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Reading and Hearing the Word in a Puritan Way

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It is well-known that Puritans were lovers of the Word of God. They were not content with the bare affirmation of the infallibility, inerrancy, and authority of Scripture. They read, searched, sang, and heard the Word with delight, always seeking for and relishing the applying power of the Holy Spirit accompanying the Word. They regarded the sixty-six books of Holy Scripture as the library of the Holy Spirit graciously given to them. For the Puritan, Scripture is God speaking to us, as a father speaks to his children. In Scripture God gives us His Word as both a word of truth and a word of power. As a word of truth, we can trust in and rest our all upon Scripture for time and eternity. As a word of power, we can look to Scripture as the source of transformation used by the Spirit of God to renew our minds.

As late twentieth-century Protestants and evangelicals, we too must complement the defense of the doctrine of biblical inerrancy with a positive demonstration of the transforming power of God's Word. That power must be manifested in our lives, our homes, our churches, and our communities. We need to show without pretense that though other books may inform or even reform us, only one Book can and does transform us, making us conformable to the image of Christ. Only as "living epistles of Christ" (2 Cor. 3:3) can we hope to win "the battle for the Bible" in our day. If half the strength spent in attacking or defending the Bible would be devoted to knowing and living the Scriptures, how many more would fall sway under their transforming power!

No movement in church history can teach us more than Puritanism about cultivating the transforming power of the Word. Puritan preachers excelled in expounding how the Word must be used as a means of personal transformation. Their focus centered upon practical directions on how to

read the Scriptures and how to hear the Word of God preached.

Richard Greenham on Reading God's Word

Scripture teaches us that the Word of God must not only be read publicly in worship (Acts 15:21; 1 Tim. 4:13), but also serves as a blessing when personally read, heard, and obeyed. "Blessed is he who reads, and those who hear the words of the prophecy, and heed the things which are written in it" (Rev. 1:3).

But how must we read? Many Puritan authors have provided us with ample direction.¹ One of the most helpful early Puritan works on how to read the Scriptures was penned by Richard Greenham (c. 1535-94) under the title, *A Profitable Treatise, Containing a Direction for the reading and understanding of the holy Scriptures*.² After establishing that the preaching and reading of God's Word are inseparably joined together by God in the work of the believer's salvation, Greenham focuses on our duty regularly and privately to read the Scriptures, glean support from Deuteronomy 6:6; 11:18; Nehemiah 8:8; Psalm 1:2; Acts 15:21; 2 Peter 1:19.

Waxing more practical, Greenham asserts that men sin not only when they neglect to read the Scriptures, but also "... in reading amisse: therefore the properties of reuerent and faithfull reading are to bee set downe, which are these that follow": (1) Diligence, (2) Wisdom, (3) Preparation, (4) Meditation, (5) Conference, (6) Faith, (7) Practice, (8) Prayer.³

Numbers one through three ought to precede reading; numbers four through seven ought to follow reading; number eight must precede, accompany, and follow reading. Here is the gist of Greenham's advice.

1) *Diligence* must be pursued in reading the Scriptures more than in doing anything secular. We ought to read our Bibles with more diligence than men dig for hidden treasure. Diligence makes rough places plain; makes the diffi-

cult easy; makes the unsavory tasty.

2) *Wisdom* must be used in the choice of matter, order, and time. In terms of matter, the believer must not try to move from the revealed to that which is not revealed, nor spend the bulk of his time on the most difficult portions of Scripture. If the minister must accommodate his preaching of the Word to the level of his hearers, "then much more the hearers themselves must apply their owne reading to their owne capacities."⁴

In terms of order, the wise reader of Scripture will aim to be firmly grounded in all the "principall points of doctrine." Moreover, Scripture reading must follow some semblance of order rather than skipping around. Only a whole Bible will make a whole Christian.

Time must also be utilized wisely. The whole of the Sabbath should be devoted to such exercises as the reading of Scriptures, but as for other days, a portion of Scripture in the morning, at noon, and in the evening is a wise balance (Eccl. 3:11). In any event, no day should pass without some reading of the Scriptures.

3) Proper *preparation* is critical. Without it, Scripture reading is seldom blessed. Such preparation is threefold: First, we must approach Scripture with a reverential fear of God and His majesty. We must approach the Word "swift to hear, slow to speak" (James 1:19), determined like Mary to lay up God's Word in our hearts. Reverential fear is almost always blessed, either by having our understanding enlightened, or by some other good affections put into us.

Second, we must approach Scripture with faith in Christ, looking on Him as the Messiah, who "is the lion of the tribe of Iuda, to whom it is giuen to open the booke of God." If we come to Scripture with reverence for God and faith in Christ, will Christ Himself not open our hearts as He did the hearts of the disciples traveling to Emmaus?

Third, we must approach Scripture sincerely desirous to

learn of God (Prov. 17:16). Those who bore fruit from thirty to a hundred fold were precisely those who received the word “with a good and honest heart” (Luke 8). We often do not profit from Bible reading because we come “without a heart” for divine teaching.

4) *Meditation* after reading Scripture is as critical as preparation before reading Scripture. One can read diligently, but the reading will bear no fruit if meditation does not follow. Reading may give some breadth, but only meditation and study will give depth. The difference between reading and meditation is like the difference between drifting and rowing toward a destination in a boat. “Meditation without reading is erroneous, and reading without meditation is barren. . . . Meditation makes that which we have read to be our own. He is blessed which meditates in the law day and night (Ps. 1).”⁵

Meditation involves our mind and understanding as well as our heart and affections. To reach a sound and settled judgment on various truths, the mind must be brought to meditative understanding. Meditation, however, also “digests” this settled judgment, and makes it work upon our affections. If our affections do not become involved, our sound meditative understanding will whittle away. The Scriptures must be transfused through the entire texture of the soul.

5) By *conference* Greenham means godly converse with ministers or other believers. “As iron sharpeneth iron: so one friend another” (Prov. 2:7). The godly must share together what they are gleaning from the Scriptures, not in a proud manner speaking beyond what they know, but with humility, trusting that where two or three are gathered together for spiritual conversation, God will be among them. Such fellowship should not be carried on in “too great a multitude,” nor with a shut-door policy to others.⁶

6) Our Scripture reading must be mixed with *faith*. Faith

is the key to profitable reception of the Word (Heb. 4:2); without faith it is impossible to please God (Heb. 11:6). To read without faith is to read in vain. Actually, all eight of these guidelines for reading Scripture should be followed in the exercise of true faith.

Moreover, through reading the Word by faith, our faith will also be refined. Our Scripture reading ought often to try our faith, not only in the generalities of our lives, but also in our particulars—especially in our afflictions. As gold is tried in the fire, so faith will abide the fire of affliction.

7) The fruit of faith must be *practice*. And practice will “bring forth increase of faith and repentance.”⁷ Practice is the best way to learn; and the more we put the Word into practice in the daily obedience of faith, the more God will increase our gifts for His service and for additional practice. When the Spirit sheds light upon our conscience that we are “doing” the read Word, we also receive the great benefit of being assured that we possess faith.

8) *Prayer* is indispensable throughout our reading of Scripture—preceding, accompanying, and following. In public reading of Scripture, it is not possible to pause and pray after each verse. In private reading, we would do well to salt Scripture constantly with short, pungent, applicable petitions suggested by the particular verses being considered.

If we pray for nourishment from our physical food for every meal, how much more ought we not pray for spiritual nourishment for every Bible reading? If we do not dare touch our food and drink before we pray, how do we dare touch God’s holy Book—our spiritual food and drink—without prayer?

Prayer also necessarily involves thanksgiving: “If we be bound to praise God when he hath fed our bodies, how much more when he hath fed our souls?”⁸ Let us not be fervent in asking and then cold in giving thanks. Rather, let

us pray to read with godly fear and humble thanksgiving, remembering that the believer who is perfunctory in Bible reading will be perfunctory in Christian living.

If the Bible is to get into us, we must get into it. To neglect the Word is to neglect the Lord, but those who read Scripture “as a love-letter sent to you from God,” shall experience its warming and transforming power.

Thomas Watson on Hearing God’s Word

Much of what Richard Greenham said above about the reading of Scripture applies to the hearing of the Word as well. Thomas Watson, one of the most well-known and readable Puritans, offers specific help with regard to hearing the preaching of God’s Word.⁹ As we read this list, we would do well to ask after each item: *Am I really hearing the Word of God? Am I a good listener of the proclaimed Gospel?*

1) When you come to God’s house to hear His Word, do not forget to also prepare your soul with prayer.

2) Come with a holy appetite for the Word (1 Peter 2:2). A good appetite promotes good digestion.

3) Come with a tender, teachable heart (2 Chron. 13:7), asking, “What shall I do, Lord? (Acts 22:10). It is foolish to expect a blessing if you come with a hardened, worldly minded heart.

4) Be attentive to the Word preached. In Luke 19:48, we are told that the people “were very attentive” to Christ. Literally translated, the text says, “they hung upon him, hearing.” Lydia evidenced a heart opened by the Lord when she “attended” or “turned her mind” to the things spoken by Paul (Acts 16:14). Such attentiveness also involves banishing wandering thoughts, dullness of mind, and drowsiness (Matt. 13:25). Regard the sermon as it truly is—a matter of life and death (Deut. 32:47).

5) “Receive with meekness the engrafted word” (James 1:21). Meekness involves a submissive frame of heart— “a

willingness to hear the counsels and reproofs of the word.” Through meekness the Word gets “engrafted” into the soul and produces “the sweet fruit of righteousness.”

6) Mingle the preached Word with faith: “The word preached did not profit them, not being mixed with faith” (Heb. 4:2). If the chief ingredient of a medicine is missing, the medicine will not be effective; so be sure not to leave out the chief ingredient, faith, as you listen to a sermon. Believe and apply the Word. Apply Christ when He is preached (Rom. 13:14); apply the promises as they are spoken.

7) Strive to retain and pray over what you have heard. Don’t let the sermon run through your mind like water through a sieve (Heb. 2:1). “Our memories should be like the chest of the ark, where the law was put.” As another well-known Puritan, Joseph Alleine, advised, “Come from your knees to the sermon, and come from the sermon to your knees.”

8) Practice what you have heard. “Live out” the sermons you hear. Hearing that does not reform your life will never save your soul. Doers of the Word are the best hearers. Of what value is a mind filled with knowledge when not matched with a fruitful life?

9) Beg of God to accompany His Word with the effectual blessing of the Holy Spirit (Acts 10:44). Without the Spirit, the medicine of the Word may be swallowed, but it will not result in healing.

10) Familiarize yourself with what you have heard. When you come home, speak to your loved ones about the sermon in an edifying manner: “My tongue shall speak of thy word” (Ps. 119:172). Remember each sermon as if it will be the last you ever hear, for that may well be the case.

Under the Spirit’s blessing, if these “ten commandments” for hearing the Word are conscientiously obeyed, the preached Word will be a transforming power in our

lives. If, on the other hand, these directions are ignored, and the preached Word is not effectual to our salvation, it will be effectual to our condemnation. Watson rightly concludes: “The word will be effectual one way or the other; if it does not make your hearts better, it will make your chains heavier. . . . Dreadful is their case who go loaded with sermons to hell.”¹⁰

Conclusion

It should be evident from the foregoing discussion that to read and hear God’s Word rightly, and so experience its transforming power, we shall need the help of the Holy Spirit. We need to ask: How may we know if the Word being read and heard is really being applied to us by the Spirit of God? We may know by what precedes, accompanies, and follows that application. Prior to the Spirit’s application, room is made in the soul for the Word. With the Spirit’s application, there is a sense of suitability and power—be it the power of the still, small voice of the Gospel (1 Kings 19:12) or the thunders of Sinai (Ex. 19:16)—which persuades us that we are receiving for the welfare of our souls precisely the word and instruction from God which we need to receive. And most importantly, when God applies His Word to our souls, “the fruit of righteousness which comes through Jesus Christ, to the glory and praise of God” (Phil. 1:11) begins to appear. The old nature is mortified and the sinful cult of self begins to decrease; the new nature is quickened and Christ’s manifest presence in our lives increases. Where such fruit and evidence of the Spirit’s working with the Word are lacking, the Word is not being used aright. “For the tree is known by its fruit” (Matt. 12:33)—fruits such as true conversion (Ps. 19:7a), wisdom (Ps. 19:7b), joy (Ps. 19:8a), peace (Ps. 85:8), sweetness (Ps. 119:103), freedom (John 8:31-32), praise (Ps. 119:171), and light for the dying (Ps. 19:8b).

John Flavel summarized it well, “The Scriptures teach us the best way of living, the noblest way of suffering, and the most comfortable way of dying.”

Today’s Christians need to become intensely Word-centered in reading, listening, praying, worshiping, and living. In the words of Henry Smith, a great Puritan preacher:

We should set the Word of God alway before us like a rule, and believe nothing but that which it teacheth, love nothing but that which it prescribeth, hate nothing but that which it forbiddeth, do nothing but that which it commandeth.¹¹

Let us pray for grace to read and hear the Word of God in a Puritan way, for that way is consonant with Scripture itself and is able to make us wise unto salvation.

Endnotes

- 1 Though Greenham is used here as a model, many Puritans have addressed the “how-to” of Bible reading. One of the best, recently reprinted, is Thomas Watson, “How We May Read the Scriptures With Most Spiritual Profit,” in *Heaven Taken by Storm: Showing the Holy Violence A Christian is to Put Forth in the Pursuit After Glory*, ed. Joel R. Beeke (Pittsburgh: Soli Deo Gloria, 1992), appendix 2: 113-29. For a practical twentieth-century booklet written in a Puritan vein with a helpful section on how to develop a reading plan, see Geoffrey Thomas, *Reading the Bible* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1980).
- 2 *The Works of the Reverend and Faithfull Servant of Jesus Christ, M. Richard Greenham*, edited by H [enry] H [olland] (London: Felix Kingston for Robert Dexter, 1599), 389-97.
- 3 *Ibid.*, 390.

- 4 Ibid., 391.
- 5 Ibid., 393.
- 6 Ibid., 394.
- 7 Ibid., 395.
- 8 Ibid., 397.
- 9 This list merges in summary form, Watson, *Heaven Taken by Storm*, 16-18, and *Body of Divinity* (London: Banner of Truth Trust, 1971), 377-79.
- 10 Ibid., 379.
- 11 "Food for New-Born Babes," in *The Works of Henry Smith* (Edinburgh: James Nichol, 1866), 1:494.

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