



A CLOSER LOOK

AT THINGS PERTAINING TO THE FAITH

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THE REWARDS OF BIBLE READING

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ABOUT SIX YEARS AGO, I faced a faith-challenging personal crisis. At the time, my son was attending Freed-Hardeman University and told me several Bible majors he knew read Hugo McCord's translation of the New Testament once a week. I bought a copy of the version and began reading it weekly.

I found it was not overwhelming, and realized the New Testament is shorter than many novels. When I came to a difficult passage, I underlined it and, at my leisure, looked it up in a few commentaries and sometimes checked Bible dictionaries and Greek resources. After a number of weeks of reading McCord's version over and over, I began to read the Bible completely through every four to six months.

This month's
focus:
*Reading
Scripture*

Up to then, I had been, to coin a term, commentary-oriented. I relied heavily on commentaries throughout twenty-five years of preaching. Up to this time, I had never simply read the Bible through from Genesis 1 to Revelation 22.

Commentaries have their place. Proverbs says, "Iron sharpens iron, so one man sharpens another" (Proverbs 27:17). They allow us to compare our interpretations with others, sometimes provide sermon ideas, and in some cases give deep insights into the original languages. We are

commanded to have teachers. Galatians 6:6 says, "Let him who is taught the word share all good things with him who teaches." A commentary is a written "teacher." The Bible seems to indicate that Paul used more than inspired writing in his studies. He wrote to Timothy, "When you come, bring...the books, especially the parchments." His quoting of uninspired information in Acts 17: 28, 2 Timothy 3:8 and Titus 1:12, tells us that it is appropriate for us to learn from uninspired sources. However, the Bible should be at the core of study material for all New Testament Christians, for the following reasons:

BIBLE READING GIVES A FEELING OF ACCOMPLISHMENT AND MASTERY

Most parts of the Bible are intriguing, but some are difficult. Genealogies, for example, were vital to the Jews, and are important for some in-depth scholarly study. But admittedly, they are not the most exciting reading material. I have talked to a couple of people who get as far as *Numbers*, and then bog down and give up.

For example, *Numbers* contains a lot of information that doesn't seem to pertain to New Testament Christianity, and it is very repetitious in some places. Numbers 7:12-78 is a prime example. I believe, however, that being able to tell yourself that you have read the entire Bible makes the book worth reading. There is a sense of accomplishment that comes with completing any difficult task, and that includes reading the whole Bible.

DIFFERENCES BETWEEN COMMENTARY-BASED STUDY AND BIBLE STUDY

Using the Bible only during perhaps 75% of study time leads to results that are lacking in a study regimen centered on the words of men. First, the Bible-centered student is going to the original source. He is letting the Word of God speak to him in the same manner as did everyday first century Christians before a massive collection of man-made resources were written. Second, it deeply implants the word of God in the student's mind. Third, it protects especially public teachers of the Word against silly blunders.

Some preachers are apparently insecure about making the Bible the center of their study. This conclusion is drawn from some things I have heard that are just not taught in the Bible. One, for ex-

ample, preached that Hezekiah was a bad king because he showed

Chaldean visitors all of his wealth (2 Kings 20:12). The Bible, however, presents Hezekiah as an outstanding king overall. He courageously initiated religious reforms (2 Chronicles 29:3-36), attempted to reunite the twelve tribes (2 Chronicles 30), and cleansed the land of idolatry (2 Chronicles 31:1). He was a great man who blundered with his Chaldean visitors.

I have heard sermons in which the speaker had apparently bought into "scholarship" on Romans 7, especially Romans 7:15-19. One speaker said the passage was allegorical in the style of Roman plays. Apparently he thought a just God, who has given us a book upon which our eternal life depends, would also require us to be experts in Roman playwriting. Others have said that Paul is referring to his past under the Old Law. Yet a simple reading of the text by the average person with no "help" leads to the obvious conclusion that Paul is referring to the fact that he sinned as a Christian

like everyone else (Romans 3:23).

GREAT MEN OF THE BIBLE READ THE SCRIPTURES APPARENTLY WITHOUT THE HELP OF MASSIVE NUMBERS OF COMMENTARIES.

Kings of Israel were commanded to read the Scriptures regularly. The Bible says in Deuteronomy 17:19 of future kings, "And it shall be with him, and he shall read it all the days of his life." In Josiah's reign over Judah, the Bible indicates that the inspired Scriptures had been lost. "Then Hilkiyah the priest said to Shapan the scribe, 'I have found the book of the law in the house of the Lord.'" And Hilkiyah gave the book to Shapan who read it" (2 Kings 22:8). It is interesting that Shapan was so interested in the Word of God that he read it before even informing the king about it.

Of the great leader Ezra, the Bible says, "Now Ezra set his heart to study the Law of the Lord" (Ezra 7:10). David wrote in Psalms 56:10, "In God whose word I praise, in the Lord whose word I praise." Interestingly, in David's time probably only the books of Moses and perhaps a couple of others made up inspired Scripture. In my Bible that has 282 pages. Yet the Psalms are replete with evidence that David, who wrote half of the Psalms, as well as other Psalmists, loved reading the Word of God.

In the New Testament, Paul writes, "Be diligent to present yourself approved to God as a workman who does not need to be ashamed, handling accurately the word of truth" (2 Timothy 2:15). Public reading of Scriptures is commanded in strong language: "I adjure you by the Lord to have this letter read to all the brethren" (1 Thessalonians 5:27).

CONCLUSION

I will continue to spend at least 75% of my study time reading the word of God. It helps in tying the Old and New Testament together, provides the kind of knowledge that the pioneer preachers who could not afford vast commentaries had, and is spiritually refreshing and rewarding.

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HEMIAH 8:1 SAYS:

Now all the people gathered together as one man in the open square that was in front of the Water Gate; and they told Ezra the scribe to bring the Book of the Law of Moses, which the LORD had commanded Israel.

Why did the Jews ask Ezra to bring the Book of the Law of Moses? Ezra 7:10 shows us the kind of man that Ezra was:

For Ezra had prepared his heart to seek the Law of the LORD, and to do it, and to teach statutes and ordinances in Israel.

Based on this reading, what kind of public reader of Scripture do you think Ezra was? He did not rush through the reading of Scripture, but read it with all reverence. Following are some pointers for the proper reverent reading of Scripture in public.

1. Give the congregation time to find the Scripture text, which you have announced loudly and clearly.
2. If you are reading a passage as part of a sermon or class, pause before reading and after. This sets apart God's word from your word. Do not blend your comments with the words of God. Even as when writing a report and lengthy quotations are have an extra space before and after and the margins are indented.
3. Do not rush through the reading. I once heard a well-known preacher carefully articulate his

words, but when he read Scripture he did it as fast as possible and then slowed down to emphasize his own words. Without intending it he gave greater emphasis to his words. He knew the passage by heart and this led to the quick reading. A reader must discipline himself to read the word of God carefully.

4. Follow the grammatical notations. Periods, commas, semicolons and other punctuation are there for a reason. Even as music has notations to tell you how to sing, so reading has notations to tell you how to read.

5. Read with the feeling of the text. The word of God is like a song. It has been assembled with certain literary devices to make the truth stand out. Moreover, singers are instructed to understand what a song is about. If the song is sad, it needs to be sung sad. Likewise, figure out the feeling of the passage in the Bible and bring that out when you read.

6. Practice reading the

text before you read it in public. As with anything, the more you practice it, the better you will be at doing it. Remember you are reading the word of God and how you come across in your reading will show others how you think about the word of God, leaving them an example of how they should think about it.

Revelation 1:3 promises:

Blessed is he who reads and those who hear the words of this prophecy, and keep those things which are written in it; for the time is near.



THE PUBLIC READING OF SCRIPTURE

Don Ruhl

McGUFFEY'S PLAIN RULES FOR READING

I conclude with the first seven of McGuffey's Plain Rules for Reading taken from the third and fourth readers of the famous McGuffey's Readers. I encourage you to find a set of the books and learn the other rules.

- Hold your book up well and do not bend forward.
- Speak each word distinctly and be careful to pronounce correctly.
- Endeavor to understand what you read.
- Avoid the habit of clearing your throat by coughing, or making other unpleasant noises as you begin to read aloud.
- Reflect upon what you have read and when you have a proper opportunity, converse about it. To relate what you have read is the best way to remember it yourselves. This will be profitable employment of your time and will afford you great pleasure.
- Sit or stand erect when you read. To hold the head down and the shoulders forward in reading makes the voice sound badly, and it injures the health to read much in this way.
- Be careful to learn and remember the stops and marks so well that you will know their uses whenever you meet with them.

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A POSTSCRIPT

THIS ISSUE of *A Closer Look* focuses on the reading of Scripture for a number of reasons. For one I am not persuaded that people who profess to be Christians spend enough time with the Word on a daily basis. The Word of God is to the soul what food is to the body. Adding this one discipline to your life would do more to improve the way you think and live than you can imagine.

The other reason has to do with the public reading of Scripture. I can recall as far back as elementary school the compulsion among students who were called on to read out loud to read fast. The better readers naturally read faster than the slow readers (like me), so to compensate the slower readers would rush through their text in an effort to sound like one of the better readers. Of course, we rarely sounded like one of the better readers.

But I have learned that fast is not always better. Why read the Bible fast anyway? It was not intended to be read fast. It was intended to be read slowly, deliberately. I think this is true whether you are reading it to yourself or in public.

I did not read much when I was young, but for the past thirty years I have tried to introduce myself to those works that others consider classic. In so doing, I purchased a new translation of the English classic, *Beowulf* by Poet Seamus Heaney. He not only produced his own translation of the work, he also read it for the BBC. I purchased a copy of his reading of *Beowulf* and have heard it now five or more times.

Mr. Heaney reads this story as if it were the most important book ever written. Every word receives his undivided attention and is pronounced with the utmost respect. Attention is given to every comma and period. I could only wish that everyone who aspires to read Scripture in public would listen to the way Seamus Heaney reads *Beowulf* and give the same attention to the word of God that he gives to this work if fiction.

I know we can't all read like Mr. Heaney. For one, we don't all have Irish accents. But we can all strive to improve. I have Mr. Heaney's reading of *Beowulf* on CD if anyone is interested in listening to this master at work.

I hope you find this edition of *A Closer Look* of some practical value. I thank Weldon Langfield and Don Ruhl for taking time to write.

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“Give heed to reading.”