

READING AND UNDERSTANDING



THE SCRIPTURES

Richard Greenham (c. 1535-c. 1594)

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Contents

Introduction	3
1. Diligence	4
2. Wisdom	4
3. Preparation	5
4. Meditation	6
5. Conference	7
6. Faith	8
7. Practice	8
8. Prayer	9

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DIRECTIONS FOR READING & UNDERSTANDING THE SCRIPTURES

Introduction

Those things that God has joined together no man may sever asunder. Therefore, preaching and reading of the Holy Scriptures, being of God joined together in the work of our salvation, may not be severed asunder. In all sciences, arts, and trades, teachers and masters are ordinarily required for the sound learning and profiting of them. We must be persuaded much more that it is necessary to have guides to go before us in the way to salvation.

That preaching is the most principal means to create and beget faith and repentance in God's people must be granted (Deu 18:18; 33:10; Lev 10:11; Mal 2:6-7; 2Ch 36:15; Isa 50:4-5, 7-8; 53:1; 55:10-11; 57:19; 58:1; 61:1, 62:6-7; Mat 13:3; 28:19-20; Eph 4:11-14; Rom 10:14-15; 1Co 1:21; 1Pe 1:23-25). And where this ordinary means of salvation fails,¹ the people for the most part perish (Pro 29:18; Hos 4:6; 2Ch 15:13; Isa 56:9-10; Mat 15:14; Luk 11:52). But it is likewise proved that the reading of the Scriptures publicly in the church of God and privately by ourselves is a special and ordinary means, if not to beget, yet to increase faith in us (Deu 6:6; 11:18; Neh 8:8-9; Psa 1:2; Joh 5:39; Acts 13:15; 15:21; Rom 15:14; 2Pe 1:19). The manifold fruit that comes of the reading of the Scriptures prove the same.

Reading rather establishes than derogates² from preaching; for none can be profitable hearers of preaching that have not been trained up in reading the Scriptures or hearing them read. Many inconveniences³ come from the neglect of reading, as that the people cannot tell when a sentence is alleged out of the canonical Scriptures,⁴ when out of the Apocrypha;⁵ when out of the Scriptures, when out of other writers; or that they cannot discern when he speaks his own or a sentence of the Scripture.

Again, reading helps men's judgments, memories, and affections; but especially it serves for the confirmation of our faith: which may be proved by the example of the men of Berea (Act 17:11). It serves to discern the spirits of men (1Jo 4:1-3), to make

¹ **fails** – is lacking or omitted.

² **derogates** – detracts.

³ **inconveniences** – *early usage*: calamities, misfortunes.

⁴ **canonical Scriptures** – the 66 books of the Bible accepted as genuine by the Church of Jesus Christ.

⁵ **Apocrypha** – The books commonly called Apocrypha, not being of divine inspiration, are no part of the canon or rule of the Scripture, and, therefore, are of no authority to the church of God, nor to be any otherwise approved or made use of than other human writings. Luke 24:27, 44; Romans 3:2. (1689 London Baptist Confession, 1.3)

sounder confession of our faith, to stop the mouths of our adversaries, and to answer the temptations of Satan and the wicked.

But because men sin, not only in neglect of hearing and reading, but also in hearing and reading amiss, therefore the properties of reverent and faithful reading and hearing are to be set down, which are these that follow (they be eight in number):

1. Diligence
2. Wisdom
3. Preparation
4. Meditation
5. Conference
6. Faith
7. Practice
8. Prayer

The first three go before reading and preaching. The next four come after them. The last must go before, and be with them, and come after them.

1. Diligence

If diligence be necessary in reading profane⁶ authors, then much more in reading the Scriptures. Diligence makes a rough way plain and even, and of good taste, which otherwise is hard and unsavory.⁷ In our diligence we must keep an even course, and not be like those who, upon some sudden good motion,⁸ or by reason of some good company, or by reason of some good action drawing near, or for fear of danger, etc., read for a time, and soon after give over⁹ again. Read Proverbs 2:1-2 and Matthew 13:44.

2. Wisdom

With diligence must be joined wisdom, which is in choice of *matter*, *order*, and *time*.

For lack of wisdom, in the *matter* they read, many sin in studying other books before the Scriptures, and in the Scriptures in searching things not revealed, and pretermittin¹⁰ things revealed, as John and James sought who should sit at Christ's right hand and left hand, but they sought not to come thither. And His disciples said, "Wilt thou at this time restore again the kingdom to Israel?" (Act 1:6), not asking the means to come to the kingdom of heaven. And in things revealed many will curiously

⁶ **profane** – common, not sacred.

⁷ **unsavory** – unpleasant.

⁸ **motion** – impulse.

⁹ **give over** – give up.

¹⁰ **pretermittin** – passing over, overlooking.

and busily search for things not profitable, as genealogies, and carelessly neglect the things that are to be searched. And some ignorant how to reform themselves, will be talking of reforming the Church. And if the preacher must give milk to the weak, and stronger meat to the stronger Christians, if he must thus apply his doctrine to the hearers, then much more the hearers themselves must apply their own reading to their own capacities.

Wisdom demands that men must be fast grounded¹¹ in the principal points of doctrine. First we must lay the foundation and build upon the same. Also we must keep an *order* in our readings, and not be now in this place, now in another; for order is the best help for memory and understanding. He who reads little after a good manner profits more than he who reads much otherwise, as he who limps in the way does better than he who runs in another way or out of the way. Therefore, for lack of order, many read much but profit little.

Wisdom must be used in discerning the times; for we must not read always and do nothing else, as some offending in the one extreme are after driven by Satan to the other. The Sabbath is wholly to be spent in such exercises; on other days, in the morning, at noon, and in the evening, that is, when we may redeem the day from the works of our calling, as David and Daniel did pray at these three times, under which is contained all the worship of God. We must do as much as we can every day, and no day must pass without line.¹² “He hath made every thing beautiful in his time” (Ecc 3:11).

3. Preparation

Preparation follows. If any man goes away without any profit, and either understands not, or understands amiss, lack of preparation is [often] the cause.

Preparation is in *fear* of God’s majesty, in *faith* in Jesus Christ, and in a good and *honest heart* with a greedy desire to eat up God’s word.

In all apparitions¹³ God always sent *fear* before, as His *apparitor*;¹⁴ it begets teachableness and meekness of mind, as we see in...the men [in] Acts 2. From lack of this reverent fear comes all checking¹⁵ of God’s word, and that men dare be so bold with it; but those who fear will “be swift to hear, slow to speak,” (Jam 1:19) and will lay up His word in their heart with...Mary (Luk 2:51). Though they understand it not, though they kick at the Word and spurn against it, yet if God once teach them with His fear, then will they acknowledge it to be the blessed Word of God.

¹¹ **fast grounded** – firmly established.

¹² **line** – reading, as a line of text.

¹³ **apparitions** – *early usage*: opening of heaven; appearances.

¹⁴ **apparitor** – *Latin*: attendant; clerk (as the first to *appear* before the entrance of an official).

¹⁵ **checking** – resisting.

Fear comes upon men sometimes they know not how; and if then they go to God they shall find some excellent blessing, either in having their understanding enlightened or some good affections put into them.

This fear is in respect of God's majesty, and our own corruption, to correct the pride of reason, and to control our affections; and experience will show, that when our reason and affections are tamed by misery, calamity, sickness, and inward grief, then we are very teachable. And when men err, then the pride of their reason is punished, as in heretics and profane persons. Contrarily, God's good Spirit rests upon the humble to clear their understandings; but they first crucify their understanding and affections, and offer them up in a sacrifice to God.

Faith in Christ is the second thing in this preparation. We must bring that with us when we come to read, looking on Him as on the Messiah who must teach us all things. He is the Lion of the tribe of Judah, to Whom it is given to open the book of God. He opened the hearts of the disciples going to Emmaus (Luk 24:13-32). Preachers build hay and stubble (1Co 3:11-15) because they do not only glory in Him but do seek credit and performance by preaching themselves (2Co 4:5). All heretics differ among themselves, yet they all agree in this, that they err from Jesus Christ.

A *heart prepared to learn* is required. "Wherefore is there a price in the hand of a fool to get wisdom, seeing he hath no heart to it?" (Pro 17:16). Our Lord Jesus Christ says that those who brought forth fruit (when they had heard), some thirty, some sixty, some a hundred fold, were such as received the word with a good and honest heart (Luk 8:15). Here says a godly and learned man, "Men are shut out because they come without a heart."

4. Meditation

Now follow the properties that must follow our readings, whereof the first is *meditation*, the lack of which makes men depart without fruit, though they read or hear diligently. Meditation makes what we have read to be our own. He is blessed who meditates in the Law day and night (Psa 1:1-2).

Meditation is either of the *mind and understanding* or the *heart and affections*.

Meditation of the *understanding* is when reason discourses¹⁶ of things read, or heard, which the wise of the heathen call the refining of judgment, the life of learning. Those who lack this, how much soever they have heard or read, yet shall they never have sound and settled judgment. And for this cause it is said that the greatest clerks¹⁷ are not the wisest men.

Meditation of the *affections* is when having a thing in judgment we ever digest it and make it work upon our affections. It is a continual searching of ourselves and

¹⁶ **reason discourses** – the mind thinks.

¹⁷ **clerks** – scholars.

laboring to lay up all things in the treasures of our hearts. The other will go away except this be joined with it: for judgment will away¹⁸ except we frame our affections unto it.¹⁹

Meditation in judgment goes before: then this must follow, that we may be sound in judgment before we either fear or cheer up our hearts, lest we have false fears or false joys. Many are of sound judgment and yet have not their hearts purged and touched; they can give counsel to others, but cannot follow themselves, because they join not affection with judgment. Meditation without reading is erroneous, and reading without meditation is barren.

5. Conference

The next thing is conference.²⁰ In natural things man stands in need of help; then much more in spiritual things he stands in need of others. “Iron sharpeneth iron; so a man sharpeneth the countenance of his friend” (Pro 27:17). And as two eyes see more, two ears hear more, and two hands can do more than one, so this is a special communion of saints, and God has promised, that when two or three are gathered together in His name, that He will be present with them by His Spirit (Mat 18:20), as He was corporally with His disciples going to Emmaus.

Conference is either with ministers of God, our equals, or others.

This rule must be kept, that conference with our equals must be of those things that we heard of our ministers, as it must be kept also in meditation, which is a conference with ourselves. We must for a time like babes hang at the mouths of the ministers, because we cannot run before we go;²¹ nay, we cannot go without a leader. No man may presume to understand above what is meet²² to understand, but labour to understand according to the measure of sobriety, as God hath dealt to everyone the measure of faith (Rom 12:3): and when they have laid the foundation, then build the walls and pillars. The eunuch would not interpret the word without a guide (Act 8:31), but he laid it up in his heart, as...Mary did (Luk 2:19). For lack of true humility conference is slandered, because it is used after an evil manner, as before they be surely grounded in principal points of religion, to talk of other matters.

Secondly, we must come in love without anger, envy, or desire of victory: therefore in conference we must use the preparation spoken of before: the lack of which makes much janglings and wranglings²³ in company.

¹⁸ **will away** – *early usage*: will go away.

¹⁹ The comprehension of the truth is distinguished from the love of it (2Th 2:10).

²⁰ **conference** – conversation.

²¹ **go** – walk.

²² **meet** – appropriate.

²³ **janglings and wranglings** – arguing and disputing.

Lastly, we must procure things honest before men (Rom 12:17) that it may be done wisely, without confusion and destruction, and not by too great a multitude, that we may afford²⁴ our doings before men—not with the doors shut, lest any man should hear. This is the difference between the conference of the godly or religious and the conventicles²⁵ of heretics.

6. Faith

The next thing is faith. The Word must be mixed with faith. “The word preached did not profit them, not being mixed with faith in them that heard it” (Heb 4:2). But all have not faith; therefore the prophet Isaiah said, “Who hath believed our report?” (Isaiah 53:1). “Nevertheless when the Son of man cometh, shall he find faith on the earth?” (Luke 18:8). All the former must be used to refine faith; for as gold before it be pure is sevenfold tried in the fire, so faith, that is much more precious than gold, must go through all these means.

Faith here is an increase of all that in preparation.²⁶ A merchant must have something before he be a merchant, but he occupies to increase and get more. So we must believe in Jesus Christ by a general faith going before, but we must use all the forenamed means to increase our knowledge and faith in all particulars. One may be a faithful person generally, and yet an unbeliever in particulars, as Christ’s disciples to whom He said, “If ye have faith as a grain of mustard seed” (Mt. 17:20), as Abraham, Rebecca, and Zacharias had.

There is a difference between faith and opinion or knowledge;²⁷ for our knowledge and opinions vanish away in afflictions. But as gold is tried in the fire, so faith will abide the fire of affliction. Satan winnowed²⁸ Peter; but his faith failed not, for Christ failed not, for Christ prayed for him, and for His disciples, and for all believers, that their faith should not fail (Luk 22:32).

7. Practice

Next follows practice: that we have a desire that the Word may bring forth increase of faith and repentance. “Thou through thy commandments hast made me wiser than mine enemies: for they are ever with me” (Psa 119:98). The practice of infidels²⁹ is nothing, because it is not joined with faith. But Christ says, “Blessed are

²⁴ **afford** – further; advance.

²⁵ **conventicle** – illegal and/or secret assembly.

²⁶ Faith grows and becomes more fruitful by the use of the means previously mentioned.

²⁷ **knowledge** – Biblically, faith can be equated with knowledge, and knowledge depends upon faith (Joh 10:38; Heb 11:3). Our author may have in mind mere understanding, falsely professed to be believed, that may be cast away when tested by affliction. This use of “knowledge” as “understanding” may apply to other occurrences in this work.

²⁸ **winnowed** – threw in the air like grain to blow off the chaff.

²⁹ **infidels** – unbelievers.

they that hear the word of God and keep it” (Luk 11:28). And so says James that this is what assures us that we have faith. He who does this is compared to him who builds his house upon a rock; and our works are not the foundation of the house; but then we have built upon Christ. When we join the fruits of our faith with knowledge, they will speak for us, to our consciences, and to others. Our Savior Christ says that the servant who knows the will of his master and does it not shall be beaten with many stripes (Luk 12:47): for it is worse to offend from knowledge than from ignorance. And why should He give us any more, if we practice not what we have? “For he that hath, to him shall be given: and he that hath not, from him shall be taken even that which he hath” (Mar 4:25). Why do many hearing the Word either continue or increase in their blindness, but because they would not practice what they knew; and also even what they had is taken from them? If a good conscience be not joined with faith, faith shall be taken away and errors succeed. If then we be forgetful, we must concede that the lack of practice is [often] the cause thereof. The rule of reason in all things is that the best way of learning is by practice: then how much more if we practice will God increase our talents (Mat 25:14-30).

8. Prayer

The last thing is prayer, which must be used both in the beginning, in the middle, and in the end. Prayer must be in all the former means; for without it we can never use them, nor have any blessing by them.

Prayer contains under it *prayer* and *thanksgiving*.

For *prayer*, it is plain that it must be used when we read. “Eye hath not seen, nor ear heard, neither have entered into the heart of man, the things which God hath prepared for them that love him” (1Co 2:9), meaning not only the joys contained in the kingdom of heaven, but even those that are contained in the Word. And again in the same place, “For what man knoweth the things of a man, save the spirit of man which is in him? even so the things of God knoweth no man, but the Spirit of God” (1Co 2:11). And if we must pray when we come to our meat and drink, that God may give nourishment to us by them, then how much more must we pray God to nourish us by His Word: for else we cannot profit thereby. And as no man dare touch meat and drink before he pray, and we have no title to it before it be sanctified to us by prayer:³⁰ so how impudent are they who dare touch God’s book without prayer, or think that otherwise they have title unto it? Paul may plant, and Apollos may water, but God gives the increase (1Co 3:6): so if any be senseless still, and yet have heard long, it is because God has not revealed His will unto them. Men may be diligent, yet

³⁰ While our author uses praying before eating as an example for praying before reading and this God-honoring practice is commended by the example of our Lord (Mat 14:19, 15:36, 26:26) and possibly implied by the Apostle Paul (1Ti 4:5), we have no scriptural command that we dare not touch meat or drink without prayer.

they shall err if God give not His Spirit: and though they meditate and confer, yet they shall be punished for giving liberty to their roving brain and to their tongue, except they pray for God's Spirit.

Many rest in knowledge, and lack faith, because they lack prayer. And we rest in knowledge and never practice, because we pray not to God to write His Law in our hearts by His Spirit that now, not we, but He, may work in us. Those who take anything in hand without prayer, however they say they abhor popery,³¹ yet they practice it, because they take upon them to have some power in themselves.

For *thanksgiving*, if we be bound to praise God when He hath fed our bodies, how much more when He hath fed our souls? And shall God be justly offended with us, if we thank Him not for our refreshing, with meats, sleep, etc.? And shall we not tremble for fear of revenge, if we have not praised God for any light, or any good motion that He hath put into us? For lack hereof, after some enlightening follows some darkness, and after much feeling comes deadness: and by this means Satan goes about to take all God's graces from us. David says, "Blessed art thou, O LORD: teach me thy statutes" (Psa 119:12). This shows that we must ever praise God before we come to read. Many are fervent in asking but cold in giving thanks. And if we would give thanks to God, it would much ease us in asking, and God would not punish us in taking His graces from us.



³¹ **popery** – devotion to the Pope; Roman Catholicism.