Reading the Holy Scriptures in public

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The floor of the Parliament of Victoria vestibule - featuring Proverbs 11:14

"First I see what I read, then I hear it. Two senses catch the idea and I can remember it better." - Abraham Lincoln

The public reading of Scripture is a vastly neglected element of Christian endeavour which has great potential to superbly enrich the individual, each family, the churches and their mission, along with the leadership of nations.

The imperative of reading aloud

People possessing the gift of literacy in the ancient world tended to not read silently but aloud. That approach served to solve two practical difficulties. Firstly, few people in the ancient world could read. Hence the gift of literacy was shared with others via oral reading. Secondly, few people had their own copy of any significant parts of Scripture or any other important document. Hence those who owned such writings would bless others by reading aloud. Those two difficulties continue to apply in many parts of the world today.

In ancient times it also appears that people would read orally - even when alone. It seems that the Ethiopian Eunuch, travelling by chariot, read the scroll of Isaiah aloud to himself. Consequently, Philip could hear the words as he drew nearby (Acts 8:28-30). Moreover, the above observations are predicated on the apparent fact that people in ancient times did not realise reading could proceed silently. Writing during the Fifth Century AD, Augustine of Hippo expressed amazement that his friend Ambrose of Milan could read silently:

> *... his eyes swept across the page, and his heart sought out the sense, but his voice and tongue were at rest* (*Confessions* 6:3).

While children learn to read by voicing the words, they are soon told to remain silent - so as to maximise classroom efficiency. But the only way to develop reading, pronunciation, oratorical skill and genuine understanding is through speaking the text. The power of the enunciated word cannot be overstated.

Biblical exhortations to read the written Word aloud and in public

Several parts of Scripture commend the reading of biblical texts in public and aloud - so as to ensure that we hear, understand and obey the Word of God.

Moses in the 12TH Century BC urged a reading of the law every seven years:

> *" ... you shall read this law before them in their hearing. Assemble the people - men, women and children, and the aliens living in your towns - so they can listen and learn to fear the LORD your God and follow carefully all the words of this law. Their children who do not know this law, must hear it and learn to fear the LORD"* (Deuteronomy 31:10-13).

There we see the virtue of children listening - while not yet understanding.

King **Josiah** in the 7TH Century BC addressed *all the people from the least to the greatest* after he received the recently re-discovered book of the law. Josiah *read in their hearing all the words of the Book of the Covenant ...* (II Kings 23:1-2). This sets an example for civic rulers to uphold Scripture.

A few years later, **Baruch** - who assisted Jeremiah (36:1-10) - *read to all the people at the LORD's temple the words of Jeremiah from the scroll*; soon after, the words were read to King Jehoiakim, who burned them (36:23).

After the return from exile in the 6TH Century BC, **Ezra** brought out the Book of the Law, and *in the square ... he read it aloud from daybreak till noon* while *the people all stood up* (Nehemiah 8:1-5). Likewise, following a custom from the 4TH Century AD, many believers stand for the reading of the Gospel.

Jesus in the synagogue at Nazareth *stood up to read* from the scroll of Isaiah (Luke 4:16), upholding a tradition that readers be drawn from the assembly.

The Apostle **Paul** urged Timothy: *devote yourself to the public reading of Scripture* (I Timothy 4:13) - that surely is helpful advice for modern pastors. He similarly exhorted the Colossians (4:16): *After this letter has been read to you, see that it is also read in the church of the Laodiceans and that you in turn read the letter from Laodicea*. Reading large portions of the Bible in church may help to give a more broadly balanced appreciation of Scripture.

Finally, **John** writing in Revelation (1:3) stated: *Blessed is the one who reads aloud the words of this prophecy, and blessed are those who hear it and take to heart what is written*. Hence the virtue of reading Scripture aloud.

Benefiting the individual by oral reading

Reading aloud privately often enables a better appreciation of biblical texts, and indeed any document, while diminishing the distractions that often occur during silent reading. While ploughing through long portions of text might be done efficiently in silence, it is very difficult to read silently without pausing to ponder the meaning of words. As the mind easily wanders during such pauses it may be the case that more can be read and understood orally than silently.

Enriching domestic life through family reading

Home life may be blessed when households designate one evening each week as a family night, featuring reading aloud with no computers, phones or TV. Domestic life in former generations enjoyed great benefit as children would listen to the reading of Scripture during daily devotions, usually in the context of a shared meal. Such activities helped to commend the faith while they also promoted Bible knowledge, reverence for Scripture and a love for learning.

Transmitting faithful conviction through oral reading in church

Since the generational transmission of Christian belief is closely linked to the quality of relationships in families and in church, it is crucial for children to see and hear their fathers leading meetings, and particularly to deliver the reading of Scripture. It is also vital that children be guided towards reading the Bible aloud in church. In no small measure, the future of the church depends on the extent that families devote themselves to the public reading of the Scriptures. Such activity is enhanced if churches adopt the custom of standing for the reading of Scripture - or perhaps simply from the Gospels - and as our young people are taught to read the Bible with passion, authority, volume and clarity.

Utilising Scripture as part of Christian outreach

The following actions may put the Bible to use as we reach out to the world:

- Holding a Bible-reading 'marathon' featuring members of the community - especially civic leaders - and reporting the event in regional newspapers;
- Promoting literacy using Christian Scripture - as we assist children, adults and new arrivals to the country who struggle with language proficiency;
- Installing a sign with static or moving Bible quotations for the public to see;
- Donating welcome packs (including Scripture) at citizenship ceremonies.

Commending Scripture to community leaders

As all countries benefit from applying biblical principles of governance, it is valuable when God's people commend Scripture to the civic authorities. Such commendation accords with the foundation of Western lands in general and those in the Westminster tradition in particular - especially Commonwealth nations (as they hold the British Sovereign as common head) and moreso the crowned Realms eg Australia, Canada, New Zealand and Papua New Guinea - owing to their shared Coronation ceremony with its link to Holy Scripture.

Each monarch in the Westminster tradition is crowned in a Christian service featuring biblical directives, and is given a Bible by the leaders of the Church of England and the Church of Scotland who make the following exhortation:

> *... to keep your Majesty ever mindful of the law and the Gospel of God as the Rule for the whole life and government of Christian Princes, we present you with this Book, the most valuable thing that this world affords ... Here is Wisdom; This is the royal Law; These are the lively Oracles of God.*

Since officials who pledge allegiance to the monarch inherit a duty to uphold biblical precepts, it is helpful when Christian leaders highlight that rarely-recognised obligation, as they present Bibles to newly-commissioned civic leaders, such as MPs, police, the military, judges and justices of the peace.

It is also good to inform public officials and the people about Bible quotations on civic buildings or monuments such as the Latin text of Psalm 127:1 that is featured on the floor of Central Lobby in the Palace of Westminster - *Nisi Dominus aedificaverit domum in vanum laboraverunt qui aedificant eam* - "Unless the Lord build the house they labour in vain that build it". That same quotation is in the **Queensland Parliament** on a stair window, while in Victoria's Parliament is the text of Proverbs 11:14 - *Where no counsel is, the people fall but in the multitude of counsellors there is safety*.



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