

Lesson 11 | May 14, 2023

Study Scripture in Community

Study Text: Acts 2:41–47; 17:10–12; 18:24–28; Colossians 4:15–16; 1 Timothy 4:11–14

Central Truth: The New Testament was written to be read publicly.

Key Verse: Reference

When this epistle is read among you, cause that it be read also in the church of the Laodiceans; and that ye likewise read the epistle from Laodicea (KJV).

After you have read this letter, pass it on to the church at Laodicea so they can read it, too. And you should read the letter I wrote to them (NLT).

Learning Objectives

- Students will understand that the Scriptures were read aloud in the earliest churches.
- Students will appreciate the power of publicly reading passages from the Bible.
- Students will seek out opportunities for studying Scripture in community.

Introducing the Study

Say: How has mass communication changed during your lifetime? Now let's go even farther back: What inventions in history have changed mass communication since Jesus' day? (Interestingly, the early Christians may have played a role in one such technological advance: the shift from scroll documents to the codex [book-like] format.)

Opening Activity—Telephone

Ask. What example can you give of a humorous misunderstanding where one person's statement was completely misunderstood by the listener? Demonstrate this by playing the children's "telephone" game. One person thinks of a sentence and whispers it to another, who whispers it to the next person, until the last person receives the message and says it aloud. The first person then says aloud the original message.

Say: Messages that travel secretly or privately by word of mouth can easily become distorted. There was nothing private or secretive about God's communication to His people through Scripture. The first churches read the Scriptures as public documents, heard by all. (Share your highlights from the following text.)

From the beginning, the community of Jesus' followers formed by the Holy Spirit's outpouring was immersed in the teaching of Jesus' apostles, exemplified by Peter's sermon on the Day of Pentecost. Like Jesus, the apostles anchored the gospel message in the Old Testament, God's story which had reached its redemptive climax in the life, ministry, death, resurrection, and exaltation of Christ. The Holy Spirit used this

teaching to shape and strengthen the new community as they read and studied the Scriptures in their house-church gatherings.

Part 1—Community Commitment to Bible Study As a General Practice

Acts 2:41–47

Say: Acts 2:42 describes the fundamental practices of the earliest body of believers shortly after Jesus’ ascension. The first one mentioned was their communal devotion to the apostles’ teaching, which would later be committed to writing and form the New Testament. From the inception of the Church, steadfast devotion to the apostolic testimony to Jesus has been the center of Christian identity. (Share your highlights from the following text.)

Acts 2:41–47 depicts the fledgling church in Jerusalem immediately following the outpouring of the Holy Spirit on the Day of Pentecost. The “word” many had received (verse 41, KJV) was Peter’s sermon on that day in which he proclaimed Jesus as Messiah, explained the promise and experience of the Spirit, and exhorted repentance and water baptism. Following Luke’s report on the baptism of a large number who responded in faith, he characterizes the body of believers as devoted “to the apostles’ teaching, and to fellowship, and to sharing in meals (including the Lord’s Supper), and to prayer” (verse 42, NLT).

It is not surprising that devotion to the apostles’ teaching should be an immediate effect of the Spirit’s outpouring. The Holy Spirit inspired the authorship of Scripture; it is entirely to be expected that Spirit-filled people, individually and communally, would be thoroughly committed to studying the Word. All of the other conspicuous marks of the Holy Spirit’s presence in that early Jerusalem body of believers (fellowship, the Lord’s Supper, prayer, generous sharing, signs and wonders, joy, praise, etc.) go hand in hand naturally with Bible study, which supports them and contributes to the successful mission and growth of the church, both in numbers and in spiritual maturity.

Discuss

? Do we typically think of Bible study as being a result of the baptism in the Holy Spirit? Why or why not?

? What are some ways a group of believers can encourage and practice studying Scripture together, as a whole community?

To Verify Teachings

Acts 17:10–12

Say: The Bereans have rightfully been hailed as serious students of Scripture. Christians today could learn a lesson from the Bereans and take more seriously the

responsibility to hold up every teaching to the standard of biblical truth. (Share your highlights from the following text.)

For their own protection, Paul and Silas had just been sent away from Thessalonica, where hostility to Paul's preaching had endangered them and their followers. By contrast, Luke commends the more noble Bereans for their openness to gospel preaching—provided that it held up under rigorous scriptural scrutiny. Many of the Bereans believed, not only Jews but also among the Gentiles. These were most likely “God-fearers,” Gentiles like Cornelius who had not committed to Judaism but had come to respect and honor the one true God (see Acts 10:1–2).

While many churches and Bible-based ministries have used the name “Berean” in honor of these believers' dedication to search the Scriptures (specifically the Old Testament), several more qualities of the Bereans should also be emulated. One is love—love for God and His Word. The drive to investigate what they heard came from a posture of devotion. Another is open mindedness. The Bereans were “more noble than those in Thessalonica, in that they received the word with all readiness of mind” (17:11, KJV). They were commended for their receptivity when it was paired with a love-driven search for the truth.

Paul and Silas did not experience any negative pushback in Berea from the Bereans themselves; it was the Thessalonian Jews who heard that Paul and Silas were preaching there, so they came and “stirred up trouble” (17:13, NLT). The Bereans and Thessalonians heard the same message: Jesus is the Messiah. But their reactions were vastly different. The text does not explain why, but the Bereans were eager to listen for and investigate the truth.

Discuss

? How do people today reflect the behaviors of the Thessalonians and the Bereans?

? What tools have you found helpful in studying the Bible (concordance, Bible dictionary, etc.)? Are there apps or online sites you use and could share with the class?

Resource Packet Item 1: Early Church Success

Distribute the worksheet and have the students complete it in small groups or as a class, depending on the size of your class. In larger classes it is better to divide into small groups so everyone can participate.

Part 2—Biblical Mentoring Enhances Understanding

The Mentoring of Apollos

Acts 18:24–26

Say: Apollos is not as well known as Peter and Paul, but he was a powerful and gifted preacher in the Early Church. Showing much promise early but lacking in key knowledge, he was invited to come under the tutelage of the married missionary team of Priscilla and Aquila and was mentored by the couple in the full truth of the gospel. The results suggest that this process was an effective model of biblical mentoring. (Share your highlights from the following text.)

Apollos was a Jew from Alexandria, a large city in Egypt with a significant Jewish population. Alexandria was famous for its formidable library and vibrant intellectual culture. Apollos may have been a natural-born speaker, but his eloquence could have also been enhanced in such a setting. More to the point, he was “mighty in the scriptures” (verse 24, KJV), which in his time referred to the Old Testament.

At some point, he came in contact with believers, heard the gospel, and responded with faith. As an enthusiastic new believer with extensive biblical knowledge and a gift for speaking, Apollos immediately began to preach and teach—but Scripture notes that his knowledge was slightly incomplete. Priscilla and Aquila, tentmaking missionaries and church leaders, heard Apollos speak. Recognizing his deficiency yet seeing great potential, they began to mentor him. We know this because they “took him aside and explained the way of God even more accurately” (verse 26, NLT).

Here we see some precedents for biblical mentoring. First, Priscilla and Aquila approached Apollos privately. They did not publicly lecture or otherwise try to educate this gifted speaker. Instead they showed honor and respect for his leadership. Nothing in the text says Apollos resented their methods or instruction, and because chapters 18–19 continue with a focus on Apollos, we can conclude their approach was successful. Second, we see that biblical mentoring is ongoing. Earlier, Paul met Priscilla and Aquila (18:2–3) and began living and working with them. No doubt he mentored these two church leaders who in turn mentored Apollos. If Apollos continued in this pattern, he would have mentored others as well.

This portion of Apollos’s life story reminds us that even though we have had an initial encounter with Jesus, we still need ongoing instruction. This is, in essence, a portrait of discipleship: the journey of becoming a lifelong follower of Jesus. We can gather from Apollos’s receptivity that he was a man of humility. May we be humble as we receive mentoring and mentor others.

Discuss

? Has anyone invested in your spiritual life in the way Priscilla and Aquila explained the message more fully to Apollos?

? Is there someone among your church family, perhaps younger in the faith, in whose life and calling you could invest? How might that process look today?

The Results

Acts 18:27–28

Say: Priscilla and Aquila’s spiritual investment paid off as Apollos went on to do significant ministry, especially in the region of Achaia, which includes the cities of Athens and Corinth. Believers from Ephesus wrote a letter introducing Apollos to the believers in Achaia, and he was a great blessing and encouragement to the Achaian Christians. He used his depth of scriptural knowledge publicly, showing how Jesus fulfilled the Old Testament as God’s promised Messiah. (Share your highlights from the following text.)

Paul’s two letters to the Corinthian congregation also bear witness to the powerful ministry of Apollos. Paul had initially established the church there, then Apollos followed him and contributed his gifts and efforts to the community. “I planted the seed in your hearts,” Paul writes, “and Apollos watered it, but it was God who made it grow” (1 Corinthians 3:6, NLT).

Against the intentions of both Paul and Apollos, some of the Corinthians fostered a divisive spirit by claiming to follow one or the other. Some also claimed Peter as their leader (see 1 Corinthians 1:10–12). This divisive behavior was rooted in their pagan past, and they were used to adhering to various itinerant philosophers who would pass through the Greek cities collecting followers. Enamored of worldly “wisdom” in their pre-Christian lives, they interjected their old way of thinking into the new and vastly different kingdom of God. Paul’s letters give us a glimpse of the ensuing difficulties and the corrective measures that were necessary. Neither Paul nor Apollos was to blame; both continued in mutual support. Second Corinthians describes the restoration of relationship between the church and its founding minister.

Resource Packet Item 2: Mentors and Mentees in the Bible

Distribute the worksheet, and divide your class into small groups. Assign one of the eight rows to each group. Give them a few minutes to scan the passages and fill out the information. Then ask the groups to share their responses with the class.

Discuss

? How are ministers and believers who, like Apollos, are knowledgeable in the Scriptures being used by God today?

? Does the church today sometimes bring in cultural baggage that is foreign to the ways of the kingdom of God? What specific examples come to mind?

Part 3—Devotion to Corporate Bible Reading Intended for Sharing

Colossians 4:15–16

Say: Though we name Paul’s letters after their recipients, they were intended to edify a broader audience. The letter to the church at Colossae was to be shared with the Laodiceans, and vice versa. Not everything in the situation of either church was

identical, but Paul's gospel-based principles and instructions were transferable so that other believing communities could adapt and apply them in their situations. And so it is for us today, even across the centuries and around the world. (Share your highlights from the following text.)

The biblical texts began as single manuscripts long before copy machines or printing presses. Each copy had to be made by hand, and materials could be costly. Unlike today, most individuals could not possess a copy of the letter to their own church, much less a collection of texts. Moreover, literacy rates (though estimates vary widely) were certainly well below today's. Most believers' only access to the sacred texts was via public reading. The church heard them together, read aloud in full (as letters are intended to be read) as they were gathered.

Few of us would trade the privilege of possessing and reading our Bible to return to the ancient model. Yet there is a sense in which we are missing an important communal shared experience. What would it be like to hear the Word of God read publicly in all its power and in full context while sitting side-by-side with the whole community it addressed? Is there a way we can recapture that kind of impact?

Resource Packet Item 3: Public Reading of the Word

Distribute the worksheet and choose volunteers to read the passages. Respond to the questions as a class. You may want to do only one or two of the passages and send the others home, depending on the time you have.

Discuss

? How can we make the most of our personal access to Scripture as well as deep, communal Scripture-reading experiences?

? How have you experienced Bible reading in congregational settings? What factors affect our modern capabilities to receive God's Word in that manner?

Central in Worship

1 Timothy 4:11–14

Say: We return to Paul's first letter to Timothy, recalling from last week that Paul had commissioned him to strengthen the church in Ephesus, particularly by combating the false teaching that had become rampant. Central to his task was pursuing the truth of Scripture, which Peter called desiring "the sincere milk of the word, that ye may grow thereby" (1 Peter 2:2, KJV). During his tenure in Ephesus, Timothy was to "focus on reading the Scriptures to the church, encouraging the believers, and teaching them" (verse 13, NLT). (Share your highlights from the following text.)

Cash transactions are becoming much less common these days, and bank tellers use watermarks, color-shifting ink, micro-printing, security threads, and security ribbons to spot counterfeit bills. Before these changes, a teller had to be taught to recognize bad currency. The most effective means of teaching that skill, it was determined, was not to

study counterfeiting but simply to spend long hours handling the real thing. When that level of familiarity was gained, a false bill could not get past them, and even today amid the technological advances it remains an important security measure. So it is with false teaching: the best way to identify it is to spend significant time handling the true Word of God. Paul and Timothy knew what they were doing by immersing the Ephesian church in the Word.

Reading the Scriptures occupied a central place in the worship of the gathered believers, accompanied by teaching, encouragement, and the exercise of spiritual gifts. While elders and deacons (also mentioned in this letter) would have contributed substantially, ideally all the believers would participate under the Holy Spirit's direction, as we see from 1 Corinthians 12–14. No one's gift was inferior or superior: a whole body was needed, with feet as necessary as a head, and hands as much needed as eyes. There was unity in the diversity, and each one was to contribute for the good of the entire community. "When ye come together," Paul says, "every one of you hath a psalm, hath a doctrine, hath a tongue, hath a revelation, hath an interpretation. Let all things be done unto edifying" (1 Corinthians 14:26, KJV). All stood together under the scrutiny of the Scriptures, which held the authoritative position as the very Word of God.

Discuss

? Is it possible for false teaching to coexist with reverence for and knowledge of the Scriptures? Why or why not?

? Discuss the significance of Paul's placing the following instruction to Timothy before telling him to focus on reading the Scriptures to the church: "Be an example to all believers in what you say, in the way you live, in your love, your faith, and your purity" (1 Timothy 4:12, NLT).

What Is God Saying to Us?

Say: God has poured out His Spirit in the last days, beginning at Pentecost, and we stand in that stream today. Like the Early Church, we respond to the promptings of the Holy Spirit who moved upon the prophets and authors of Scripture to bring us God's Word. We are to be a Bible-studying people. Scripture must be prominent in our gatherings for worship and must function as our authoritative guide for faith and practice. It is the standard against which we measure every teaching. Those who are more fully instructed in the way of the Lord through Scripture do well to identify and mentor other disciples. Serious study of Scripture supports the other evident workings of God's Spirit in our midst.

Living It Out

Ministry in Action

- Commit to, agree upon, and organize a group study of Scripture this week.
- Identify a potential mentor or one whom you can mentor in the study of God's Word.
- Invite neighbors to a periodic Bible-reading event with opportunity for discussion.

Daily Bible Readings

Monday:

Living the Law of Redemption.
Ruth 4:1–10

Tuesday:

Instructed to Repent Together.
Job 42:1–9

Wednesday:

Waiting Together on the Lord.
Lamentations 3:21–31

Thursday:

Christ's Custom of Scripture Reading.
Luke 4:14–21

Friday:

Courage to Share the Truth.
Acts 4:13–20

Saturday:

Paul Regularly Shares His Faith.
Acts 17:1–4, 16–17