people think about it. God has spoken!

Movie clips and drama's have replaced the reading of scripture in many churches. This is a tragedy. No, movie clips and plays should not replace the reading of scripture no matter how much more entertaining and relevant they might be to the modern crowd.

I heard a local pastor say that the reason he does not read big sections of scripture during the Sunday morning services, is that “we notice that the people zone out.” But, he said, “they come to life when we show movie clips.”

The reading of scripture should be one of the most honored and sacred parts of our gatherings. It is here that the church gets a pure testimony from God - a perfect Word from the Holy Spirit. In fact, the reading of scripture will be the only perfectly pure teaching the church will receive during her meetings. So, church leaders should take pains to place an emphasis that makes the readings sacred and honored times.

My belief is that we need to do whatever is necessary to build churches full of people

who relish long readings of the Word. We can cultivate a taste for it by careful and lengthy readings of the text. Our taste for it will increase as we find joy in doing it. And our joy in the reading will increase with use.

For the person reading scripture, a time like this requires great preparation both of the heart and the body.

First, let's take the preparation of the heart. The heart is moved only by what is in the mind. So, your mind must be properly instructed so that it can properly instruct your heart, so that it is in sync with all that God is communicating. To get there will take many readings - slowly. I like to recommend that scripture readers read the passage no less than 20 times, prayerfully. They need to read it silently and out loud.

Our technique will improve with passion that is only built through familiarity. When Ezra read the law to the people the narrative says, "So they read distinctly from the book" (Nehemiah 8:8). This is a description of careful reading that should form a pattern for us as we read scripture publicly.

Then there is the preparation of the body. By this I mean that you understand the meter and tone and have a sense for how it should be read. This means practicing out loud, to get the right inflections and timing so that it is read with great passion and clarity.

Deut 31:10-13 makes it clear that long readings of scripture were common in Israel. When Moses is aging (120 years old) and getting ready to pass the baton to Joshua he issued a command to gather everyone together every seven years and read the entire law. This means that they would read the entire Pentateuch: Gen, Ex, Lev, Num, Deut 32:47. There was a fourfold Purpose: First, to hear the law. Second, to learn to fear the Lord. Third, help the people carefully observe all the words of the law. And fourth, for children to hear it. It is strange to modern ears that Moses wanted the little children to sit and listen to 6 hours of reading.

Nehemiah 8:1-12 Records an event in obedience to Moses command, of the actual reading of the entire law to all of the people, from the youngest to the oldest.

Here is an actual account of how this was done in the days of Nehemiah after the Babylonian captivity. During the captivity, the people did not carry on the practice of reading the law every seven years at the Feast of Tabernacles. I would like to bring out five observations of this event.

The time spent: Six hours from daybreak to noon.

Their respect for the Word: they stood up - 8:5

Who was there: All ages

The honor given to the Word

The joy that was the result: v10-18

The reading of scripture is not a time filler, inferior to the preaching and worship. It should be given great emphasis. It should be engaged in with great passion. It should be done with careful preparation. It should be conducted with the care of one who is handling treasure – “fine gold”. As we do so, we will beautify the Bride of Christ. The church is beautified to the extent that we bathe her in the precious promises and principles through the reading the Word of God.