

The Reading of Holy Scripture

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‘THE Bible, I say, the Bible only, is the religion of Protestants!’¹ So wrote William Chillingworth in 1638. Protestant Churches approved Chillingworth’s statement, placing great emphasis upon God’s written Word. They recognized it as the only source of truth, the only revelation of the will of God.

Inevitably, such a belief affected worship. Reformed (or Calvinistic) Churches came to see that worship is really man’s response to what God has revealed in his Word. With this understanding, they framed a form of service in which the worshippers heard and responded to the Word of God. This was very different from the medieval Roman Catholic service. It laid the emphasis upon the reading and preaching of Scripture, not the administration of the Sacrament. But it was not simply a matter of emphasis. The content of the entire service had to be as scriptural as possible. Hence, only the inspired Psalms were permitted in praise. And so rigorously was Scripture’s authority applied that anything not positively sanctioned in the written Word was challenged, opposed, and discarded (The Regulative Principle). ‘Let it therefore be held as a settled principle’, writes Calvin, ‘that, since obedience is more highly esteemed by God than sacrifices (1 Sam 15:22, 23), all kinds of worship invented by men are of no estimation in his sight; nay more, they are accursed and detestable’.²

One other feature of a Calvinist worship service deserves mention. It is the importance given to the reading of Holy Scripture.

The first recorded instance of Scripture being read in a public assembly is to be found in Exodus 24:7. Moses took ‘the book of the covenant’, the ancient Bible in which the law of Sinai was written,

and, formally and solemnly, he ‘read in the audience of the people’. Later, just before his death, Moses enjoined this as an ordinance of Israel’s worship. Addressing the priests and elders, he said: ‘When all Israel is come to appear before the Lord thy God in the place which he shall choose, thou shalt read this law before all Israel in their hearing’ (Deut 31:11).

There are several important details here. The appointed minister was to read the Scriptures (‘thou shalt read’ is singular in form) and he was to read them at the central sanctuary when all the people were assembled (‘men’, ‘women’, ‘children’, and ‘strangers’ v 12): moreover, the whole of God’s Word was to be read (‘this law’ may refer to the book of Deuteronomy or, as some think, to all five books of Moses), so that the Word became absolutely central, even at a festival of rejoicing (such as ‘the feast of tabernacles’, v 10).

From this time on, the reading of Scripture was regarded as an important part of public worship. When Joshua raised an altar to Jehovah in the land of Israel, ‘he read (probably not in person, but by the aid of Levitical priests, Deuteronomy 27:14) all the words of the law, the blessings and cursings, according to all that is written in the book of the law’ (Josh 8:34).

Exactly what was read we are not told, but since Joshua had already written laws on the altar stones, it must have been a great deal more of the Scripture, perhaps the whole of what Moses delivered in the way of commandments. This finds confirmation in the next verse which reads, ‘There was not a word of all that Moses commanded, which Joshua read not’. In the latter part of this verse, we are once again told that ‘little ones’ and ‘strangers’ were present (v 35). Why do they repeatedly receive special mention?

Almost certainly, because the readings were neither shortened nor simplified on account of them. They too were made to hear the whole of God's Word, so that, along with the others, they might learn to fear and serve the Lord.

Arthur W. Pink remarks, 'What an example was this occasion of the importance of the public reading of lengthy sections of God's Word, and that its most unpalatable portions must not be omitted!' ³

During the reign of King Jehoshaphat, King of Judah (873-848 BC), copies of the Scriptures were scarce; and therefore a commission of 'priests' and 'Levites' was sent throughout 'all the cities of Judah', and they 'taught the people' out of 'the book of the law' (2 Chron 17:7-9). The aim was to diffuse the knowledge of God's Word and also to establish and confirm its authority in the communities of Israel. This was achieved through the simple reading of Scripture.

In shocking contrast to Jehoshaphat, were the wicked rulers of Judah, particularly Manasseh and Amon, who departed from God and deluged the kingdom with all the abominations of idolatry. By the time Josiah came to the throne (640 BC), the pure worship of Jehovah had practically disappeared. However, this young king was determined to bring about reform. He therefore ordered the repair of the Temple; and it was while workmen were engaged in this work that Hilkiah, the High Priest, found the original copy of the five books of Moses. When brought to Josiah's attention, he was so affected by it, that he gathered the people for a public reading in the Temple. 'He read in their ears (that is, he caused to be read to them) all the words of the book of the covenant that was found in the house of the Lord' (2 Chron 34:30). A wide-spread work of divine grace was the result. We would call it today a great spiritual revival 'And the inhabitants of Jerusalem

did according to the covenant of God, the God of their fathers' (v 32).

Who can tell what God may do through the reading of Scripture? The words of Jeremiah to Baruch, the scribe, come to mind: 'Go thou, and read in the roll...the words of the Lord in the ears of the people in the Lord's house...It may be that they will present their supplication before the Lord, and will return every one from his evil way...' (Jer 36:6,7).

Thus far in our study we have considered some of the special occasions on which the Scriptures were read. We should not lose sight of the fact, however, that it was the general custom of the ancient Jewish Church to read the Word of God on holy days. An impressive example may be found in Nehemiah, chapter 8. It was the day of the Feast of Trumpets, regarded as a sabbath and sacred to the Lord (Neh 8:2cf Lev 23:24). 'All the people', we are told, 'gathered themselves together as one man... And Ezra the priest brought the Law before the congregation

...And he read therein...from the morning until mid-day...and the ears of all the people were attentive unto the book of the law' (vv 1-3). The service lasted for six hours (v 3). During that time it would have been possible to read at least a quarter of Moses' writings. The rest was no doubt read on the days which followed, for 'day by day, from the first day unto the last day, he read in the book of the law of God' (v 18 See also: 9:1-3). Incidentally, this account delivers a severe rebuke to churches which have allowed music and singing to squeeze out the Word of God. It is also the answer to any who think our readings too long!

To return to the main point, however, it is certain that the reading of Scripture was a stated part of public worship among the Jews, particularly in their synagogues. The Jewish synagogue had an early origin and it can probably be traced back to the time of Moses, as appears from Leviticus 23:3: 'Six days

shall work be done, but the seventh is a sabbath of rest, a holy convocation (literally, a 'call' or 'summons': a gathering for worship). And we gather that, from the earliest times, Scripture reading was a feature of the synagogal service. 'Moses of old time hath in every city them that preach him, being read in the synagogues every sabbath day' (Acts 15:21). This is confirmed by Flavius Josephus, the Jewish historian (37-100 AD), who says of Moses: '(He) demonstrated the law to be the best and the most necessary instruction of all others, permitting the people to leave off their other employments, and to assemble together for the hearing of the law, and learning it exactly, and this not once or twice, or oftener, but every week; which thing all the other legislators seem to have neglected'.⁴

It was certainly the case in the time of Christ and the Apostles.

Our Lord was in the habit of regularly attending the synagogue at Nazareth. On one occasion, recorded in Luke's Gospel, 'he stood up for to read', thereby indicating his desire, as a recognized teacher, to read and expound the Word of God. 'There was delivered unto him the book of the prophet Esaias', and he 'found' the passage prescribed for that day, which was probably marked in the scroll: Isaiah, chapter 61 (Lk 4:16-20). Vitranga, whose massive work, 'De Synagoga Vetere', has been conveniently translated and abridged by J.L. Bernard, informs us that the public reading in the synagogue consisted of a portion of the Law, followed by a section from the Prophets. 'The five books of Moses', he says, 'were read through once a year, commencing on the Sabbath following the Feast of Tabernacles; and for the convenience of reading, the Pentateuch was divided into fifty-four sections, called Paraschioth... A selection from the Prophets [which included the historical books. M.H.W.] was read at every Sabbath morning service...The portion selected for the day was called the Haphtara of the day'.⁵

This perfectly accords with what we find in the

Acts of the Apostles. Paul and Barnabas, arriving at Pisidian Antioch, a city of the Roman province Phrygia, followed the custom of our Lord and attended the local synagogue service. Presumably they occupied seats which showed them to be teachers or they were simply recognized as such. Anyway, Luke tells us that 'after the reading of the law and prophets' they were invited to deliver their 'word of exhortation' which, by the way, bore no direct relation to the Scriptures read (Acts 13:14,15, 16-41).

Now this is most instructive. As we know, the Synagogue was the model upon which our Lord and his Apostles founded the Christian Church (James 2:2 margin) and its mode of worship was intended to have a formative influence upon Christian worship (with the elements of praise, reading, prayer, sermon, and blessing). Yet the modern church has practically abandoned this divinely approved way of reading the Scriptures. From the Gospels and the Book of Acts, we gather that God's Word should be solemnly read each Sabbath day; the readings should have a central place in the service; chapters should be read from the main sections of our Bibles; the Canonical Books should be read right through, consecutively; and, the readings should be regarded as a separate ordinance and not always chosen to suit the theme of the sermon. What can I say? There is a crying need for reformation in this area.

The Lord Jesus appeared to intimate that the reading of Scripture would be a feature of Christian worship. In his discourse on the Destruction of Jerusalem and his own Second Coming, he quoted from Daniel's prophecy and added, 'whoso readeth, let him understand' (Matt 24:15 cf 11:15; 13:9,43). Since the Gospels were first read in Christian assemblies, the reference here could be to public reading. Comparable, then, would be the words of Revelation 1:3: 'Blessed is he that readeth (singular), and they that hear (plural) the words of this prophecy...' On this latter verse, Dr James Glasgow

remarks: 'By specifying one reader and a plurality of hearers, and pronouncing them unitedly happy, it points to public reading and hearing. It shows that the book should be read from the pulpit, and attended to with studious faith'.⁶

According to the apostle Paul, it is the minister's responsibility to read the Word of God in a church service. Writing to Timothy, a minister temporarily residing in Ephesus, Paul says: 'Till I come, give attendance to (the) reading, to exhortation, to doctrine' (1 Tim 4:13 Note: There is a definite article [the] in the original Greek). Paul is exhorting Timothy conscientiously to discharge his public duties and these, of course, include 'the reading' of Scripture. But what was to be read? The answer must be: the Old Testament, according to the custom of the Jews (2 Cor 3:14 - 'the reading of the old testament'); and any portions of the New Testament which were written and in circulation. Paul, more than once, alludes to the reading of his own New Testament letters in Christian church services. To the Colossians, he writes: 'When this epistle is read among you, cause that it be read also in the church of the Laodiceans...' (Col 4:16). It was not to be reserved for private use, but to be 'read aloud' (as the word is) to the congregation assembled for worship. Similarly, he writes to the Thessalonians: 'I charge you by the Lord that this epistle be read unto all the holy brethren' (1 Thess 5:27). 'All the holy brethren' again implies the gathered church. He 'charges' or 'binds us with an oath' that this epistle be openly read in the church.

How many of our churches have heard the entire Scriptures read? Very few indeed. Chapters are selected at random to suit the sermon and, because the minister has his favourite passages, often the same chapters are read over and over again. The results are ignorance, imbalance, and- worst of all - gross disobedience to God's revealed Will. Ministers have a responsibility to ensure that, at each service, they read chapters from the Old and

New Testaments, and that they read according to a plan which, in time, will enable them to cover the entire ground of revelation.

Some mention should here be made of the practice of the primitive church. That the reading of the Holy Scriptures occupied a prominent place in early church services may be proved from the testimony of Justin Martyr (100-165 AD), who describes a typical church service in 140 AD. 'On the day called Sunday', he says, 'all who live in cities or in the country gather together in one place, and the memoirs of the apostles or the writings of the prophets are read, as long as time permits'.⁷ Tertullian (168-220 AD) likewise states that public services include 'the reading of Scriptures,...the chanting of psalms,...the preaching of sermons,... (and) the offering up of prayers'.⁸

Then there is Origen (185-254 AD), who not only bears witness to the practice but who also stresses its evangelistic usefulness. He writes: 'By means of readings, and explanations of the things read, we lead men to the worship of the God of the universe'.⁹

Cyril of Jerusalem (315-386 AD) writes: 'The divinely-inspired Scriptures of both the Old and the New Testaments teach us. For the God of the two Testaments is One'. That established, he proceeds with the exhortation: 'Have nothing to do with the apocryphal writings. Study earnestly these only which we read openly in the church'.¹⁰

My final quotation here comes from Chrysostom (347-407 AD). After quoting a number of verses, he reminds his people that, 'Every week these things are read to you twice or even three times: and the reader when he goes up (to the desk) first says whose the book is, (the book) of such a prophet, and then says what he says, so that it shall be more intelligible to you...But all in vain; all to no purpose. For your zeal is spent on things of this life, and of things spiritual no account is made'.¹¹

What evidence is there, however, of Scriptures

being read from both Testaments? Already, we have noted how Justin Martyr mentions the readings from ‘the memoirs of the apostles’ and ‘the writings of the prophets’. Chrysostom, also, in one of his homilies, says to his congregation: ‘Tell me what Prophet, what Apostle hath been discoursing to us today? and on what subjects?’¹²

There are even indications that a certain method was observed in the public reading of the Scripture. ‘When there was nothing peculiar to direct the reading’, observes Lyman Coleman, ‘the scriptures were read consecutively, according to their established order’.¹³

The Early Church Fathers believed in the systematic and uninterrupted reading of Scripture. In sermon after sermon, Chrysostom exhorts his hearers to read carefully at home the portion due to be read the next Lord’s Day. We also find him saying: ‘Moses indeed was a great legislator..., but we hardly read over his writings once in the year in our public congregations: but we read David in our public services, both by day and by night’.¹⁴ Augustine (354-430 AD), the greatest of the Fathers, shows that in his day, too, the Scriptures were read straight through. He alludes to ‘the course of reading from the Gospel of John’ which, he says, ‘proceeds in regular order’.¹⁵ In one of his homilies on 1 John, he alludes again to the practice and makes mention of ‘the continuous reading of this epistle’.¹⁶

Naturally, we shall want to ascertain the beliefs and practices of the Reformers and their Puritan successors. Luther, we know, took positive steps to ensure that Scripture reading continued in the Protestant Church. He wrote: ‘One of the books should be selected and a chapter or two, or half a chapter, should be read until all of it has been used. After that another book should be selected, and so on, until the entire Bible has been read through’.¹⁷ In Calvin’s ‘Form of Church Prayers’, the readings occupy a prominent place and reference is made to ‘the appointed chapters of Holy Scripture’.¹⁸ It is

clear that John Knox shared the same convictions, for he was responsible, at least in part, for ‘The First Book of Discipline’, which states: ‘We thinke it most expedient that the Scripture be read in order: that is, that some one book of the old or new Testament be begun and orderly read to the end... For this skipping and divagation from place to place of Scripture, be it in reading or be it in preaching we judge not so profitable to edifie the Kirk as the continuall following of one text’.¹⁹

The Westminster Directory of 1645 lays down this rule: ‘All the canonical books of the Old and New Testaments (but none of those which are commonly called Apocrypha) shall be publickly read in the vulgar tongue, out of the best allowed translation... It is convenient, that ordinarily one chapter of each Testament be read at every meeting...It is requisite that all the canonical books be read over in order, that the people may be better acquainted with the whole body of the scriptures; and ordinarily, where the reading in either Testament endeth on one Lord’s Day, it is to begin the next’.

The evidence clearly shows that God has appointed the reading of the Scriptures as a part of public worship and that this has always been the practice of true gospel churches. Before concluding, it might be as well to make one or two further points concerning this duty.

(i) God intends that his Word should be rendered conspicuous above all other worship ordinances. The Psalmist says, ‘Thou hast magnified thy word above all thy name’ (Ps 138:2).

(ii) Everything which has been revealed belongs to the Lord’s people and conveys some spiritual benefit to their souls: ‘Those things which are revealed belong unto us and to our children for ever, that we may do all the words of this law’ (Deut 29:29 cf 33:4). The apostle Paul perceived how even obscure passages had present-day value. After citing an ancient ceremonial law, he says, ‘For our sakes,

no doubt, this is written'; and recalling events which took place during Israel's wilderness wanderings, he insists that 'they are written for our admonition' (1 Cor 9:10; 10:11 cf 1 Pet 1:12).

(iii) Passages from both Testaments should be read. Concerning the former (so often neglected), Paul writes: 'Whatsoever things were written aforetime were written for our learning, that we through patience and comfort of the scriptures might have hope' (Rom 15:4 cf 2 Tim 3:16).

(iv) Ordinarily, the Scriptures should be read in consecutive order. This enables the church to become acquainted with the whole body of revealed truth. One of God's complaints against his ancient people was that they treated parts of his Word as if they did not really belong to them. 'I have written to him', God says, 'the great things of my law, but they were counted as a strange thing' (Hos 8:12). The Lord Jesus has made clear that his churches are under obligation to hear the whole of the inspired Word. He has said repeatedly: 'He that hath an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches' (Rev 2:7,11,17 etc cf 22:16). Now what the Spirit says to the churches is to be found in all the Scripture.

(v) If some verses are difficult, it may be necessary for the minister, either before or after the reading, to give a brief word of explanation. There is biblical warrant for this. Ezra and the Levites 'read in the book in the law of God distinctly, and gave the sense, and caused them to understand the reading' (Neh 8:8).

(vi) Since the Bible is God's Word written, it becomes the Lord's people to listen to the readings with both reverence and respect. 'To this man will I look, even to him that is poor and of a contrite spirit, and trembleth at my word' (Is 66:2).

(vii) There is blessing in the proper observance of this ordinance. Solomon's servants were blessed, according to the Queen of Sheba, because they had the privilege of hearing that wise man, but those

admitted to hear God's Word enjoy far greater blessedness and happiness. Hear what the Lord himself says: 'Blessed is the man that heareth me, watching daily at my gates, waiting at the posts of my doors' (Prov 8:34 cf Rev 1:3).

There is a tendency in some circles to minimize the importance of the Scripture readings. It is a tendency which must be firmly resisted. The reading of the Word, in a proper biblical manner, is absolutely necessary to the true worship of God. We pray that it will soon be restored to our churches, for God's glory and his people's good.

Notes

1. William Chillingworth, 'The Religion of Protestants, A Safe Way to Salvation' in 'The Works of W. Chillingworth' (Philadelphia: Herman Hooker, 1840), Ans. 6, sect. 56, p 481.
2. Calvin, 'Commentary on the Harmony of the Evangelists', vol 2, p 254.
3. A. W. Pink, 'Gleanings in Joshua' (Chicago: Moody Press, 1969), p 233.
4. Flavius Josephus, 'Against Apion' in 'The Works of Flavius Josephus', translated by William Whiston (London: George Routledge and Sons), 2:18, p 705.
5. Joshua L. Bernard, 'The Synagogue and the Church' (London: B. Fellowes, 1842), part 1, chap. 12, pp 130,133.
6. James Glasgow, 'The Apocalypse Translated and Expounded' (Edinburgh: T.T. Clark, 1872), p 115.
7. Justin Martyr, 'The First Apology of Justin', chap 67. The Ante-Nicene Fathers, vol 1, p 186.
8. Tertullian, 'A Treatise of the Soul', chap. 9. The Ante-Nicene Fathers, vol 3, p 188.
9. Origen, 'Origen against Celsus, bk. 3, chap. 50. The Ante-Nicene Fathers, vol 4, p 484.
10. Cyril of Jerusalem, 'Catechetical Lectures', Lect.

4, sects. 33,35 The Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, vol 7, pp 26,27.

11. Chrysostom, 'Homilies of Hebrews', Hom. 8, sect. 10. The Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, vol 14, p 408.

12. Chrysostom, 'The Epistle to the Romans', Hom. 24. The Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, vol 11, p 519.

13. Lyman Coleman, 'Ancient Christianity Exemplified' (Philadelphia: Lippincott, Grambo & Co, 1852), ch. 17, sect.2, p 341.

14. Cited by R.P. Blakeney in 'The Book of Common Prayer in its History and Interpretation' (London: James Miller, 1866), pp 344,5.

15. Augustine, 'The Gospel of St. John', Tractate 13,

sect 1. The Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, vol 7, p 86.

16. Augustine, 'The Epistle of St John', Hom 9, sect. 1. The Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, vol 7, p 513.

17. Martin Luther, Works of Martin Luther (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1982), p 61.

18. C.W. Baird, 'A Chapter on Liturgies' (London: Knight & Son, 1856), p 35.

19. 'The First Book of Discipline' (1560), The Ninth Head, Concerning the Policie of the Kirk. See: 'The First Book of Discipline' with Introduction and Commentary by James K. Cameron (Edinburgh: The Saint Andrew Press, 1972), p 185.