

Why Read the Word Publicly?

Reading the Word publicly is a good thing. Some just want a little bit; a few verses here and there. Other times as much as a whole chapter might be read, but then the speaker focuses on two or three verses. I remember a pastor who took a year to go through the book of Hebrews. I happen to like reading large portions, not only in private for myself, but in public meetings as part of worship. I think the more of the Word we can take in the more the Spirit can write it on our hearts and change us to conform to God's will. Ten chapters at a time are better than a few verses or the words of men for many reasons I will discuss shortly.

There are those who think that taking an hour to really focus on a couple of verses imparts more understanding and promotes memory retention or spiritual growth, but this is not proved out as far as I can see. What seems to happen more often is that the speaker shows off how much knowledge he has, listeners dodge hearing the Word and having to make changes in their lives, and the same elementary doctrines are covered over and over again. Many sections of the whole and complete Word are not covered or barely covered. Besides, I can't count the number of times I've discovered new information in a verse after hours of so-called "in-depth" study. Spiritual growth goes begging with the two-verse-an-hour readings, and congregants simply do not know the Word. We can see the effects when houses collapse during storms. It's God's Word that gives us life, not the words of the priest or pastor.

If I lead a meeting I use a reading schedule that is popular in synagogues called the Parasha or Portion. The schedule divides the first five books of the Old Testament (the Torah) into weekly pieces or portions, but we modify it to include readings from the first five books of the New Testament too. There are also lots of extra readings in the schedule from the prophets and verses which in the New are quoted from the Old portion.

All this reading takes a while. We might spend as much as 35 or 40 minutes reading about nine or ten chapters, especially when kids are reading. That's about as much time as many pastors take preaching a sermon. Honestly though, reading the chapters out loud is much more effective in getting the Word of God into a person's heart. Pastors may mean well, but their words just do not have the same benefit as the words we hear from God Himself. Some might argue that pastors give the meaning of what is read, but that's just not true in my decades of experience. Just look at the condition of the church. Mostly pastors give opinions, push denominational theology, and try to relate current events to the section they are reading. Or they push emotionalism in an attempt to influence behavior. Let's be honest, too. Pastors in the main think their flocks are just too stupid to understand the Word as it is read.

There's something about reading together, out loud, that makes the Word more vibrant and realistic. Even when reading some of what seems to be boring details, like a genealogy or how to build a Tabernacle, God's message is getting out in new and fresh ways because we hear it in new and fresh perspectives. I also think the impact depends on the condition of the heart. If

our hearts are hard reading the Word out loud seems dull and boring. But it isn't the Word or the reading that is the problem. King Jehoiakim of Judah (Jeremiah 36) illustrates this well. He's the one that cut off sections of God's written Word sent to him by the hand of Jeremiah which were read out loud by Jehudi, and put them in the fire.

In teaching, repetition three times is supposed to help us remember better. Usually this repetition is by writing, reading, and hearing. Nowadays we add viewing videos to the mix too. So if we read out loud after having read it ourselves at home and then talk about it, our memories are surer and our hearts are less likely to forget.

We need the repetition of reading out loud in public too. We forget what the Word says on a regular basis, and so on a regular basis we need reminding. Repetition in a reading schedule every year helps to soften the heart so the Spirit can write God's Law on it (Jeremiah 31:31-34). It cements the Word in our hearts and our brains. It habituates us into going to the Word for answers and illuminates the answers to life's pressing issues. If only we would read it and do it...

People who don't want to read large portions of the Word out loud are missing out on a lot. Believers get to immerse themselves in the flow of the Spirit from God when we read together.

For he whom God has sent utters the words of God, for he gives the Spirit without measure. (John 3:34, ESV)

God tells us in pretty clear terms to do so in Deuteronomy 6:6-9 when He tells us that not only should His words be on our hearts but also doorposts and foreheads and to talk of them everywhere. There is also a command to read the entire Torah every seven years at Tabernacles (Deuteronomy 30:10-13) and that the king had to make a copy to keep on hand to read constantly (Deuteronomy 17:19). Okay, maybe he didn't read out loud (except for King Josiah at least in 2 Kings 22:10 and 23:2). But he had to make a copy by hand, and make sure all the people read it too. Moses did it (Exodus 24:7). Joshua did it (Joshua 8:34). Nehemiah did it and there was a strong reaction from the people (Nehemiah 8 and 9). Jeremiah (through Baruch) did it. Jesus did it (Luke 4:16). It was a standard practice in the early church or synagogue (Acts 13:15, 27; 15:21, 31). John tells us that we are blessed when we read aloud the words of "this prophecy" (Revelation 1:3). Paul not only wrote letters, he said they should be read publicly (Colossians 4:16).

Paul also tells us to "devote yourself to the public reading of Scripture" in 1 Timothy 4:13. I suppose you could say that instruction was just for Timothy, but I think in light of the many other Scriptures on reading that what is implied is that it was a practice that was common and high on the list of activities when believers gathered together. Copies of the Bible were not distributed then as they are now. We have so many copies and translations now that most of them just gather dust on a coffee table (which is another reason we should read large portions in public). But back then there were probably just single copies that a whole group would have to

share. Public reading was a must if for no other reason than the shortage of copies. Then there's the instruction by Paul "not to go beyond what is written" which implies knowing all that was written, which in turn implies that public reading covered all of what was written at the time (mostly the Old Testament).

Most church-goers will say they read the Bible, but do they read the whole thing or just the same few verses over and over again? It's been my experience that reading for most is only those verses the pastor reads when he says, "Turn with me to (whatever reference he is going to preach on today)." I say this because most are unaware of basic teachings of the Bible such as the New Covenant. I have not found a single church-goer so far who can tell me what it is or where it is found in the Word. Reading large sections of the Word out loud remedies this situation. If the only reading done is during the sermon, then use the sermon time to read the Bible instead.

One of the reasons we don't read the Word is that it challenges us. It moves us out of our comfort zones and draws us to reflect on our behavior and repent. We humans are not very fond of that sort of reflection. We'd prefer to stay comfortable, thank you very much. Reading the Word out loud removes excuses for not knowing what God requires and gives us a blunt choice: are we going to do what He says or not? No weaseling, no claims of ignorance or confusion from what the pastor said anymore. Reading puts it all out there and it causes a reaction. Either we embrace it or reject it. There's no middle ground. Reading large portions out loud exposes the lie that we read His Word privately on a regular basis.

If we stick with the pastor's message instead of public reading, there is an added bonus for those who want to avoid the discomfort of God's Word. A pastor's word we can ignore, or dismiss as just an opinion. If we listen to God through His written Word, however, it is more authoritative and harder to let go in one ear and out the other. If we're only hearing some guy's opinions we can even write a check and feel like we've given fair market value for time spent, like buying tickets to a play or something. Reading out loud through large chunks of the Bible, on the other hand, is much more specific and demanding. "Thus says the Lord" leaves very little wiggle room for feel good opinions. It's too much like a demand to change, and change now.

For the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and of spirit, of joints and of marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart. (Hebrews 4:12, ESV)

This curious reluctance to read out loud also has another cause I think. When we avoid reading out loud, what we are really saying is that we already know what the Word says and we don't need instruction. In view of the lack of Spirit fruit in our assemblies I would classify this as a sort of apathetic arrogance or pride. We don't know the Word, we don't follow the Word, yet we don't need to read it? It is the source of life, light and love which contrasts with our dark, hateful world and still we hesitate to read large portions publicly. This, sadly, is commentary on exactly the reasons for the darkness and the hate. Silently we resist hearing His Word; but we can

spend hours and even days playing video games or binge watching favorite series. Is it any wonder that our lives are as messed up as the TV shows?

Reading out loud is work. It's much easier to let the pastor, priest or rabbi do the work of preparing a nice message and finding all the references for us. Then we blend his message in with all of our other entertainment options. Reading out loud takes patience, longsuffering, humility, faithfulness and goodness. We have to labor to show ourselves approved. In short, it allows us a chance to show and produce more of all the fruit of the Spirit.

We have to be humble because maybe we don't read very well. Or we worry over how to pronounce words, or we think we will look bad if we don't pronounce them correctly. As an aside comment to this, let me just say that I don't think any of us really know how the words were originally pronounced or even spelled for that matter. So we shouldn't be so picky or proud that we forsake the many benefits of public reading of the Word just because we might fumble a bit. Besides, if we keep reading out loud we will all learn to pronounce as well as anybody.

Any group led by me is going to get a good foundation from reading the first five books of the Bible out loud. Adding the first five of the New Testament connects both sections and a bunch of His teachings together. It emphasizes that the Word is one faith delivered to one body by one God and Savior (Ephesians 4:4-6). We cannot begin to understand what the apostles teach until we share their foundation. So many sections of the Torah (the first five) are quoted by the apostles that in my view if we do not have the foundation we are bound to misinterpret. And the church really does misinterpret all the time.

We need the foundation to stay on track. Every prophet, good priest and every godly king of Israel used the Torah to keep their lives in line with God's will and taught others to do the same. They did this in part by proclaiming the Word publicly. The people of the time of the Judges did badly because they didn't keep reading the Torah and doing what it said. Ultimately Israel was kicked out of the land because they didn't read the Torah and did not do what it said. The religious leaders of Israel read the Torah but didn't do what it said, so they killed the Lord of Glory and persecuted His remnant. The church does not read the Torah or do what it says, in some ways proudly, while going so far off track they too are at risk of judgment.

Without the foundation of the Torah, we wouldn't know the Promise (Genesis 3:15) and how it relates to the actions of Jesus. We wouldn't know why the writer of Hebrews (4:2) calls the Law the gospel or good news. There would be no knowledge of the New Covenant or why it was needed. Without the foundation of the Old Testament Jesus would have been regarded as just another itinerant preacher. Every book written after the first five was based on the Torah, referred often to the Torah, and expected that people were to live according to its precepts.

Once we have the foundation, the Spirit can build a framework with us for living out the Word in all its power and life. Reading alone does this too, of course, but reading out loud is one more tool God uses to make the house strong. Maybe we can humorously think of it as another

whack with the hammer. Seriously, though, understanding how the parts fit in the big picture only comes from fitting them on a frame built on the foundation, and the better the framework, the better the house. As long as the foundation is on the rock, the building will stand up to even the strongest storms.

Reading large sections corporately gives us context not only for the section we happen to be reading but also for the entire Bible. It's like hearing testimony in court. All writers of Bible books after the Torah quote from, teach, reinforce, and preach from the Torah. So it behooves us to know the subject matter from which they get their material. Without the Torah the Bible doesn't make any sense. If we just read a few verses here and there we have no context or proper understanding of events and other teachings. Jesus made it a point to say that He did not come to abolish the Law but to fill it up full of the Spirit and love as it originally was intended to have. He surely didn't mean that He didn't come to abolish but to abolish. He obviously meant that He didn't come to abolish but to establish. He also tells us that if we don't believe Moses we won't believe Him (John 5:46). The message of Jesus, John the Baptist, and the apostles was to repent. Repentance means to turn or return, but what would the people turn to? The answer is the Torah. Read what God says and do it.

Our behavior in public assemblies will also be a model for others to follow at home. If we believe the Bible is important and should be read regularly, then it should be read regularly in our assemblies. Reading out loud encourages reading at home both personally and silently as well as out loud with the family. Public reading of large amounts of Scripture speaks volumes about what we think is important. Music and singing is nice and desirable; some explanation from the pastor is a good thing; and we need to hear some announcements about upcoming events. But the most prominent place and the most time should be given over to the most important activity.

Visitors or new converts in our assemblies are often confused with the language we speak. Church-goers tend to use terms and phrases specific to the faith that are hard for the uninitiated to understand and often called Christianese. This language may be based on Scripture, but it takes time to learn and in the meantime our visitors are lost in translation. Reading the Word out loud, especially focusing on the beginning books of the Bible, makes plain the meanings of many words and concepts. It is an excellent introduction to difficult ideas such as atonement, faith, and the promise. God speaks plainly and simply and even the most uneducated can understand and receive His Word this way. Reading out loud also opens the door to questions which can be explained in the meeting or privately later. We would rather speak five words with our minds in order to instruct others than ten thousand words in a tongue (1 Corinthians 14:19).

Reading large portions of the Word out loud is one of the tools believing parents can use to teach our children. They see us dedicating ourselves to public reading, so they will do it too. Kids can participate in our services in a constructive way. When we do it in our assembly, many

of the kids will jump at the chance to read sections. They learn to love reading, and reading the Word of God. If it is important to the parents, it will be important to the children. From even very young ages and before a child even learns to read the Word is going into them and helping to inform their worldview. It encourages questions and gives God's opinion on all the important issues. We teach our children by how we act when the Word is read publicly. Repetition builds recognition.

We learn from each other when large sections of the Word are read publicly. The meaning of phrases can be discussed, words are introduced with suggestions for pronunciation, and we get different perspectives through different eyes. Patience is foremost when reading publicly because some people may struggle a little with unfamiliar words or cultural differences. It isn't a contest for the best reader, it is a community effort to share in the service and teach the fruit of the Spirit. It builds confidence in members who are shy while inducing humility in those who may be tempted toward pride in their reading abilities. Correction without judgment can occur because everyone is trying to learn and grow.

Believers hunger and thirst for the Word of God. Reading out loud publicly helps fill us with large meals of the only thing that can satisfy. Substitutes such as passionate preaching, endlessly repeating songs, tearful testimonies and multimedia presentations charge up the emotions, but they do nothing (and I mean nothing) for getting the Word out to people like reading His Words. The other stuff may contain some of the Word, and in that much it helps a little, but believers don't want to snack on the Word. Appetizers are not enough - we need hearty meals full of nutrition.

As the writer of Hebrews says, "Therefore let us leave the elementary doctrine of Christ and go on to maturity, not laying again the foundation of repentance from dead works and of faith toward God, and of instruction about washings, the laying on of hands, the resurrection of the dead, and eternal judgment" (Hebrew 6:1, 2 ESV). So much of church teaching and activities are geared around elementary doctrines of Christ that they don't have room for the meat of the Word. The Hebrews writer again gives us the picture. "For by this time you ought to be teachers, you need someone to teach you again the basic principles of the oracles of God. You need milk, not solid food, for everyone who lives on milk is unskilled in the word of righteousness, since he is a child. But solid food is for the mature, for those who have their powers of discernment trained by constant practice to distinguish good from evil" (Hebrews 5:12-14 ESV). We get solid food from the Word of God, read regularly and obeyed always. We don't get enough satisfaction from the constant milk of emotional presentations from a few verses in vain repetition.

Spiritual people need solid food, while those people of the flesh demand milk. This is why most every church meeting only delivers milk at the present time. I know much of this article will not penetrate the hard hearts of many out there. We have reached that stage spoken of by Paul in 2 Timothy 4:3 where "For the time is coming when people will not endure sound teaching; but having itching ears they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own

passions, and will turn away from listening to the truth and wander off into myths." People of the flesh try to avoid reading more than just a few dribbles squeezed out of the Bible by some speaker. Spiritual people, however, consume all of the Word as if starving and aren't afraid to read large sections out loud. We don't flinch away from the words of life.

Reading the Word, which includes reading it out loud, gives us wisdom and understanding. Hearing the Word spoken helps us learn new things because we see them reflected in the eyes and behavior of the one reading. God says, "Keep them and do them, for that will be your wisdom and your understanding in the sight of all people, who, when they hear all these statutes, will say, 'Surely this great nation is a wise and understanding people'" (Deuteronomy 4:6). As we hear the Word read out loud we share in the experience with other body members, agreeing with the testimony and proclaiming it to angels.

In discussion after reading out loud in our meetings, we can go anywhere else in the Word the Spirit leads. We hear connections to other parts of the Word, and through this we not only preach the unity and continuity of it but we see it for ourselves. We reinforce the fact that the Word is one message to one body from one God and Savior. As the framework is filled in for us, we understand how all the parts fit together. In addition, we see how we all fit together into one body. God introduces all of the subjects; we just follow where He takes us.

Reading, and reading out loud, is a test to see if Torah is really present and practiced. In love we participate with other members in the flow of the Spirit as the words are read. Our patience is tested as we work through sections that seem to be boring but later we find they are crucial to some other concept in the Word. It is a test of our faithfulness because as we continue in it all the benefits we've discussed are given and shared, and generations after us pick up and carry the task through their lives. In times of trial we reaffirm our love of God and vocalize His promises.

You may not want to hear this, but reading the Word out loud also tests whether people really want to learn the Word of God. Of course this test would also include behavior in keeping with the sound doctrine spoken of in the reading. Agents of darkness or hard-hearted people cannot stand to hear large portions of the Word read out loud. That's not to say that hard-hearted people couldn't stick around in a group, because obviously that happened with synagogues at the time Jesus was in the flesh. Large portions of those unbelievers were instrumental in the persecution that arose after the time of Pentecost. But that's what I mean. When The Word (Jesus) was introduced, there was immediate reaction both positive and negative. There were many congregation splits as the Word was introduced by the apostles and others. That's why I think we have to include the New Testament in our reading schedules - reading large parts of the first five books of each section (OT and NT) is a sure fire way to filter out those who do not really want to follow God but just want to dip themselves in whitewash.

On the one hand, reading the Torah filters out those pretenders who claim a Jesus that is a touchy-feely social justice warrior, but isn't God in the flesh who also demands a holy standard. On the other hand, reading the gospels and Acts filters out those who only see a distant, disconnected and judgmental God of anger and fury. Reading large parts of both sections every meeting does an excellent of scaring away both those who don't want to obey, and also those who think a bunch of rules is the way to righteousness and the Kingdom.

Reading the Word publicly trains us in self-control, godliness, patience and good works. We all hear the instruction, so we can all work to conform to it and help each other conform. If one of us falters others can carry through on the admonition to bear one another's burdens and encourage each other in love. We all hear the instructions to do so. Reading the Word out loud trains us in unity to respond in love to build one another up.

Another reason to read the Word out loud is because we don't want to. Our flesh is easily distracted by more entertaining baubles. The fruit of the Spirit doesn't just pop out because we raise our hands and go forward to be "saved." Reading the Word is part of the sanctification process, and our natural man doesn't respond too well. That's one of the reasons I think Paul says our old man was crucified (Galatians 5:24) and that we have to "work out your salvation with fear and trembling" (Philippians 2:12 ESV).

We claim that reading the Word in public (or even just reading it) is hard, but it is not hard to read. What is hard is the heart. Obey has always been a four-letter word to the natural man. In our flesh we don't want to conform. We want to do things "our way" and not God's way. Like Cain, we hope that our self-seeking sacrifice will be accepted instead of offering the sacrifice of obedience as did Abel. The flesh resists whenever the reigns of the Word are applied. However, if we submit to His Words which we can all hear in public, then the Spirit will come and aid us in our fight against the flesh. Reading the Word publicly is another tool that conditions our hearts to resist the natural man and keep him in the grave where he belongs.

Reading out loud with anyone able and willing to participate encourages and enhances fellowship. Public reading unites us together with each other and other congregations in a symphony of reading that reaches into heavenly realms. It praises God and gives Him glory in front of witnesses, including angels. It's better than emotional singing or even the most passionate preaching.

Everyone who reads gets to participate in a meeting instead of sitting there like bumps on a log listening to entertainment. We find out where there may be weaknesses in learning and gently fill in the gaps. We learn together how to pronounce words, including children. Reading out loud brings the members of the body together in a harmony of unity and diverse voices all centered on our Father and Savior.

Finally, reading out loud is fun. We are surprised with connections we didn't see before no matter how many times we've read it ourselves. There is warmth and comradery that is

missing from conventional church meetings. Using a schedule, we all know where we are at and can join right in even if we've missed a meeting or two. We know what to expect and can have questions or observations ready. We have a common framework built by the Spirit from which to work and share. So grab hold of His Word by reading it, reading it in public, and doing what He says.

Shalom

Bruce