

A Gathered People of the Book: A Case for Scripture Reading in Gathered Worship

Andrew Lucius

Charleston Southern University

Abstract: *This essay argues that the public reading of Scripture is a biblically commanded, historically demonstrated, and theologically formative element of gathered Christian worship. This study traces the practice through the canon of Scripture and demonstrates that Scripture reading functions as a communal, formative, and divinely effective act of worship. Additionally, biblical examples are reinforced by early Christian witnesses such as the Justin's First Apology and the Apostolic Tradition, confirming the centrality of extended readings in corporate gatherings. Integrating biblical theology, historical theology, and pastoral application, the essay contends that reclaiming robust public Scripture reading strengthens ecclesial identity, fosters spiritual formation, and aligns doxological practice with evangelical theological convictions.*

Key Words: *1 Timothy 4:13, apostolic tradition, biblical theology of worship, Christian liturgy, early church worship, Evangelical worship, gathered worship, public Scripture reading, Scripture and spiritual formation*

There is no shortage of resources within the evangelical tradition that emphasize the centrality of the Scriptures for the Christian life.¹ Within the broader Evangelical movement, Southern Baptists demonstrate a strong commitment to the Bible by regularly identifying themselves as “people of the Book.”² This commitment to Scripture expresses itself in theological categories such as inerrancy and sufficiency and influences Baptist worship distinctives, such as the practice of expository preaching

in weekly gathered worship.³ However, there is a persistent irony within many evangelical worship services.

Although evangelicals emphasize the importance of the Bible, they often limit public Scripture reading to a single passage, often corresponding to the sermon text, while the broader canon remains largely unheard in weekly worship. In contrast, other Christian traditions that do not hold the same theological convictions about the Bible, such as the Roman Catholic and the Episcopal Church, frequently incorporate extensive readings from both the OT and NT as substantial elements of their worship liturgies. Matthew Emerson and Lucas Stamps reinforce this observation, stating, “This points to another irony, namely, that many evangelical churches, which place a high priority on the inspiration and inerrancy of Holy Scripture, feature far less Scripture than many in the ‘higher’ traditions, some of which have long ago abandoned belief in the full trustworthiness of the Bible.”⁴ Why is there an inconsistency between theological positions and doxological practices in evangelical churches? Emerson and Stamps offer one explanation for this problem, as they trace the influences of frontier liturgy on free church worship and comment on the inconsistency highlighted above: “There is a noticeable scarcity of Scripture readings in frontier liturgy. In many Baptist and evangelical churches, it is not uncommon for there to be only one Scripture reading during the entire service, namely, the sermon text read by the preacher.”⁵ Although essential and clearly biblical, the act of preaching does not fulfill the biblical mandate to read Scripture in gathered worship.⁶ This mandate is most clearly presented in 1 Tim 4:13 and is modeled in the worship practices found throughout the Bible. Therefore, this essay contends that the Bible provides both explicit imperatives and descriptive models that support the importance and the outcomes of faithful Bible reading in the gathered assembly.

³ This essay will not treat evangelicals and Baptists synonymously. Instead, it understands Baptist, in particular Southern Baptist, as the largest modern expression of evangelicalism.

⁴ Matthew Y. Emerson and R. Lucas Stamps, *The Baptist Vision: Faith and Practice for a Believers' Church* (B&H, 2025), 127. Although they do not explicitly cite James White, White's work in North American worship is often cited as the first source to articulate the idea of “frontier worship.” See James F. White, “The Missing Jewel of the Evangelical Church,” in *Christian Worship in North America, A Retrospective: 1955–95* (The Liturgical Press, 1997), 103–8.

⁵ Emerson and Stamps, *The Baptist Vision*, 127.

⁶ Block states, “Evangelicals must rediscover that the Scriptures were written to be heard; they were not written primarily to be preached” (Daniel I. Block, *For the Glory of God: Recovering a Biblical Theology of Worship* [Baker Academic, 2016], 190).

¹ Perhaps the most important work on the doctrine of the Scriptures from an evangelical perspective is the work of Carl F. H. Henry, *God, Revelation and Authority: God Who Speaks and Shows Primary Considerations*, 6 vols. (Crossway, 1999). The significance of Henry's works is connected to his importance as the most influential thinker of the early Evangelical tradition.

² This commitment is illustrated through Wayne Grudem's quip, “I am a Baptist because of the Bible” (“A Mere Christian, and a Baptist Too,” in *Why I Am a Baptist*, ed. Tom J. Nettles and Russell Moore [B&H, 2001], 201).

Some authors have sought to address this issue within the free church tradition in one of two ways. First, some take the approach of focusing on the specific methods of how to read Scripture publicly. Constance Cherry's *The Worship Architect* is one example of this approach.⁷ Second, other scholars take a more theological approach, seeking to understand the biblical practice of reading Scripture publicly. One of the best examples of this approach is Daniel Block's work in *For the Glory of God: Recovering a Biblical Theology of Worship*.⁸ In this text, Block gives significant attention to the role of the Scriptures throughout the canon. Both approaches are needed and aid Christian worship, but it must be conceded that without a grounding in biblical principles, practical guidance is unlikely to sustain a consistent practice of reading Scripture publicly. To this end, Ligon Duncan rightly suggests that the Bible is our guide for worship renewal: "If a renewal of Christian worship is to be undertaken, on what principle will it be founded? If we are to live and worship together *soli deo gloria*, then what shall be the basis and pattern? The only answer for the evangelical Christian is *sola scriptura*."⁹ Therefore, this essay takes the methodological approach of examining selected biblical texts as windows into the practice of publicly reading Scripture. Rather than asserting a comprehensive liturgical practice from these passages, it seeks to draw careful observations about how such readings function within the worshiping life of God's people across the canon. These biblical observations are then compared with selected worship manuals and witnesses from the early, post-apostolic Church. These witnesses specifically suggest how Scripture reading functioned as a normal element of early Christian worship. Through the integration of biblical observations with theological

⁷ Constance M. Cherry, *The Worship Architect: A Blueprint for Designing Culturally Relevant and Biblically Faithful Services* (Baker Academic, 2010), 83–101.

⁸ Block suggests four elements of worship that have been affected by reducing the amount of Scripture in corporate worship. "The diminished place of Scriptures in many evangelical churches today is reflected in (1) replacing pulpits that highlight preachers' roles as spokespersons for God with nondescript or transparent stands, to make them more visible; (2) drastically reducing or eliminating the reading of Scripture in worship; (3) replacing sustained exposition of the Scriptures with short, topical homilies; and (4) substituting hymns steeped in the language and theology of Scripture with jingles that may borrow biblical phrases but are little more than sound bites empty of biblical meaning to many who sing them" (*For the Glory of God*, 170). A second example is the work of Jeffrey D. Arthurs, *Devote Yourself to the Public Reading of Scripture: The Transforming Power of the Well-Spoken Word* (Kregel Academic, 2012), 13–34. While most of Arthurs's work is pragmatic, he gives one chapter to considering the biblical evidence of reading Scripture publicly.

⁹ Ligon Duncan, *Does God Care How We Worship?* (P&R Publishing, 2020), 11.

and historical insight, this essay seeks to provide a biblically compelling foundation for reclaiming the public reading of Scripture (especially among Baptist or baptistic churches) as an essential act of corporate worship, supporting the growing health of local churches.¹⁰

Biblical Foundations for Scripture Reading in Gathered Worship

Biblical worship and Scripture reading in worship are not synonymous. Many within the evangelical worship tradition have sought to develop gathered worship practices that are deeply rooted and dependent on the Bible. Descriptors of biblical worship such as "regulative" and "normative" have shaped how churches understand the Bible's role in determining the content of biblical worship.¹¹ In both descriptors, the Bible is cited as the authoritative text. In his article on biblical worship, Michael Farley traces how different hermeneutical models lead to distinct liturgical decisions in gathered worship, each allowing the Bible to remain in authority over elements of corporate practice.¹² The value of Farley's work lies in his ability to clarify different approaches that seek to apply biblical authority in the worship service. Yet, regardless of what hermeneutical model local churches incorporate, what remains underdeveloped is the centrality of the Bible being read aloud in worship.

Cherry emphasizes the long-standing importance of the Scriptures for gathered worship and indicates a starting place for observing their use in public worship within the biblical narrative: "The written word of Scripture and its interpretation have been central to worship since the time of Moses."¹³ What follows in this section is an attempt to trace the practice of reading Scripture through OT and NT examples and imperatives. As Cherry suggests, this path begins with Moses and concludes with a final imperative from the apostle Paul.

¹⁰ Crider connects the practice of Scripture reading with the overall health of local churches, stating, "Could a connection exist between the lack of Scripture being used in worship and the fact that 80 percent of churches in America have plateaued or declined?" (Joseph R. Crider, *Scripture-Guided Worship: A Call to Pastors and Worship Leaders* [Seminary Hill Press, 2024], 27).

¹¹ In his monograph on Baptists and worship, Connell traces the influences of the regulative principle on Baptist worship (R. Scott Connell, *Baptists and Worship: Sitting Beneath the Gospel's Joyful Sound* [Pickwick, 2020], 209–24).

¹² Michael Farley, "What Is 'Biblical' Worship? Biblical Hermeneutics and Evangelical Theologies of Worship," *JETS* 51.3 (2008): 591–613.

¹³ Cherry, *The Worship Architect*, 84.

The Beginning of Public Scripture Reading: Deuteronomy 31:9–13

As the final book of the Pentateuch, Deuteronomy concludes the first major portion of the written Word of God.¹⁴ Block suggests, “The bulk of Deuteronomy consists of Moses’ farewell pastoral sermons delivered before the Israelites crossed the Jordan to the promised land.”¹⁵ Situated within Moses’s final exhortation to Israel, Deut 31:9–13 serves as a theological mandate that shapes Israel’s worship identity.

Then Moses wrote this law and gave it to the priests, the sons of Levi, who carried the ark of the covenant of the LORD, and to all the elders of Israel. And Moses commanded them, “At the end of every seven years, at the set time in the year of release, at the Feast of Booths, when all Israel comes to appear before the LORD your God at the place that he will choose, you shall read this law before all Israel in their hearing. Assemble the people, men, women, and little ones, and the sojourner within your towns, that they may hear and learn to fear the LORD your God, and be careful to do all the words of this law, and that their children, who have not known it, may hear and learn to fear the LORD your God, as long as you live in the land that you are going over the Jordan to possess.”¹⁶

This account is the first direct OT articulation describing the practice of reading Scripture publicly as a communal responsibility, establishing a precedent to trace through the rest of the canon. As the Israelites prepare to enter the promised land without the leadership of Moses, the institutionalization of Scripture reading anchors Israel’s life and worship in the authority of the words of God. The passage connects the practice of reading Scripture publicly to Israel’s corporate relationship with God. Regarding this narrative, three specific observations clarify the process and purpose of this ancient worship practice, laying the groundwork for tracing the continuity of public Scripture reading across the biblical canon.

¹⁴ Block, *For the Glory of God*, 171. The Pentateuch contains significant passages regarding worship. Block suggests that the Decalogue is one of the most significant passages, stating, “The Decalogue is crafted as a worship document for the redeemed people of God, calling for a specific response to YHWH’s revelation of himself through the exodus.”

¹⁵ Block, *For the Glory of God*, 175. Block continues this idea, stating, “Moses’ speeches in Deuteronomy complete the revelatory process that gave the Israelites their core Scriptures. In the covenant-renewal ceremony that underlies the book, the Israelites commit themselves to the entire package: text and interpretation.”

¹⁶ All Scripture quotations are from the English Standard Version unless otherwise noted.

First, a close inspection of the text reveals an emphasis on the communal scope of the reading of the Law. As Moses entrusts the written Torah to the Levitical priests, he commands that it be read aloud at the appointed time to all the assembly (Deut 31:11). Within this assembled audience are men, women, children, and even the sojourner residing within the city gates (Deut 31:12). This point stresses the importance of communicating covenant knowledge to all the people of the community, not just the religious elites. The public reading of Scripture is for everyone.

Second, the stated purpose of public reading reveals the function of this worship practice. Moses explains that the Law is to be read, so “that they may hear and learn to fear the LORD your God and be careful to do all the words of this law” (Deut 31:12). Hearing allows learning; learning leads to fearing the LORD; and fearing supports obedience—an ordered sequence that reflects the formative power of Scripture within the gathered worship assembly. Furthermore, the reference to children who do not know the law (Deut 31:13) demonstrates that the public reading serves as an act of intergenerational teaching, ensuring that Israel’s identity as God’s people is continually reinforced through shared exposure to the Word of God. In Peter Craigie’s classic commentary on Deuteronomy, he describes the pedagogical aim of this event: “For the older people in the covenant community, the educational value of the ceremony would lie in remembering the covenant with God and in renewed dedication to the God of the covenant.”¹⁷ Craigie contrasts this reminder with how the young would receive the reading of the Law: “The younger generation, however, would learn for the first time the full meaning of the covenant.”¹⁸ The purpose of reading the Law is, at its most basic level, one of teaching all generations.

Third, the worship context of Moses’s command demonstrates a connection between gathered worship and Scripture reading. The specific event Moses references in which public Scripture reading is to occur is the Feast of Booths in the year of release, a reference to the Sabbatical year in Deut 15:1, occurring every seven years. This fall feast was a seven-day celebration of God’s faithful provision throughout the year. It was also a time of remembering God’s faithfulness in delivering the people from Egypt, when God made them live in booths (Lev 23:33–43).¹⁹ Through the act of embedding the reading of the Law within a worship gathering marked by remembrance, celebration, and assembly, Deuteronomy

¹⁷ Peter C. Craigie, *The Book of Deuteronomy* (Eerdmans, 1976), 172.

¹⁸ Craigie, *The Book of Deuteronomy*, 285.

¹⁹ *ESV Study Bible* (Crossway, 2011), 249.

omy presents the public reading of Scripture as a critical element of gathered worship. The Law is proclaimed in the context of a worship celebration, reminding the people that obedience flows from knowledge of the Word of God.

Reading of the Law and Worship: Nehemiah 8:1–8

Following the example of Deut 31, Neh 8:1–8 describes a second event in which the public reading of Scripture was central. The context of Nehemiah differs significantly from the time of the Israelites wandering in the wilderness. However, the text of Nehemiah supports and further clarifies the importance of public Scripture reading in gathered worship. Set within the broader narrative of post-exilic restoration, the passage depicts the people of Israel gathered to hear the Word of God read by Ezra. Through a survey of this text, several points of continuity can be discerned between this vivid description and Deut 31.

The first point of continuity is the intended gathered audience. In both descriptions, the reading of the Law is to be heard by everyone in the community. Nehemiah 8:2 lists those who participated in hearing the Law read: “So Ezra the priest brought the Law before the assembly, both men and women and all who could understand what they heard, on the first day of the seventh month.”²⁰ Mervin Breneman says, “The Jews became known as ‘the people of the book.’ The Old Testament emphasizes that God’s Word is to be known and used by all the people, not only the priests and leaders.”²¹ Therefore, in both Deuteronomy and Nehemiah, the entire gathered assembly listened to the Word of God read as an act of worship (Neh 8:6).

A second point of continuity concerns the purpose of reading Scripture publicly. As written in Deuteronomy, the outcome of reading Scripture publicly is that the people understand the Word of God. This aspect is also demonstrated in Nehemiah by the initiative taken by the Levites to “help the people to understand the Law” (Neh 8:7). Breneman suggests this action was necessary because the Israelites had been living in a foreign country all their lives and had probably lost some of their ability to understand the Law of God due to cultural gaps or language.²² Whatever the barrier to understanding the Law rightly, the Levites took on the responsibility of helping overcome those barriers, ensuring the people understood what was being read. This initiative implies an orientation toward

²⁰ Williamson connects the idea of “all who could understand” specifically with children (H. G. M. Williamson, *Ezra, Nehemiah*, WBC [Zondervan, 1985], 165).

²¹ Mervin Breneman, *Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther* (Broadman Press, 1993), 281.

²² Breneman, *Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther*, 281.

doing what God commands. As in Deuteronomy, the Law is read, understood, and followed.

Nehemiah’s narrative supports the account of Deuteronomy through continuity and offers greater clarity to the practice of public Scripture reading by describing the people’s response to the reading of the Law. While Ezra reads, the attentive people of Israel stand listening to the reading from early morning to midday (Neh 8:3). Once Ezra finishes, there is a threefold response of worship, which Williamson describes as follows:

Their cry of ‘Amen! Amen!’ expressed their concurrence in Ezra’s words; the raising of their hands demonstrated their sense of need and dependence, no doubt with the thought that God would meet that need through the Scripture soon to be read; and their prostration demonstrated both their worship, as stated, and humble adoration.²³

The people’s response to the reading of the Law of God is a multi-positional expression of worship that reflects agreement, thanksgiving, and humility. Additionally, it is worth noting the significant amount of Scripture read in Nehemiah. Ezra and the Levites were committed to a lengthy time of reading, and the people received the reading with joy.²⁴

The Purposes of God Through Scripture Reading: Isaiah 55:10–11

A third OT passage to consider is Isa 55:10–11. Deuteronomy 31 and Neh 8 emphasize the practice of reading the Law within the gathered community through vivid accounts of worship among the Israelites, but Isaiah 55:10–11 provides a theological explanation of the result of God’s Word being read. Isaiah begins with a metaphor, comparing the rain and snow that fall from heaven to water the earth to God’s Word sent out among people. Isaiah 55:11 states,

So shall my word be that goes out from my mouth;
it shall not return to me empty,
but it shall accomplish that which I purpose,
and shall succeed in the thing for which I sent it.

In his commentary on Isaiah, John Oswalt connects God’s Word to

²³ Williamson, *Ezra, Nehemiah*, 166.

²⁴ Block suggests that this must be recovered in contemporary worship today: “Evangelicals must rediscover the joy of reading and hearing Scripture together with other believers. Hearing Scripture in worship is a communal enterprise, involving full participation of those gathered, communion with the saints who have preceded us, and fellowship with those in far-off corners of the globe—wherever God’s people gather for worship” (*For the Glory of God*, 191).

the promise of salvation: “Here the reason for turning to God is the absolute dependability of his word. What God has said about the certainty of pardon being available is absolutely dependable.”²⁵ Oswalt expands upon this concept of God’s truthfulness: “But even more than that, all that God has said is reliable, whether it is about himself and his love, or about the nature of reality and the foolishness of idolatry, or about the human predicament and the necessity of repentance.”²⁶ Therefore, it is through the Word of God going out that the purposes of God are accomplished.

These verses from Isaiah inform a biblical view of the public reading of Scripture. Isaiah 55:11 references God’s Word going out from his mouth. This divine act exemplifies any instance where the Word of God is reach, which would undoubtedly include the public reading of Scripture in gathered worship. Thus, when applied to the broader context of the Old Testament’s practice of public Scripture reading, the poetic images of Isaiah demonstrate the richness of the act of reading Scripture publicly and further clarify the principle that the Word read will accomplish the purpose of God.

Synagogue Worship and the Public Reading of Scripture:

Luke 4:16–21

The OT narrative presents descriptions of the people of God experiencing the blessing of the read Scriptures in gathered worship, but these blessings cannot be determined to be a normative result of Christian worship until these ideas are followed into the New Testament. What can be confidently asserted is that the reading of Scripture was for all Israelites, public Scripture reading was part of significant worship events, and the purpose of reading publicly was to educate the people in the Law of God that they might follow it. These ideas are enriched by the principle found in Isaiah that the public reading of the Word of God enriches the worship event and accomplishes the purpose of God.

Similar to OT narratives, Luke and Acts describe Scripture reading in gathered worship. Early in Luke’s Gospel, the reader observes the practice of Scripture reading in synagogue worship, suggesting familiar worship rhythms that Jesus would have experienced throughout his youth. In Luke 4:16–21, Jesus enters into this practice and reads from the Law in the synagogue of his hometown, Nazareth.

And he came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up. And as

²⁵ John N. Oswalt, *The Book of Isaiah, Chapters 40–66*, NICOT (Eerdmans, 1998), 211.

²⁶ Oswalt, *Isaiah*, 212.

was his custom, he went to the synagogue on the Sabbath day, and he stood up to read. And the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written,

The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,
because he has anointed me
to proclaim good news to the poor.
He has sent me to proclaim liberty to the captives
And recovering of sight to the blind,
To set at liberty those who are oppressed,
To proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.

And he rolled up the scroll and gave it back to the attendant and sat down. And the eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him. And he began to say to them, “Today this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.”

Luke’s account describes Jesus participating in the customary practice of synagogue worship by reading from the Scriptures on the Sabbath.²⁷ Luke observes how Jesus stood to read, a practice mentioned as early as the text of Neh 8, and how Jesus was handed the scroll of the prophet Isaiah. Both elements demonstrate a continuous thread between early OT worship practices and those found in the NT synagogue. However, what is unique to Luke’s account is the identity of the reader and the revelation that emerges from his reading.

As Jesus reads from Isa 61, his public act of Scripture reading becomes inseparably linked to the revelation of messianic fulfillment. After reading the text, Jesus declares, “Today this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing” (Luke 4:21). This simple statement testifies to the fulfillment of God’s redemptive promises within the gathered assembly and within the act of hearing itself.²⁸ When is the Scripture fulfilled? Upon hearing the text read by Jesus. James Edwards states, “It is not fulfilled in abstraction,

²⁷ James R. Edwards, *The Gospel According to Luke*, PNTC (Eerdmans, 2015), 137.

²⁸ More attention can be given to the appropriation of speech act theory to the public reading of Scripture. As one example, David Calvert interacts with the idea of how words—specifically God’s Word in the Scriptures—has the capacity to do something in the worship service. The words read, sung, prayed, and preached are not mere words but words with power to shape the worshiper (David J. Calvert, “Liturgical Speech Acts: How to Do Things with Words in Worship” [PhD diss., Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2018]).

however, but ‘in your hearing’ (v. 21) as a prophetic call of Jesus for listening ears and responsive hearts.”²⁹ This emphasis on “hearing” stresses the importance of the auditory nature of the event. The reading of Scripture functions not merely as a recollection of prophetic hope but as a means through which that hope is realized and disclosed.

Although Luke 4:16–21 is a descriptive account of the Messiah reading Scripture in the synagogue, it also informs the act of Scripture reading in public worship today. Specifically, the scene supports the idea that Scripture reading in worship is a site of engagement with God, in which God speaks decisively through his Word and reveals his redemptive purposes to his people. Jesus’s reading of Scripture in Luke 4 is perhaps the most apparent manifestation of the promise in Isa 55: that God’s Word, when read to the listener, fulfills God’s promises. This principle supports the idea that Scripture reading is not ancillary to worship but central to it, functioning as a primary mode through which God addresses his people and reveals the fulfillment of his promises in Christ.

The New Testament Church and the Public Reading of Scripture: Acts 13:14–15

In addition to Luke’s Gospel, Acts 13:14–15 provides an important description of the continuity of Scripture reading between Jewish synagogue worship and the emerging worship life of the early Church. Block connects this worship practice to Christian worship, stating, “Since the public recitation and reading of Scripture was part of temple and synagogue worship (see Luke 4:16; Acts 13:27; 15:21; 2 Cor 3:15), it naturally became an important part of Christian worship.”³⁰ As Paul and Barnabas enter the synagogue in Antioch of Pisidia on the Sabbath, Luke states, “After the reading from the Law and the Prophets, the rulers of the synagogue sent a message to them, saying, ‘Brothers, if you have any word of encouragement for the people, say it’” (Acts 13:15). This brief description assumes the regular reading of Scripture in gathered worship. The Law and the Prophets are read aloud as a normative feature of worship, as evidenced by the leaders’ expectations and the fluidity shown by Paul and Barnabas in completing the task.³¹ This commitment to Scripture reading asserts a covenantal identity and reflects a canonical consciousness that situates the early Christian message within the story of Israel.

Paul proceeds to offer an exhortation to the people by connecting the read Scriptures to the gospel message of Jesus Christ. His exhortation

²⁹ Edwards, *Luke*, 137.

³⁰ Block, *For the Glory of God*, 188.

³¹ Lawrence R. Farley, *The Acts of the Apostles: Spreading the Word* (Ancient Faith Publishing, 2018), 187.

does not replace or supersede the readings but emerges organically from them, seen clearly in his use of Scripture throughout his exhortation. In this way, Paul interprets Israel’s Scriptures Christologically and narratively. Therefore, Scripture reading serves as the authoritative basis for proclaiming the gospel, ensuring continuity between God’s past redemptive acts and their fulfillment in Christ.

Reflections on the Public Reading of Scripture

Up to this point, this essay has primarily considered the example of the biblical witness as it pertains to public Scripture reading in gathered worship. Through the OIT and NT, the Bible offers examples that substantiate the public reading of Scripture as a normative rhythm in gathered worship. In addition to these narrative examples, the NT epistle of 1 Timothy provides a direct imperative to read the Scripture publicly.

In his pastoral exhortation to Timothy, Paul instructs him as follows: “Until I come, devote yourself to the public reading of Scripture, to exhortation, to teaching” (1 Tim 4:13). This instruction is not presented as a novel innovation from Paul but as a foundational rhythm in gathered worship. This is the most explicit NT imperative directing the church to the public reading of Scripture in gathered worship. Arthurs emphasizes the rich tradition already established by the time Paul writes this letter to Timothy, stating, “[Paul] says, in effect, to continue the ‘millennia-deep’ tradition.”³² This rich tradition is built on the objective truth of the Scriptures. Arthurs continues, “Paul’s use of the definite article, referring to ‘the faith,’ implies that we have a fixed body of doctrine that all believers should understand and to which all should give assent.”³³ Therefore, Paul’s exhortation underscores the public reading of Scripture as a sustained and essential practice within the life of the gathered church. By calling Timothy, and ultimately the church, to devote himself to this task, Paul emphasizes the critical importance of this worship rhythm.

From Moses’s final exhortation in Deuteronomy to Paul’s pastoral mandate to Timothy, Scripture not only informs the pattern of biblical worship but also is integrated into worship through public reading. The force of the Bible’s instruction is amplified when example and imperative address the same principle; therefore, the descriptive text observed from Deuteronomy and Nehemiah, joined with Paul’s imperative, provides ample evidence that the Bible instructs the Church to read Scripture aloud publicly in gathered worship. In addition to this general principle, three specific theological points can be observed.

First, God’s Word is meant to be heard by all the people of God. The

³² Arthurs, *Devote Yourself to the Public Reading of Scripture*, 25.

³³ Arthurs, *Devote Yourself to the Public Reading of Scripture*, 25.

public reading of Scripture is intended to be communal rather than private. Education level, age, or cognitive ability are no boundaries when the Scriptures are read aloud. Such reading is for everyone because God is accessible to everyone. Second, public Scripture reading is formative, not merely informational. The biblical pattern consistently links the hearing of Scripture with moral and spiritual formation, covenant identity, and people's worship responses. Hearing the Scriptures is not only an opportunity to learn the Law of God but also an opportunity to be shaped more deeply. Third, Scripture reading is a primary mode of divine address in worship. It is the means through which God actively speaks and accomplishes his purposes when Scripture is read aloud in gathered worship. Scripture is not simply a governing text, explaining what to do and what to abstain from in life and worship; the testimony of the biblical witness is that the Scriptures are words of life to those willing to submit themselves to hearing them.

Examples of Scripture Reading in the Early Church

The Bible presents compelling reasons for churches to consider public Scripture reading as a normative worship rhythm. Additionally, a brief consideration of the practices of early Christian worship helps the Church connect the principles of the biblical text to worship practice, a role often played by church history in the life of the Church. Duncan highlights the value of allowing history to influence liturgical behavior: "Church history does not supply a normative authority for Christian worship, but it does supply a didactic authority that we would be foolish to ignore."³⁴ If Duncan's assessment of the value of church history is correct, what kind of didactic authority might be available for this essay? Was the early Church devoted to reading Scripture publicly, and if so, how was this practice adopted? To discern the answers to these questions, this essay considers two of the most significant documents of the early Church: the *Apostolic Tradition*, and Justin's *First Apology*.

The *Apostolic Tradition* is one of the oldest documents dealing with worship practices of the early church after the New Testament.³⁵ The text of this document was highly influential in the Western ecclesial tradition

³⁴ J. Ligon Duncan III, "Does God Care How We Worship?" *Give Praise to God: A Vision for Reforming Worship*, ed. Philip Graham Ryken, Derek Thomas, and J. Ligon Duncan III (P&R, 2011), 60.

³⁵ Nathan Chase and Maxwell Johnson, *The Apostolic Tradition: Its Origins, Development, and Liturgical Practices* (Liturgical Press, 2025).

while documents like the *Didache* were more influential in the East.³⁶ Regarding the *Apostolic Tradition*, Paul Bradshaw argues, "Although some scholars still entertain doubts about its attribution to Hippolytus or its Roman origin, it is now universally accepted that this document is the original source of the other church orders from which it was formerly presumed to be derived."³⁷ The *Apostolic Tradition* presents a clear, explicit reference to Scripture reading in the gathered worship assembly through the appointment of a "reader." Chapter 11 states, "The reader is appointed when the bishop gives the book to him."³⁸ Bradshaw connects this role of the reader to Jewish synagogue worship, providing a direct link to the example of Jesus in Luke 4:

The function could have been exercised by different members of the congregation in turn, as was the Jewish practice, where the individual was handed the scroll from which to read—the same gesture as the bishop uses here to make the appointment.³⁹

The bishop's role in making this appointment amplifies the role of the reader and increases the importance of Scripture reading. Only four chapters later, the text addresses the catechumens who enter worship: "Those who are newly brought forward to hear the Word shall first be brought before the teachers at the house, before all the people enter. Then they will be questioned concerning the reasons that they have come forward to the faith."⁴⁰ There is an emphasis in this chapter on the people's "hearing the word" after professing and explaining their faith. This practice seems consistent with OT examples of all those within Israel hearing the Word of God read aloud to support identity as the people of God and unity with one another.

The *First Apology* (155 AD) of Justin Martyr offers the most straightforward explanation of Scripture reading in early Christian worship:

³⁶ "The *Didache* serves as a window into the life of earliest Christianity, the community's self-identity, and related problems surrounding a nascent (post-) apostolic period" (Shawn J. Wilhite, *The Didache: A Commentary* [Cascade, 2019], 78). Although the text of the *Didache* is informative, its primary value for understanding early Christian worship lies in other liturgical elements, not in how the early Church read Scripture corporately. Therefore, it is not considered a supportive document to the argument of this essay.

³⁷ Paul F. Bradshaw, *The Search for the Origins of Christian Worship: Sources and Methods for the Study of Early Liturgy* (Oxford University Press, 2002), 76.

³⁸ Hippolytus, *On the Apostolic Tradition*, ed. Alistair C. (St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2015), 159.

³⁹ Paul F. Bradshaw, Maxwell E. Johnson, and L. Edward Phillips, *The Apostolic Tradition*, Hermeneia (Fortress, 2002), 74.

⁴⁰ Hippolytus, *On the Apostolic Tradition*, 170.

And on the day called Sunday, all who live in cities or in the country gathered together to one place, and the memoirs of the apostles or the writings of the prophets are read, as long as time permits; then, when the reader has ceased, the president verbally instructs, and exhorts to the imitation of these good things.⁴¹

Justin describes a substantial time for Scripture reading, though it would probably vary in duration from service to service. Additionally, he explains the familiar pattern of reading and explanation mentioned in texts such as Nehemiah. He also commends the practice of moral formation as a product of reading and explaining the Scriptures.

The witnesses of the *Apostolic Tradition* and Justin's *First Apology* provide a picture of how the early Church practiced the act of reading Scripture publicly. These documents, and others like them, eventually led to a more formalized reading practice. According to Chapell, "By the end of the fourth century, the dominant liturgical pattern included three readings: one from the Old Testament and two from the New—an Epistle and a Gospel."⁴² This pattern largely persisted until the Reformation, when the Church's worship underwent many liturgical changes.

The act of reading Scripture publicly in gathered worship is not an incidental feature but a central means through which God addresses and forms his gathered people. The OT describes examples of Scripture being read as a communal, formative act embedded in Israel's worship. The NT presents this practice as a developed worship element in synagogue worship and as a command within the life of the Church. The early Christian sources do not innovate beyond these biblical patterns; instead, they display continuity between early Christian worship and the patterns established in the Torah. Therefore, the testimony of church history offers precisely the didactic authority Duncan describes, not by replacing Scripture's normativity but by testifying to how the Church in the Apostolic Era incorporated regular and reverent public reading of the Word of God.

The Practice of Scripture Reading in Gathered Worship

The biblical witness and the patterns of the early Church demonstrate a commitment to the reading of Scripture, but how do churches incorporate this practice in a way that is both natural and worshipful? To answer this question, it is essential to consider public Scripture reading at two

⁴¹ Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson, eds., *Ante-Nicene Fathers 1: The Apostolic Fathers with Justin Martyr and Irenaeus* (The Christian Literature Company, 1885), 67.

⁴² Bryan Chapell, *Christ-Centered Worship: Letting the Gospel Shape Our Practice* (Baker Academic, 2009), 222.

levels: service planning and the liturgical event. Furthermore, as this essay has demonstrated, reading Scripture aloud is associated with specific outcomes: the establishment of a communal identity, the instruction of God's people, and moral and spiritual formation. The following paragraphs consider both the practice and the effects of public Scripture reading.

Service Planning and the Public Reading of Scripture

As with other elements of the worship service (e.g., corporate singing, preaching, scripted prayer), it is wise to plan public Scripture readings to ensure faithfulness to God's Word and effectiveness in gathered worship. Planning supports the seriousness of the task of reading.⁴³ Scripture readings are never neutral or simply functional elements of a service; they are acts of proclamation through which God speaks. Although numerous approaches might be considered in this essay regarding the planning of Scripture reading, three interrelated points are especially relevant.

First, the public reading of Scripture in gathered worship must be canonically and theologically informed. Rather than functioning merely as a prelude to the sermon or a proof-text for a particular theme, publicly reading Scripture is an opportunity for biblical interpretation simply through text choice and placement in the service. Therefore, great care must be taken to ensure the text is correctly considered in light of the context of the text and the placement within the service. Intentional planning resists the tendency of functional canon reduction and enables Scripture itself to do formative work in the gathered assembly. Through engagement with the diverse voices, genres, and theological themes of the Bible, corporate Scripture readings contribute to the long-term work of shaping people immersed in all the Scriptures. Lectionaries are helpful tools for churches looking to incorporate regular readings from different genres of the Bible.⁴⁴ Additionally, lectionaries also make it possible for local churches to connect with other congregations through reading the same text of Scripture.⁴⁵

⁴³ Chapell states, "Reading, no less than preaching, is an exegetical task" (*Christ-Centered Worship*, 226).

⁴⁴ One example of a lectionary that fits within the broader Christian tradition is the Revised Common Lectionary. It is available through the Vanderbilt Divinity Library. <https://lectionary.library.vanderbilt.edu>.

⁴⁵ "All serious reading of the canonical text has in view the catholic horizon. It is not because the church of the past bequeathed us a *different* text from that which it inherited, but because it *shares* a text with us, that we can read in hopeful

Second, the placement of Scripture reading within the church's liturgy must be thoughtful, considering how it functions liturgically within the service.⁴⁶ These readings are acts of divine address, and their location in the service shapes their reception. A text read as a call to worship, a summons to confession, a declaration of assurance, or a sending word will be heard differently in each setting. Liturgical placement informs the dialogical nature of worship, highlighting how God speaks to his people and how the congregation responds in faith. Churches that desire to increase the amount of Scripture read publicly will find that it is easy to add a Scripture reading at the beginning of the worship service as a call to worship and a final verse of benediction at the end. Additionally, this act enables the gathered worship service to begin and end with the Word of God—a powerful liturgical dynamic.

Third, public Scripture reading must be planned with a pastoral lens, considering the congregation's needs and abilities to receive the text. This is not to suggest that only pastors are allowed to read Scripture in public worship, but that it is the responsibility of pastors to plan and organize the weekly worship of the local church. This principle supports the biblical example of reading Scripture being an act of worship for all those gathered. This pastoral lens includes evaluating the length, translation, and cumulative exposure over time. Additionally, pastors must follow the precedent found in both the Scripture and early church history of reading long portions of text without feeling the tension of expediency when the Scriptures are read. Glenn Stallsmith points to an apprehension about incorporating lengthy passages in contemporary worship services. He suggests, "One can debate the merits of having several scripture readings, but the fact is that recitation of long passages can easily break the flow for

anticipation that the insights of one generation and another will complement each other. Good interpretation catches the echo of the text as it bounces off different surfaces. So the readings of the past are a proper test of our readings, challenging us to demonstrate our care, good faith and self-abnegating attention" (Oliver O'Donovan, "The Reading Church: Scriptural Authority in Practice," *Fulcrum: Renewing the Evangelical Centre*). <https://www.fulcrum-anglican.org.uk/articles/the-reading-church-scriptural-authority-in-practice/#:~:text=The%20authority%20of%20Scripture%20rests,away%20till%20all%20is%20fulfilled>.

⁴⁶ Calvert states, "In the context of corporate worship, reading Scripture may be a Celebrative act as it re-illocutes Expressive and Assertive illocutionary acts from the text. Reading Scripture may be a Participative act by performing an Expressive while simultaneously re-illocuting a Commissive or Directive from the text. The reader's choice of tone, emphasis, and other rhetorical and aesthetic facts may also influence the way that Scripture is illocuted. Because of the multiple addresses in the context of corporate worship, reading the phrase 'Jesus is Lord' may even function as a Re-presentative" ("Liturgical Speech Acts," 112).

which contemporary services strive."⁴⁷ Yet, this sentiment is precisely why this point of application is so important. Wise planning acknowledges that public Scripture reading shapes a congregation's biblical literacy, theological imagination, and habits of receiving God's Word. Therefore, a significant amount of time should be devoted to the reading of the Word of God.

Considering the Liturgical Act of Scripture Reading

The public reading of Scripture must also be considered at the performative level or at the level of the liturgical event. Perhaps one of the most significant disincentives to increased Scripture reading in gathered worship is the casual, haphazard approach often taken when executing these moments of worship in services. The truth is that Scripture is frequently read poorly. How can churches move toward a way of publicly reading the biblical text that would be fitting for the moment and reflect the idea of God's Word accomplishing God's purposes found in Isa 55? The reader can take five basic preparatory steps before the event to refine the practice of reading Scripture publicly. These steps are applied to the specific text of Rom 8:31–33 to illustrate each point and provide greater clarity.

First, the text chosen for gathered worship must be read in context multiple times before reading it publicly. It is probably insufficient to read only the verse or verses that will be presented publicly. The reader must read the entire chapter (and possibly the entire book) containing the verses to understand the passage's full context. This process should lead to interpretive decisions as the reader reads the passage, informed by the broader context. Additionally, the reader should internalize the passage by reading it multiple times. For the text of Rom 8:31–33, the reader should become familiar at least with the rest of Rom 8.

Second, the reader must work to understand the chosen text by studying the passage. This process is not primarily one of theological study but of elocution. The reader must know how to pronounce all the words, especially the names of people and places. Furthermore, the reader must seek theologically significant words (e.g., "kingdom," "gospel," "grace") and note words and phrases that reveal structure, such as "the next day," "while they were still speaking," and "therefore." These transitional words help the reader to follow the author's thinking.

Third, the reader should paraphrase the chosen text in his own words. This is an excellent way to help readers grasp and internalize a passage's content. This activity can be typed or handwritten, but it is most effective

⁴⁷ Glenn Stallsmith, "Spoken Flow: What Gets Said," in *Flow: The Ancient Way to Do Contemporary Worship*, ed. Lester Ruth (Abingdon, 2020), 73.

when the reader puts his own paraphrase on a page.

Fourth, the reader must prepare the chosen text. In the Bible that will be used for the Scripture reading, the reader should make notes, underline, or highlight words he wants to emphasize. He should consider writing slash marks or apostrophes where he wants to pause. He should make sure the text in his Bible is large enough to read clearly under bright stage lighting.

Fifth, the reader should practice with his prepared Bible in hand. He should read the passage aloud multiple times. The reader may want to video himself and watch his facial expressions and nonverbal communication as he listens to how the passage sounds as he reads it. If possible, he may want to practice in the place where he will read it publicly.

The above is a simple list of five basic actions readers can take to improve their Bible reading in public. There are many other ways a reader might prepare, but the most important principle is that he or she take time to prepare. Reading God's Word together is one of the most essential elements in the Church's weekly worship.

Conclusion

If the argument in this essay is persuasive and the Scripture does command and model the public reading of Scripture in the worship gathering, what might be anticipated as a result of increased devotion to this discipline? In his hermeneutical text *Eat This Book*, Eugene Peterson rightly connects spiritual formation with the Bible: "Christian spirituality is, in its entirety, rooted in and shaped by the scriptural text."⁴⁸ Therefore, one answer must be that listeners are better supported in their own spiritual formation through an exposure to the text of the Bible.⁴⁹

In his short book on public Scripture reading and public prayer, British pastor Stuart Olyott directly connects how the Bible is read with belief about what the Bible is: "What you believe about the Bible, what you really believe about the Bible, comes across in the way that you read it in public. If you read it like any other book, it is because in your heart of hearts you believe that it is like any other book."⁵⁰ Therefore, the Church must treat the planning and preparation of Scripture reading with the seriousness that reflects the belief that the Bible is the Word of God.

⁴⁸ Eugene H. Peterson, *Eat This Book: A Conversation in the Art of Spiritual Reading* (Eerdmans, 2009), 15.

⁴⁹ Jim Wilhoit and Evan B. Howard, *Discovering Lectio Divina: Bringing Scripture into Ordinary Life* (InterVarsity Press, 2012), 65.

⁵⁰ Stuart Olyott, *Reading the Bible and Praying in Public* (Banner of Truth, 2008), 43.

If the only evidence that existed to discern what evangelicals (especially Baptists and baptistic churches) believe about the Bible was the weekly gathered worship service, what conclusions would be drawn regarding their belief and commitment to the Bible? Would evangelicals still have the reputation of being "people of the Book"? Many might retain the reputation, but for far too many churches, that label might be lost. This point does not mean that the Bible has lost its role in governing these worship services, but it warns evangelicals that their doxological practices should better align with their theological convictions. Those who hold the Bible highest must also be devoted to the public reading of Scripture.