

“The Public Reading of Scripture”

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Before you are several sheets of paper entitled something like “The Ebb and Flow of Lectio Continuo Bible Reading in English-Speaking Reformed Churches, 1539-2000, and Its Recovery Today.”

Back a number of years ago when I was studying in England, I happened one Sunday night to attend the St. Mary Redcliffe Church that was across the Bristol Downs. It was an Anglican church that had been built before Columbus sailed, and they were using the 1662 *Prayer Book*. They’d been using it there since 1662, and it was a very difficult, of course, Anglican service. And during the service they came to the portion where the Old Testament was to be read, and they had a reader who went to the lectionary and began to read from the prophet Isaiah. He read very slowly, deliberately, with an English accent that was beautiful, and I found myself being very moved by the impact of the Scriptures read well.

As I pondered that experience, I realized that over the years I could not recall ever hearing the Bible read in church apart from the text that was being preached upon, and typically that was one or two verses. I’d been brought up in a Baptist church, attended a Bible church in college – a congregational church – and had been in Presbyterian churches. I felt like I’d been around the block a few times in terms of exposure to what was there, at least in southern California. And yet, in those years, 22-plus years of being in church every Sunday, I could not recall just a Bible reading in church. And yet here I was being very moved by the impact of the Scriptures well read.

Before Dr. Boice died, every time I heard him speak, he started – no matter what he was speaking on – he started with a little gripe session about the state of worship in the church today. Every time he talked, he got up and he began to talk about how abysmal the practice of worship was, and he’d go through element by element and talk about the preaching. You know, expository preaching is gone by the wayside. He’d talk about what we were singing – classical hymnody, psalmody gone by the wayside. He’d talk about the absence of prayer. He didn’t necessarily talk about Scripture-based prayer, but again prayer was deficient in our day. And Bible reading. The absence of Bible reading was another one of the issues that he pointed to as being one of the defects, one of the indications of the degeneration of worship in our day.

The way I see it is that Bible reading is something like the Rodney Dangerfield of biblical elements...I mean, it’s there in *The Confession*. It’s listed as one of the elements as distinct from preaching...the reading of the Scripture. *The Directory* separates it as a legitimate element. But whereas we fight over all of the others – right? – we fight over what we’re going to sing, we fight over how we ought to preach, we fight over whether or not we’re going to pray and how much prayer, and we criticize each other on that ground. There’s plenty of tussling over the sacraments. But we don’t fight over whether or not the Scripture ought to be read, I don’t think. I don’t think we hardly even discuss it. I don’t think it’s an issue. I don’t think anybody’s going to say, ‘You know, you really shouldn’t read Scripture in worship.’ You know that argument is just not out there being made.

But I would at least anecdotally maintain that the reading of the Scripture may be the candidate for the single most neglected element of them all. It’s just one of those things that flies by, insofar as it flies at all, under the radar screen. We’re not giving attention to it. It has been neglected, I would say, for a long, long time in our circles.

And yet, we actually have a command on this one. This is one of the elements where...I mean, John Frame could claim, as he does in one of his articles, that there's no explicit command to preach.

I see Dr. Old's seven volumes on preaching and reading of Scripture in the history of the Christian church as a massive rebuttal of that statement, but if he cannot find an explicit command for preaching, there really is one for Bible reading. Here's the Apostle Paul, I Timothy 4:13:

“Until I come, give attention to the public reading of Scripture, to exhortation and teaching.”

And what the original text says is “Give attention to the reading...,” and I think in the context that *public* is rightly supplied – “the reading” – everybody would know what he was talking about. There's a context to that assertion, and they would understand in light of what was practiced in the synagogue that he's talking about the regular sequential reading of Scripture, and he's telling Timothy, ‘Don't neglect it. This is something that you must do. This is a part of the service of the church. This is what we do when we gather for worship, we read the Scripture.’

James F. White, the liturgist who was on the faculty of Notre Dame, refers to the decline of the public reading of Scripture as apostasy. He actually uses that word for what is going on in the churches today. He is that strongly convinced that what is going on is wrong, and a terrible failure on the part of the church today. And yet for Reformed Christians in our heritage, the Reformers were all but unanimous in their conviction that both the Scriptures should be read, and that they should be read *lectio continuo*, that the Scriptures should be read sequentially; that we should pick up the next week where we left off the previous week, and work our way through books of the Bible.

We, however, in our day have dropped what surely was a major plank in the Reformers' program of what we might want to call church revitalization today. This was not a minor issue for them, particularly, ironically enough, with Cranmer and the Church of England, as Dr. Old points out in his fourth volume of his survey of the reading and preaching of Scripture.

One of the ways that the Reformation was to be established in England was through both a *lectio selecta* of the Sunday service, but he also outlined a program for the reading of the New Testament three times and the Old Testament once each year in the daily service in the church, and so in the vernacular the Scriptures were to be read straight through every year in the context of the parish church. It was through the reading of the Scripture as well as its preaching that the Reformers sought to reform the church.

So this goes somewhat into some of the historical and biblical background. I'll try not to get bogged down in too many of the details, but what the Reformers were reacting to was the medieval lectionary that had been codified by Gregory the Great (whose years were 540-604) which was a *lectio selecta*, or a selective reading: not a consecutive reading, not a sequential reading, but a topically-driven, calendar-driven selection of readings from the Scriptures—some, in fact, as my Church of England friends would joke when I was at Trinity—some baffling as to try to figure out why they were selected at all. But nevertheless, by some criteria selected, but the criteria wasn't that of consecutive sequential reading of the Scripture.

The Reformers reacted to that and looked back to what they believed to be the biblical and patristic practice, which was not a selected reading but a consecutive reading, a sequential reading. They noted from the Old Testament (Exodus 24:7) that Moses was read in the context of the assembly of the people. They looked back to Nehemiah 8:5-8, where Ezra read and then gave interpretation of the reading, and it was typical of the rabbis to see Ezra and that

reading in Nehemiah 8 as the foundation for the establishment of the synagogue and the synagogue service.

In the New Testament, you might want to flip around with me some so that we can see something of what was being practiced in the first century. **Luke 4:16** says that Jesus came to Nazareth where He had been brought up, and “as was His custom, He entered the synagogue on the Sabbath and stood up to read.” So, it’s the Sabbath Day, it’s the assembly in the synagogue, and what are they doing? They’re reading Scripture. This was what was done. “And the book of the prophet Isaiah was handed to Him” – so we’re to imagine here a scroll being handed to Him. The scroll is open, what do they read? Well, they pick up where they left off. They would open the scroll; they would go to that point up to where they had read the previous Sabbath in the prophet Isaiah. “And He found the place where it was written, “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because He anointed me to preach the gospel to the poor...” and so forth, as He reads from the prophet Isaiah.

The point here is that Isaiah was read, and then when it was read (verse 20),

“He closed the book and gave it back to the attendant. Their eyes were fixed upon Him (verse 21) and He began to say to them, “Today...””

– in other words, **the exposition that would follow upon the reading of the Scripture.**

Acts 13:15. The Apostle Paul on the Sabbath Day [in Pisidian Antioch] “... went into the synagogue and sat down. And after the reading of the Law and the Prophets...” You know, it’s just an observation of what was going on in the synagogue. What did they do? They read the Law and the Prophets. That was a standard part of the synagogue service. And then the synagogue officials say,

“ ‘Brethren, if you have any word of exhortation for the people, say it.’ And Paul stood up, and motioning with his hand, he said....”

So the Scriptures were not just read, but then comments were made. Interpretation was given, exhortation was made, and application was made on the basis of the Scripture that was read, so there’s this connection between *lectio continua* Bible reading and *lectio continua* exhortation or exposition on the basis of it. Two readings: reading of the Law; reading of the Prophets.

Acts 15:21. James, at the Council of Jerusalem, making comment on the practices of the synagogues of his day: “For Moses from ancient generations...”—arguing that the synagogue was established in ancient times. Moses from the ancient, relative to the first century in which James lived... “For Moses from ancient times has in every city those who preach him, since he is read in the synagogues.” Every Sabbath he is read, and so he is preached. That is, there is this close connection between the reading and the preaching, and this is why the Reformers were so strongly in favor of *lectio continua* preaching. They saw that the two were governed by the same principle: you read consecutively, and then you preach on the basis of what’s being read. So what is a sermon?

A sermon is an exposition of one of the read portions of the Scripture, and even as you read consecutively through the Scripture, then you also preach your way consecutively, *lectio continua*, on the basis of one of the texts being read.

Dr. Old and R.H. Fuller, another liturgical scholar, both argue that this was the principle upon which synagogue Bible readings were based. It was based upon the principle *lectio continua*. You pick up the next week where you left off the previous week, and read your way

through the Law, through the Prophets, and then start over again. That's what's being referred to in I Timothy 4:13, when the Apostle Paul says give attention to the reading. So the church essentially adopted the form of worship of the synagogue, and continued the practice of the reading.

Then the Reformers looked as well at the patristic witness to this practice of *lectio continua* reading of the Scripture and then its exposition. They found examples of it in Origen, who lived about 185-254; the sermons of Augustine (354-430); Chrysostom (347-407); Gregory of Nyssa (330-395); Gregory the Great (540-604). R. H. Fuller, in *The New Westminster Dictionary of Liturgy and Worship*, p. 298, says: "For ordinary Sundays, the principle of *lectio continua* was used in the early church." That's a good line to read in the presence of your high-church friends who are committed to a *lectio selecta* approach and believe strongly in its antiquity. Yes, it is ancient. It goes back to Gregory the Great, but before that in the earliest centuries from apostolic times until the period of late antiquity that was not the method that was used. The earlier method was that of *lectio continua*. So R.H. Fuller again:

"For ordinary Sundays the principle of *lectio continua* was used, a book being selected apparently at local discretion, and read in successive parts until it was finished."

That's what the Reformers found, and so that's what they began to advocate, both for biblical historical reasons and for prudential reasons as well.

And I've provided for you some of the statements from the early books of order and liturgical documents. Let's start with Martin Bucer's *Strasbourg Liturgy*. You can read along with me as I read. This dates from 1539, and it reads as follows:

"The minister goes to the pulpit and reads out of the Gospels as much as he proposes to expound in a single sermon, treating the books in succession, and they should be dealt with in their order, not as heretofore by picking out several pieces..."

You see the concern that the Bible must be understood in its context, and it's not understood in its context if your readings are based upon another criterion of selection other than that of successive readings. Otherwise you're just pulling passages out of context and expecting them to be understood. Bucer is against that, and wants the Bible to be read in its context. So,

"...picking out several pieces, often without particular skill, so that all other things given in the Gospels have been withheld from the congregation. In the afternoon and other hours, the other biblical books all are also expounded."

Like Calvin, Bucer argued for primarily the gospels to be preached on the Sunday morning services, and then the other books of the Bible in the Sunday afternoon service, and then also in the weekday services. But you see the two concerns. One is that the Bible be read in context, and then that the Bible be read comprehensively, so that as he says here, all the other things in the Gospels not be withheld. If you're jumping around taking bits and pieces, then you're omitting that which ought not to be omitted, and *lectio continua* forces you to deal with all of the Bible – to read it all, and to expound it all.

The Scots' *First Book of Discipline*, from 1560... we see similar concerns. There we read, "We think it most expedient that the Scriptures be read in order, that is, that some one of the Old and New Testament be begun and orderly read to the end."

He's not talking about reading Genesis to Revelation. He's saying you take a book and read it in order. Read from the beginning of the book to the end of the book. Then you pick another book.

“In the same we judge the preaching for this skipping and divagation...”

[*divigation* means wandering about] “...from place to place of the Scripture, be it in reading or be it in preaching, we judge not so profitable to edify the church as the continual following of one text.”

Why? Because you're going to understand it better and, too, because you're going to read all of it and not omit things that God intended for us to hear in the reading.

The Middleburg Liturgy of the English Puritans from 1586, we read this:

“Upon the days appointed for the preaching of the word, when a convenient number of the congregation are come together that they may make fruit of their presence until the assembly be full, one appointed by the eldership shall read some chapters of economical books of Scripture, singing psalms between at his discretion, and this reading to be in order as the books and chapters follow, so that from time to time the Holy Scriptures may be read throughout.”

[There's the concern that the whole Bible, the whole counsel of God, be read.]

“But upon special occasion, special chapters may be appointed.”

In The Westminster Directory, 1645, we read the following:

“Reading of the word in the congregation being part of the public worship of God, and one means sanctified by Him for the edifying of His people, is to be performed by the pastors and teachers.”

By the way, there's some tension in this whole section here between the English Puritans and the practices that developed in Scotland, and one of them was the Puritans did not want to have lay readers, and so that little barb there is aimed at the Scottish practice of lay readers, and *The Directory* says no, it's to be the pastors and teachers who are to read the Scriptures.

The next,

“All the economical books of the Old and New Testament shall be publicly read in a vulgar tongue, out of the best allowed translation, distinctly that all may hear and understand.”

A third paragraph:

“How large a portion shall be read at once is left to the wisdom of the minister, but it is convenient that ordinarily one chapter of each testament be read at every meeting, and sometimes more where the chapters be short or the coherence of the matter requireth it.”

Next paragraph, a fourth:

“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 ended on one Lord's Day, it is to begin the next.”

Also we could cite the daily readings in Cranmer's *Book of Common Prayer* (1547 and 1662), and Baxter's *Reformed Liturgy* of 1661, each of which required a chapter of each

testament in the Sunday service, and then worked its way through the rest of the Bible in the daily services.

So in the English-speaking world particularly there is a unanimous consensus in the Reformation era that the Bible is to be read, and is to be read *lectio continua*. We're to read our way through the Bible. That was the standard on the Continent, and that was the standard amongst the Scots and the Puritans well into the seventeenth century.

Then other developments began to appear, **and the development that is the most interesting is that of the expository reading**. It was actually first proposed by Bucer in his *Grund und Ursach* (German speakers, forgive me for that), but *grund* is ground, and *ursach* is reason, and it dates to 1524. It is very difficult to find an English translation of it, but this was the first defense of the worship of Reformed Protestantism, the first attempt to explain why Reformed Protestants were doing what they were doing in their worship services and to provide some explanation and some defense for the changes that were taking place in the medieval liturgy, and he proposes there that there be some comments that accompany the reading so that the people would better understand what was being read.

As I mentioned, there were tensions between the Scots and the English Puritans...*The Directory* in fact addresses this in the fifth paragraph. I think I included that with your things:

“When the minister who readeth shall judge it necessary to expound any part of what is read, let it not be done until the whole chapter or psalm be ended.”

In other words, they're directing those who were reading and commenting, giving a running commentary on the chapter being read—they're giving them counsel here to hold your tongue until you read the whole chapter. **Let the word speak for itself, is what the English were saying to the Scots**, and then at the end if you want to give some explanatory comments, hold your tongue until then. But, further counsel:

“And regard is always to be had unto the time, that neither preaching nor other ordinances be straighteneth, or rendered tedious, which rule is to be observed in all other public performances.”

There again is the fear that these expository readings would squeeze out the sermon proper.

The main thing I'm pointing out here is that *The Directory* recognizes the distinction here between the reading with comment and the sermon.

And what developed over time was – amongst the Puritans in England, the Puritans in New England, and the Scots – was this expository reading of the whole chapter that would take somewhere around thirty minutes prior to the sermon proper, which would then typically be like what you find in all the Puritan works. You know, a sermon on one phrase from one verse, and the next sermon on the next phrase from the same verse. *Lectio continuo* is slowed to the snail's pace! Whole volumes on single verses, this sort of thing.

We find the expository reading in English Nonconformity. Dr. Old argues that Henry's ...Matthew Henry's [commentary] is in fact his Bible-reading notes. Those are the notes that accompanied the Scripture reading...read that portion, and then made comment upon it. There's evidence of it in Isaac Watts' Meeting House in London, as well. It's sometimes referred to as “the double sermon” or the lecture. I'd like to call it the expository reading.

There's evidence of it among the New England Puritans, the orders of service for example found in John Cotton's book *The New England Way*, and his other book *The True Constitution*, where he speaks of the exposition of a chapter of the Scripture prior to the sermon proper.

And then there's also evidence of it amongst the Scottish Presbyterians. Patrick Fairburn, writing in 1874 in his volume on pastoral theology, dates these expositions, expository readings, to the 1650's, the Commonwealth period, and really speaks of them as continuing to his day in the 1870's. There's evidence of these readings in Thomas Boston's ministry; he died in 1732. See Philip Ryken's work on Boston...in his work he speaks of that.

And then, amongst the remnants that practice apparently survives even to the present. William Still was doing something like this in Aberdeen, though some have suggested he didn't know he was doing anything that was part of the Scottish tradition when he did! But nevertheless he'd stumbled upon this which had been fairly typical of Scottish Presbyterian practice; that is, of having a *lectio continua* expository reading of a chapter of the Scripture that is part of the regular service, over and above the sermon proper.

Then decline sets in. It's not easy to establish why this decline took place. Somewhere between the middle of the eighteenth century and the middle of the twentieth century, the decline in the practice began to set in. By 1855, at least in the United States...Charles Baird, in his book *Eutaxia*, lamented this decline and called for a return to *The Directory's* instruction that a chapter of each testament be read.

Somewhere along the way, the expository reading was dropped. And when it was dropped, the regular reading fell out along with it, so that rather than merely going back to the practice of simply reading the Scripture, reading fell out of the service altogether, apart from the text that was being preached. You can see evidence of this neglect in virtually all of the nineteenth pastoral and preaching manuals, which will make no mention or give no instruction or exhortation with respect to Bible reading other than merely the mechanics of reading Scripture.

You find evidence of the decline in that the twentieth century pastoral and preaching manuals also – and workbooks on worship – have virtually no exhortation or instruction with respect to Scripture reading. No one seems to be aware of this background or care about this background practice of *lectio continua* Bible reading.

It's been neglected in the journal articles. Lately there has been some revived interest (I'm talking about the last decade) in Bible reading. There's quite a bit of interest in *lectio continua* preaching; there has been almost no interest that I can find anywhere—and I've done the internet searches and all that, and virtually no interest in *lectio continua* Bible reading to be found anywhere for several hundred years. And until Ligon Duncan wrote the article in the Boice *Festschrift* on Bible reading, in which he urged a return to *The Directory's* instruction on reading *lectio continua* through chapters of the Bible...that's the first article that I could find to advocate specifically *lectio continua* Scripture reading as a regular part of the practice of the church.

Let me give a couple of tentative explanations as to why there was this decline...a loss, rather, of the practice of Bible reading in Presbyterian, Congregational, Baptist, and Methodist churches.

Why? Dr. Old suggests in the first case that it has to do with the scholastic preaching method that was characteristic of the English Puritans. His argument is that on the continent of Europe, you had this cadre of Renaissance scholars committed to the principle of *ad fontis*, of going back to the sources, who were proficient in the original languages and so there developed this group of scholars who were committed to preaching their way sequentially through the Scriptures. They went back to the form of the patristic homily, in other words, rather than the medieval scholastic analytical method of preaching.

And he argues that there was no similar group of scholars in Great Britain, that the great preachers at the Reformation era in Great Britain still were clinging to the scholastic method, that the Puritans largely followed this and tried to combine (as they do in *The Directory*) the *lectio continua* principle with an analytical method that was more scholastic and biblical. And so, you know the various divisions in Puritan sermons ...their interpretations, and doctrines, and uses and so forth very much reflects a scholastic approach to preaching. And he says in the long run you just couldn't put the two together. The scholastic approach is a detailed analysis of short pericopes – short texts, small texts – and combining that with *lectio continua* of major portions just in the long run didn't work! And so preaching became more and more topical and less and less text-driven.

Secondly, the commitment to the weekday *lectio continua* found both amongst the Anglicans and the Puritans...the Puritans were saying that really the *lectio continua* ought to be done in the home. It's in family worship that you read without comment. The very purpose of the public assembly is so that you would have reading with comment, and that's why you have an ordained ministry. So, in private you read without comment because you're not ...heads of households are not really qualified to make comment...but when the public assembly takes place, the reading has comment by the minister. And so they moved away from the *lectio continua* method both amongst the Anglicans and amongst the Puritans as a part of the Sunday services of the church.

Third, time constraints. As sermons grew to be an hour, hour and a half, long, they tended to swallow up the readings. Cotton Mather in fact makes comments in one of his works on the variety of practices in Puritan New England in his day, and recognizes that John Cotton, his grandfather, wanted there to be these *lectio continua* readings in the services. Increase Mather, his son, argued that they ought to be dropped altogether, and that they only ought to preach and not have the Bible readings in the services. Cotton Mather said there was still a debate going on in New England and a variety of practices, and he was happy with that being determined on a local basis.

Another possibility that Dr. Old raises has to do with the influence of Pietism. He would argue that evangelical worship today has more to do with Pietism than it has to do with the Reformation, and that the preference for selected devotional readings (that is, readings based upon the devotional quality of the passages to be read) really overtook the commitment to consecutive readings. In other words, what you read really needed to be inspiring...no sense in plowing your way through II Samuel. Find the ones that really inspire the people, the most beloved passages, so that the needs of inspiration about which Pietism was so concerned really squeezed out the disciplined systematic approach to Scripture reading. That plus the other needs of inspiration – the evangelistic sermon, the special music, the choirs and so forth, time constraints – further squeezed out the commitment to regular readings.

So here we are. What I'm arguing is that we need to go back to, we need to restore this plank in the Reformers' program of church revitalization; that we have been wrong to move away from it; our negligence is culpable; and, that we need to restore it.

As far as a practical aside, after I'd been at Independent for about fifteen years, I started counting up the number of books that I had preached through. I can't remember exactly...at the time it was probably about 25...somewhere between 25 and 30 books of the Bible. I was patting myself on the back for my wonderful commitment to expository preaching and how much we'd been able to do. But the next thought was...you know...say it was 30. Well, there's 36 more books of the Bible to get to! Fifteen years, 30 books, fifteen more years...in other words, it's going to be 15 years, maybe 20 years, before I get to some of those books. That seemed to me to be a neglect of duty on my part, that our people would not have been exposed to great sections of

Scripture in our services because I was not preaching at a pace adequate to get them there for another 15 years.

I started to ponder that some, and I thought, you know, that we could get there a lot quicker if we would read and not just preach. And we always had an Old Testament reading, typically determined by the text for the morning sermon, and then we didn't have certain readings in the evening. And so about five years ago, I thought that it was a matter of duty on my part to quicken the pace at which our people would be exposed to the reading of the whole Bible, and so we began to read a Sunday morning text unrelated to the morning sermon, and then just in the last couple of years added a text in the evening service as well, from the Testament not being preached. And as a result of that, we have already gotten up to around sixty books of the Bible.

And I've provided at the back here just an example of one year. This is what we're reading through in 2006, what we're reading through in the morning service and what we're reading through in the evening service. In the morning, I've been preaching through Matthew, so it's mainly Old Testament text in the morning. In the evening, I'm preaching through a harmony of Samuel, Kings, and I and II Chronicles, so it's mainly New Testament...not exclusively, but mainly New Testament in the evening. I've scaled down the reading for communion services and Christmas services and that sort of thing, or let the calendar determine those readings. But you can see – 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6...six different books of the Bible in the evening, five books of the Bible in the morning. In all, about ten books a year can be covered, depending on which books you're reading. I think that's worth it. I think that's important, and I've been extremely pleased at what my congregation has been exposed to just simply through reading texts of Scripture to which we would not have gotten – I'm not going to get to II Corinthians probably for a long, long time, but they're hearing it read right now and I think it's a good thing. I think it is...as it was for me as a young theology student in England, it can be powerful just to hear the Bible read well.

So here are my recommendations. I've sort of reworked the order a little bit, but let me briefly hit on these.

Number one, I recommend that you read a chapter of each Testament in each service, just as *The Directory of Worship* commends that we do so. I think you need to do this roughly, not slavishly. I think some chapters have to be broken up into two or even three pieces. I think there are some sections of Scripture that are not well-suited to public reading, and so you may need to skim over those lightly and make a short comment and then settle on the text that you will read. But I think the basic guideline holds that you ought to aim at reading about a chapter in each Testament in each service.

Secondly, read the Testament not being preached. I propose this as a way of maintaining biblical balance. As I just noted, I'm preaching through Matthew in the morning, so I'm going to read from the Old Testament. I'm preaching from the Old Testament in the evening, so I'm going to read from the New Testament. That way you're getting the balance of the Bible, the whole counsel of God is receiving exposure.

Third, read passages that are accessible to the congregation. What I'm really pleading for here is wisdom in the implementation of the program of *lectio continua*. For example, I just think it would be foolish to say, "Okay..." (announce on Sunday) "We're going to start...I've come back from Twin Lakes, I'm all jazzed up about this, and we're going to start reading through the Bible, and we're starting with Leviticus!" I just think that would not be wise. I'm not saying it's not Scripture, I'm not saying it's not important, I'm not saying there isn't a time when you might do that. I am saying that I think it would be very unwise to start there. I don't think it's very accessible. Until your congregation is more mature in the Scriptures, I think it's better,

it's wiser, to start with books of the Bible that are much more accessible, like the Gospels and Acts, and the Psalms, and the Epistles and Proverbs, and some portions of Old Testament narrative.

Consistent with this, then, I would recommend that you skim over with descriptive comments exceptionally remote or difficult texts. For example, passages such as Exodus 25-31, which are describing the tabernacle and its furnishings. I think an expository series on that could probably prove to be extremely valuable, but I have some doubts about whether or not the reading of it would be...the sockets and the poles, and the curtains...you know, I think that's remote. If I were you, I'd just skim over those, giving a brief description of what's there, and then settle in Exodus 32 and start reading there. I mean, all in the same service you would just explain what's in 25-31, and then hit the next text. Joshua 15-21, which outlines the distribution of the Promised Land to the twelve tribes. I would skim over that. Maybe I'm not a purist; maybe I'm giving way to pragmatic considerations, but I believe that they're not as accessible to the congregation. Chronicles 1-9, the genealogies, I just skimmed (*skimmed* is a better work than *skipped*! It shows more reverence for the inspiration of all of Scriptures). Nehemiah 3, describing the placement of the workers on the walls of Jerusalem – you know, So-and-so was here and So-and-so was there...it's a little remote...I would skim over it. So I think they are ordinarily best handled with a summary comment while transitioning to the next text to be read.

Fourth, vary scriptural types. I think it would be unwise to plough straight through the Minor Prophets or the Old Testament narrative beginning from Genesis plowing straight through to Nehemiah. Instead, I would recommend that you try to vary the diet, which is what I've tried to do in these two programs of reading that I've provided for you. Move from Gospel to Old Testament narrative to Epistle, to Old Testament poetry to Acts, to Old Testament wisdom, and so on.

Fifth, provide brief introductions to books and chapters. By brief I would mean normally a few sentences lasting from 15-45 seconds—a few comments setting the stage for the text to be read, anticipating perhaps a difficulty in the text. But by doing so I think you can do much to enhance the spiritual profitability of the reading if you give it just a brief setting, and statement of concerns.

Then, sixth, read slowly and clearly, and with nuance. I think it goes without saying (but I'll say it anyway) you can read the Scripture more or less well. Right? You can read it poorly or you can read it well. Why not read it well? I think you can enhance the understanding of the congregation by studying the passage (at least at some level) so that you understand where the stress points are, what to underscore as you read by your tone of voice, by the emphasis you give to the text as you read it. That was what was so powerful about the reading at St. Mary's Redcliffe in Bristol. The person reading was a master of reading Scripture, and so the meaning of the passage was illuminated by the excellence by which that individual read it: slowly, distinctly, nuanced in such a way as to help the listeners to grasp the meaning of the text that was being read.

So that's the basic encouragement that I would like to give you in the way of implementing Scripture reading in your church. The goal at which we are aiming is that substantial portions of Scripture be read in the assemblies of God's people because that is what God has required of us. Going back to biblical times, that was what was practiced by the patristic and Reformation-era churches, and above all because that indeed is what will edify the people of God.

Now, do you want to break, or do you want to take questions?
All right, questions!

[Transcriptionist's note: Most questions were not clearly heard.]

Johnson: I don't know how to answer that. I've never timed it. But I guess if you look at these pericopes I've picked, I would think it would be about three minutes. No, I don't think it's five minutes, but I think it's more like three. And you know, I think it helps to recognize that a decision to do something in a service is at the same time a decision not to do something else.

You know, you have a finite amount of time. That's why I really believe that at least in our culture that an economy of language needs to be used in leading a service. You need to cut out all the extraneous chatter that goes on, and lead the service very succinctly. Because often time is just lost, just wasted, with announcements and extraneous matters. And you know three minutes is not a lot of time, but it is at twelve o'clock, when everyone's checking their watches! The problem is we lose the time at the beginning and we can't get it back. So, is it important enough to fit it in? It may mean that something else that's not as important needs to drop out. A decision to do one thing is at the same time a decision not to do another.

Johnson My answer would be that if you are counting on the fact that people are literate and therefore can read their Bibles at home, and therefore they will....*[Laughter]*...I have a high regard for the depravity of man. I just don't think that the church can count on the majority of the congregation reading the Scripture, either privately or in families. I don't think it happens. So...and even if it were, I probably still would argue that it's an element of our worship that we read Old and New Testament in our services.

Johnson Ministers? That's another subject, but I really believe in ministerial leadership in the worship service. I just think that's our job. That is what we were ordained to do. The church invested a lot in setting us apart, putting us under care of Sessions, putting us under care of Presbyteries, sending us off to seminary, examining us, ordaining us, installing us – for what? To lead worship services. I mean, that's a major part of what we do. We were set apart for the sake of public ministry. Not everybody can do public ministry. A lot of people can do private ministry, but public ministry, you have to be really examined and qualified, and we are very tedious in our requirements for that, and so I really think that's what we're supposed to do. So I pretty much hang on to that for myself and the other ministers.

Johnson It's become a greater priority for me, and I'm arguing for the priority that they get more exposure to more Scripture, and so I'm willing to sacrifice the parallel passage from the Old Testament that accompanies the New Testament sermon for the sake of more exposure to more Scripture. It's a value judgment. It's a priority judgment. But that's the one that I'm really making.

Johnson Yes, and is it the case that every element of the service has to thematically tie in? I mean, my opening hymn never ties in thematically – well, not “never” – but except for Christmas and Easter and Palm Sunday, when I think it's profitable to recognize that that indeed is what Sunday it is, I never pick the opening hymn on the basis of a theme. It's just always a great hymn of praise. So I don't think...I don't have to tie my prayer prior to the sermon into the sermon and anticipate the themes of the sermon. I mean, I've never thought to do that. I just don't think every element...it's nice to tie things in thematically, it's nice for the last hymn to tie into what you've just [heard]. But I don't think most of us need to think we need to tie every element into it.

Johnson Yes, almost all those responsive readings are Psalms, so you'd be limited. No, I guess in *The Trinity Hymnal* there are New Testament ones, aren't there? I don't ever use responsive readings. I'm not crazy about them. I think it's just a stylistic or personal preference. I just like better the idea of Scripture being read by the minister – authoritatively read!

Johnson We had a speech teacher at Trinity/Bristol, and I thought he was going to cry, he was so upset with how horrible I was! *[Laughter]* I don't know if it was the American accent or just buffoonery on my part, but he was about ready to throw me out of the room. Other questions?

Johnson What do I tell the people to do while I... ? Yes, I really do want them to open and read, especially if they are longer passages. I feel like most people will follow better if they do that, but I have to say I'm sort of a hypocrite because at times I like to just sit back and listen. You know what I mean?

Johnson Are there versions of the Bible that I would say don't...? Yes, I would say you shouldn't use a paraphrase. I think you ought to use one that pretty strictly sticks to the text and is a translation of the text, not a short commentary, not a paraphrase. I think for the sake of the integrity of the public service, I think that it should be a fairly strict translation. And in my context, where I have an old congregation, on holiday Sundays I will usually go back to the King James Version just for the sake of the older people who I know want to hear the older language, and for whom that is very meaningful. But otherwise I just think a good solid translation should be used, but not a paraphrase.

[Question: Is there a line between what you call nuanced reading and then what I would call dramatic reading? And how much dramatic do you want to get?]

Johnson I don't want it to become a skit, if that's what you mean! *[Laughter]* This is... T. David Gordon talks about the argument of the beard. Is there a difference between drama and a dramatic reading and a reading with nuance, and aren't they on a continuum, and since they are, they're all the same? You know – if you're clean shaven and the next guy's got a day of growth, and the next guy's got five days, and then you've got a full beard, since they're on a continuum, is there really a difference between being clean-shaven and having a beard? *[Laughter]* There is a difference between a drama, dramatic production, and a nuanced, careful reading. And there is a line, and I can't tell you where it is, but there's a line there somewhere. And I know when you cross that line! *[Laughter]*

Johnson I'm not sure I understand. You asked me about the value of public reading? Oh, I forget who, but there are Puritans and others who testify to being converted through public reading. I think it has great value. I mean, just think about reading through the Sermon on the Mount. You're not preaching on it, but you're just reading through the Sermon on the Mount. When I was in college and was trying to witness to people, I would sit them down and read from the Sermon on the Mount and say, "Surely you're just absolutely dumfounded by the power of these words." I think it has great value, myself.

Thank you.
[Applause]