

An Old View of the New Testament

While we are certainly becoming a video based society, I think we can still say that we are mostly a text-based society. Even with the advent of so much internet communication, we still communicate and study most through text. Whether it is tweets, posts, e-mails, or blogs, text still dominates our world. But it has not always been that way. In fact, when the New Testament was written, it was not that way.

Only recently have I realized one of the very practical ways the Bible has impacted society, especially western society. Because the Bible was written down and the majority of the New Testament was passed along in letters, when the Reformation occurred and folks wanted to study the Bible for themselves, they had to learn to read. I haven't done a whole lot of research on this, but I'm guessing it is the Bible itself that has turned us into a text based culture.

Interestingly, the Bible changed us into a text-based culture which in turn changed how we approached the text. We believe it is something to be read. (And of course, we should.) However, when the New Testament was written only 5 to 20% of folks were literate (Ben Witherington III, [New Testament Rhetoric](#), Cascade Books, Eugene, Oregon, 2009, p 1). That means in any given location where Paul sent a letter, somewhere between 80 (4 out of 5) to 95% (19 out of 20) couldn't read.

With all this in mind, it becomes much clearer why several translations add "public" to the description of reading in **I Timothy 4:13**. Paul wasn't encouraging Timothy to read the Scriptures in the privacy of his study, but to devote himself to publically reading the Scriptures to the congregation. Most of them wouldn't be able to read it for themselves. Their only study would come from hearing it read to them. We also see why **Revelation 1:3** says not only is the one who reads the book blessed, but those who hear it as well. Most of the people wouldn't be able to read it for themselves; they would only be able to hear it read.

Therefore, when the New Testament letters were written, delivering a letter didn't simply mean handing a sealed envelope to someone. It more than likely meant actually reading it to them. In fact in **Colossians 4:7-9**, the indication is that Paul's letter deliverer, Tychicus, was to do far more than just hand off an envelope. He was even to provide information that Paul had not included in the letter. That is, Tychicus was more than Paul's mailman, he was Paul's representative. Since Paul was in prison and unable to come himself, Tychicus was to stand in his place, conveying information and presenting the letter. What we should envision is not a piece of paper passed around for everyone to make their own copy to read at their leisure at home. Rather, we should envision Tychicus reading the letter to the Colossians based on Paul's own instruction of how he wanted it to sound. Rather than a letter, it is a sermon by proxy. Such would be the case for most of the letters.

This provides an even different view of the letters written to individuals like Timothy and Titus when we learn that the final sentence in each letter is "Grace be with you," but the "you" is in the second person plural. That is, as **Titus 3:15** is translated, "Grace be with you all." These were not just for Timothy's and Titus's private uses, but addresses to the congregations they worked with as well.

All of this brings home two points to me.

First, we should be very grateful for our literacy. We have an opportunity most early Christians didn't have. We can read the Bible for ourselves. We have our own copies with us. If those early Christians were to be devoted to getting together and hearing it read, how much more should we who are able to read it do so.

But second, perhaps it would do us some good to spend time reading the Bible aloud. That was actually what was intended when it was written. Paul and the other writers did not have in mind all of us taking our copies home and poring over them. He had in mind listening to them being read as if hearing an address or sermon. Perhaps we should have some assemblies where we just listen to the Word read aloud. Perhaps we should all take the time to read it aloud and listen to it read aloud in our homes. Just a thought.

--Edwin L. Crozier