

THE DANGERS OF READING SCRIPTURE

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A cartoon depicted a minister hard at work in his study writing his sermon. On his desk in front of him was his open Bible. His wife was looking over his shoulder and she said, "You're always quoting Scripture. Haven't you any ideas of your own?"

Oh that ministers today were accused of quoting Scripture too much! Or that we could be accused of plagiarizing our sermon ideas from the Bible, of never using any ideas other than those found in Scriptures!

But it is so tempting to preach about our own favourite topics so that we might generously pass on our private wisdom without much thought to Scripture. Unfortunately, too many ministers favour these kind of topical sermons rather than expository sermons focused on the Bible. Indeed, it is my impression that many of the most popular preachers do precisely this. Fine oratory, but not the word of God.

This is just one of the trends regarding the Bible that Dr. James Smartⁱ pointed many years ago, observations that I think are still relevant and applicable today.

Smart also pointed out the prevalence of social activism that is based in the abstract, in Godless humanism rather than reflections on Scripture.

Anyone who knows me and my ministry knows that social justice has always been an important focus motivated and modelled after Jesus' own mission and ministry caring for the impoverished of the world and trying to make systemic changes that would improve the lives of everyone.ⁱⁱ Our social activism as Christians is Biblically based and practical.

A third observation was that inspirational literature was replacing the Bible as a source of material for devotions. It has even invaded Sunday worship as well as wedding and funeral services. This is fine, except that sometimes it is to the exclusion or even contradiction of the Scriptures.

Finally, he notes a general disinterest in Bible study, a general lack of knowledge of the Bible and a general lack of individual Biblically-based, personal devotions.

I am pleased that Rev. Andrew has been emphasizing the importance of daily Bible reading and reflection, and many months ago introduced you to new ways of undertaking that discipline.

Why don't Christians read the Bible more frequently? Might it be because it's dangerous?

I remember when I was a student preparing a service of worship with a supervising minister at his home. His wife had

been listening to us talk and she spoke up and gave me this piece of advice. “If you can avoid it, don’t read any Scripture in the service. When I hear the reading begin my mind shuts off until it’s over. People don’t like it. They fall asleep.”

Perhaps it’s the danger of falling asleep that militates against Bible reading. Perhaps it’s because they expect that it will be boring. They aren’t expecting that anything special might happen.

Paul tells Timothy that by the use of Scripture “everyone who belongs to God may be proficient, equipped for every good work.”ⁱⁱⁱ In the study and use of Scripture there is an element of expectation that Scripture is profitable because it is, as Paul says, inspired by God.^{iv} Those who fall asleep, those whose minds wander – and that means all of us from time to time – are not expectant enough. Perhaps that’s why some don’t read Scripture as much as they should. They think it will be boring and unimportant. Nothing important is expected.

About 25 centuries ago, after two long periods of bondage, one in Egypt and one in Babylon, and after two Exoduses from that bondage, the people of Israel were expectant. In today’s Scripture reading, when Ezra opened the book, they all stood. They knew something important was about to happen. At a time when only men participated in the hearing of God’s word, all were allowed to be present, women and children, everyone. Anyone

capable of understanding was invited. All were called to hear, and all who came to hear were expectant that God would speak.^v

If you have the opportunity to attend Sabbath worship in a synagogue, you will observe a very moving ceremony. At the front of the sanctuary is the Ark of the Covenant, a cabinet in which is stored the scroll of the Torah, the five books of Moses found at the beginning of what we call the Hebrew Scriptures. Within the Ark, the Torah is encased in velvet. The scroll is about 3 feet tall with massive silver ends. At the time of reading, the scroll is removed from the Ark and as in the days of Ezra, everyone stands. It is then carried around the sanctuary. The congregants try to touch and kiss it. The men touch their prayer shawls to it. Everyone's attention is riveted to the processional of the Torah. Such feelings of awe are impressive and moving.

The scroll is then taken to the bimah, the reading table where it is spread to the day's reading. It is read for one hour by the primary reader assigned that day. It will be read completely over the course of the year. At various times, other members come forward to read small portions. Youth who have been studying for their bar mitzvah or bat mitzvah come up to read. It is an honour to do so. The text itself is not touched, because it is sacred. So a pointer called a yad is used to follow the writing. When the reading is complete, the scroll is rolled up, paraded around the sanctuary once again, wrapped up and replaced in the Ark.

Afterwards, the Rabbi preaches to give the people the sense and meaning of the passage. As in the time of Ezra, “the ears of all the people were attentive to the book of the law” and “all the people wept when they heard the words of the law.”^{vi}

Perhaps if we had that kind of attitude, an expectant attitude that something wonderful was about to happen, that God was going to speak, and it wouldn't be boring, but exhilarating, we would be moved to read and study the Scriptures more often.

When I was very young, I really wished that I could have a Bible of my very own. I had a sense that there was something in it that I needed to hear. Important stories for sure. Wisdom perhaps. The Word of God.

When I was eight years old, I received my own Bible finally. In our church when you moved from, I think, Primary to Junior class you received a Bible. It was leatherette with your name embossed in gold on the front. It was so special. I still have mine, and I used it for many years, more as an adult than a child, because as exciting as it as to get it, I couldn't understand it. It was, of course, in the King James Version, published in 1611. I didn't speak that like and struggled to understand the English. Yet, people older and wiser than I, at least that's what I thought, said it was the only English version to read with its beautiful language. Some folk even believed that it was dictated by God to the 17th century translators.

I recall one year when I was chaplain at St. Andrew's College getting a complaint after our Christmas Carol Service that the boys had not read the Bible readings from the KJV. We used at that time the Revised Standard Version from 1946 and 1952, still a glorious translation, but more up-to-date in its language. The complainant didn't like it. It had to be in the KJV if he was going to listen.

One of the dangers of reading Scripture is turning it into an idol, a great piece of literature to be left on the shelf to be admired but not to be heard or read for its wisdom.

Another danger is that we often don't really hear what we read and apply it to our lives. Sometimes we use it to reinforce what we already know and believe, even if that is wrong.

In the 1970s, there was a lot of turmoil in Latin America. I suppose there is still. But what I recall was hearing a story about the death squads, military units that killed people who opposed the political powers who ruled. They also kidnapped and tortured people. The story I remember was that on their way to work in the morning, they would stop at the local church for mass. They would hear the prayers and readings, and partake in communion, and then go off to torture and kill people as if they had never been there. The contrast between these two scenarios confused me. How could they listen to the words of love and then inflict so much hatred on others.

Now it has come to light in Canada that we did much the same thing through our treatment of First Nations children. They were put in residential schools run by people recognized as spiritual leaders. But many of those same leaders lived as if they themselves had not heard the message of love. Children were abused. Many died. I would say many were killed. The United Church of Canada, just one of the denominations involved, has been dealing with the aftermath of our participation since the 1970s and 80s. We apologized for our role in 1986, then again in 1998, and we have been working hard to this very day to live out that apology and to continually repent.^{vii}

One of the dangers of reading Scripture is that we will actually ignore what it says or use it to confirm what we already believe, even if that is wrong. And so we need to continually repent and listen.

One last danger of reading Scripture is that we are afraid that something might actually happen. We might not fall asleep, but instead be awakened. The danger is that the Bible not be an idol, but the living Word of God, that our preconceptions might not be confirmed but shaken.

When Israel at the Water Gate heard God's word in the reading of Scripture, they wept and mourned. With their understanding came a sudden and profound sense of judgement upon them and guilt within them. Thus, it may be with us.

But Nehemiah, Ezra, the scribes and Levites told the people not to weep and mourn. Rather, they said, rejoice for this day is holy, and in your joy is the strength of God.

Centuries later, in a letter to his beloved friends in Rome, the apostle Paul would say that though the Law puts burdens on our consciences we need not endure them. We can rejoice in Christ who forgives us and empowers us.^{viii} Ezra, Nehemiah and the other leaders saw a glimpse of light. We find that light burning brightly in the eyes of Jesus Christ who judges but forgives.

Today, let's accept the challenge to take Scripture seriously, both as a church and as individuals. A church that takes the Scriptures seriously is a Biblically-based people. Be adventurous. Take a chance. Read the Scriptures often, listening for God's word. Discover the judgement and the forgiveness. Experience the deep sense of joy and gratitude that arises from God's Word.

Ezra opened the book in the sight of all the people, for he was standing above them; and when he opened it, they all stood, and while they listened, they wept, and when they understood they celebrated, shared and rejoiced.

Let it be so. Amen.

ⁱ See, for example, <https://www.biola.edu/talbot/ce20/database/james-dick-smart>

ⁱⁱ Luke 4: 14-30.

ⁱⁱⁱ 2 Timothy 3: 16, 17.

^{iv} 2 Timothy 3: 16.

^v Nehemiah 8: 1-10.

^{vi} Nehemiah 8: 3, 9.

^{vii} See, for example, <http://www.rememberingthechildren.ca/press/ucc-apology.htm> and <https://united-church.ca/community-and-faith/being-community/indigenous-ministries>

^{viii} See, for example, Romans 7 and 8.