

# H2R P5

## Reading the Bible Aloud in Community

---

### **E2: Is Reading The Bible Together Just a Form of Group Think?**

Podcast Date: June 09, 2017

(48.18)

Speakers in the audio file:

Jon Collins

Tim Mackie

## E2: Is Reading The Bible Together Just a Form of Group Think?

Jon: Hey, this is Jon with The Bible Project podcast. Today, I'm going to continue talking with Tim on this biblical theme of reading the Bible together out loud. Last episode, we talked about the history of ancient Israel, how they read the Torah aloud in their community.

Today we're going to look at how that practice continued on into the New Testament with Jesus, Jesus who actually announced his public ministry during a public greeting of Scripture. In this episode, we're going to talk about key practices in the early church that helped that group form their identity. Practices, including communion, also known as the last supper, but also this practice of reading the letters of the New Testament aloud as a group.

Tim: Because you when you're by yourself, you're like, "The Bible's weird." But then when we're a group together, we're like, "This our story and we're going live by this story and I find the Christian worldview more believable."

Jon: As a skeptical person, sometimes this whole thing feels a little bit like just group think or brainwashing. I asked Tim about that too.

Tim: It is a form of identity formation called brainwashing, but the point is, is that the person poking holes in that is themselves exposing themselves constantly to a different form of brainwashing of just a different story about the world. Of course, the question is, which of those stories offers a better account of the human experience and of reality?

Jon: If you've ever wondered about what early church services looked like, if Christianity might be some weird group therapy, stay tuned. Here we go.

Tim: Out of Ezra, Nehemiah practice comes a practice that went two ways in Jewish tradition in Middle Eastern—

Jon: Ezra, Nehemiah's practice?

Tim: Both, they revived this practice. They read of it, and then they asked all the people to renew their commitment to the covenant. Then, what the story is, and the rest of Nehemiah go on to show is it didn't really work. People didn't really stay faithful. But that's another matter.

But historically, this practice went on. So Babylonian, Middle Eastern Jewish communities from later Jewish texts, the mission, and the Talmud have this practice, this synagogue practice of gathering on the evening of Sabbath or Shabbat, and over the course of one year, they'll have read the entire Torah aloud in the

## E2: Is Reading The Bible Together Just a Form of Group Think?

synagogue gatherings. All the way back in Israel Palestine, Jewish communities are taking three and a half years.

This practice developed in two different ways. There are Shorter readings, and then a practice developed where they would combine that shorter reading from the Torah with a selection from the prophets or the Psalms or the wisdom books.

It's the early lectionary. This is what became the lectionary practice in Christianity of reading from sections of the Bible.

Jon: Which is in a high church?

Tim: That's right. Yeah, for the most part. The practice when diverse directions in Jewish history after the biblical period, but it's been a practice within Jewish history all along - the public reading of Scripture. This is what moving forward into the New Testament—

Jon: So there's no Jewish tradition where they just every seven years on the Feast of Booths actually just read through?

Tim: That's a good question.

Jon: There's no Hasidic? It seems like Hasidic Jews would do that.

Tim: Yeah, we keep that going. I'm not as much off the top my head about more modern Jewish practices like that. There's nothing in the Second Temple period. We go to Ezra, Nehemiah, and then out into the spread of the Diaspora Jewish communities around Babylon and Israel, and these other practices developed. This is the setting the Jesus and the apostles are all a part of.

There's that story in Luke chapter 4. Jesus goes to synagogue on the Sabbath, and the scroll of Isaiah is opened and handed to him.

Jon: So they must be in that part?

Tim: Yeah. the Torah reading's already been done. Now, this is the reading of the prophets. Whether he just neglected the order and chose Isaiah 61 or whether it happened to be Isaiah 61, we're not told.

Jon: He's like, "Oh, we're in Isaiah 61. Perfect."

Tim: "Perfect. Let me tell you guys. This is being fulfilled in your hearing." There are a couple other mentions of it. Like when Paul and Barnabas go out on the first missionary journey, they're sent out by the church in Antioch, and they go to a town

## E2: Is Reading The Bible Together Just a Form of Group Think?

in modern-day Turkey called Pisidia Antioch. On the Sabbath, they entered the synagogue and sat down.

After the reading from the Torah and the prophets, the leaders of the synagogue said, "Hey, you guys are new to town. Give us a short word of exhortation."

Jon: That was a typical thing in the synagogue?

Tim: Yeah. Well, think back to that Ezra, Nehemiah practice. You have reading the scriptures and then expositing them or giving them sense.

Jon: And there wasn't like one person who gets to do that, necessarily?

Tim: Yeah, that's right.

Jon: It wasn't just the rabbi who gets to do that?

Tim: Well, there was the priests and Levites in Ezra, Nehemiah, but there are no rules about who can read.

Jon: The two can expose it?

Tim: Anybody can get up and read. Like Jesus can, or Paul and Barnabas after the reading are invited. "There are new guys in town, some new brothers, new kinsmen of ours." So they invite them, "Hey, give us a word of exhortation based on the scriptures that we just read."

When Paul gets up is he does a whole retelling of the story of the Old Testament leading up to the Messiah. Then he says, "Then the Messiah is the crucified Jesus."

Jon: And they're kind of like, "Whoa. We didn't expect that."

Tim: This is same practice. It is the origins of the sermon in Jewish Christian tradition.

Jon: In my small church ministry experience, you do not let people get up on stage and start expositing scripture without. The open mic time is—

Tim: "Open mic." It's not really cool.

Jon: It goes wrong. I mean, even in a small group setting, if you turn to someone and say, "Cool. Now, what do you think what might happen?" Someone's going to have some just crazy thing to say. Why is that such a fear?

Tim: That's interesting.

## E2: Is Reading The Bible Together Just a Form of Group Think?

Jon: There are some crazy people, right?

Tim: Oh, yeah.

Jon: There's that. There are people who they just waiting because they have this thing they're obsessed with and they're just waiting for an opportunity to obsess about it without love.

Tim: Many people have been in those awkward home groups or Bible studies where there's the person who just hijacks the room.

Jon: Can you just imagine like Barnabas being one of those guys, and they're in Antioch and they're like, "You're new brothers." And also they're talking about space aliens and everything—

[crosstalk 00:07:18]

Tim: Note to self: Do not let Barnabas exposit.

Tim: Maybe they knew some people there. I don't know. Early Christianity develops in the setting of weekly gatherings where the scriptures are read aloud and there's a short exposition of them or word of exhortation.

Here's what's interesting. Jesus and the apostles as they went into Jewish settings did this. As the followers of Jesus started to form their own worship gathering not around Sabbath but around resurrection morning, which is Sunday morning, they would gather in homes and eat a meal together and take the bread and the cup together.

Jon: So instead of going to the temple...When would synagogue be?

Tim: Synagogue would be on Friday nights.

Jon: And there was a specific place?

Tim: Yeah, it would be at the synagogue.

Jon: At the synagogue?

Tim: Yeah, building designated. Christians didn't have any of their own building dedicated.

Jon: And they're not going to crash the Jewish synagogues on?

## E2: Is Reading The Bible Together Just a Form of Group Think?

Tim: Maybe you might have some Jewish followers—

Jon: It isn't like the Korean church saying, like, "Hey, you guys don't use this building on Saturday night?"

Tim: There are no stories about that. All the evidence in the New Testament and after is that met in people's homes because it was all about a meal. Everything's focused around replaying the Lord's Supper together.

Jon: Every time?

Tim: Mh mm. Then we get a window in Paul's letter to the Corinthians that during the meal, and afterward, somebody would bring a word, a prophecy, somebody would bring a teaching, and multiple people would contribute to the sharing time over or after the meal. That's the early Christian gatherings.

Jon: So there wasn't just reading the scripture?

Tim: It certainly played a part but there's more happening at least in the house churches that Paul started. But it's interesting because at the end of two of his letters he talks about the reading aloud of something and what it is, is his letters.

At the end of his letters to the Thessalonians, 1 Thessalonians chapter 5, he says, "I charge you before the Lord to have this letter read aloud to all the brothers and sisters." The end of Colossians, he says, "After this letter has been read to you, see that's also read in the church down the road of Laodicea. And in turn, get the letter I wrote to them and read that."

Jon: Which we don't have.

Tim: We don't have it, unless, it's the letter to the Ephesians. It's also the letter to the Ephesians. Just interesting rabbit hole that we don't have time for there. We know that Paul intended his letters to be read aloud the same way that they would be reading aloud other sacred texts of the Scriptures.

Jon: So, sorry to be picky, how do we know they were continuing the tradition of reading the Torah?

Tim: In 1 Timothy, in the directions is the third important passage. When Paul writes to Timothy who's a pastor, he's stationed in Ephesus. Paul wants to come help Timothy out with a bunch of pastoral problems, but he says, "Until I come, keep devoting yourself to the public reading of Scripture and to preaching into teaching."

## E2: Is Reading The Bible Together Just a Form of Group Think?

Between all of this, Paul's having his own letters read aloud, but also in these house church gatherings, we're having just Scripture read aloud. Which at the time he's writing, Timothy doesn't refer to the New Testament because those writings are just coming into existence. He's referring to the Old Testament Scriptures.

Jon: So based off of that verse, we know there was the public reading, the Christians were continuing reading out loud these Jewish Scripture?

Tim: Yeah. They both picked up but also developed this Jewish practice of reading the Old Testament Scriptures aloud, probably in Greek for many of these people. And that along with the scriptures, Paul's letters are being read aloud, which the issue of that he viewed his letters as having the same kind of Covenant authority, almost certainly somebody would be reciting from oral memory, large sections of the Sermon on the Mount or something like that, teachings of Jesus.

Then also, as the Spirit led people, what he talks about in 1 Corinthians 12 through 14 of the Spirit prompting people to share something they feel like God wants to say to their church community. It's a very active gathering over a meal.

Jon: Would they actually be at a meal the whole time?

Tim: Good point. I mean, all you do is think of gatherings that we host in our home.

Jon: Yeah. After a while, you go back to the living room or something.

Tim: We have a meal together, and we're talking and then we put the dishes away and go living room and we just keep talking. We pray for each other and we don't sing. We don't sing songs.

Jon: These Christians who are really interested in how the early church actually performed worship service or a gathering because of the belief that the way that it was done in the early church is the way it should always be done. And so if we could figure out what they were doing, that's the way we should be doing in church.

We don't have to get into whether or not that's a valid assumption, but how much can we actually know exactly what was being done? Because it seems like we're just getting these little piecemeal things. And who knows? It would have been done one way in a Jewish environment yet and then it probably would have been done...because they have all the synagogue background, so would have been highly adapted from the way that they were used to do in synagogue. They changed the day, but they're still going to have all of that tradition to fall back on.

But then you go to a city that's not Jewish and they don't have that—

## E2: Is Reading The Bible Together Just a Form of Group Think?

Tim: And the majority of the followers of Jesus are Greeks and Romans.

Jon: And they don't have all the synagogue background. And maybe some of it was imported in a little bit from the missionaries that came and told them about Jesus. They have that background.

Tim: Like the public reading of the Scriptures, that's a Jewish practice that gets adopted into these non-Jewish traditions.

Jon: But they'll probably bring their own flavor of the way that they're used to gather into it too.

Tim: That's right.

Jon: The kind of assumption I would have is that it probably looks very different in every single gathering.

Tim: Depending on the city and on the house, church community. I think that's right. There's no manual of worship gathering in the writings of the apostles.

One of the earliest post-New Testament documents that claims to represent the way worship and teaching was done in the New Testament era is called the *didaskalia* which is just the Greek word for teaching or instruction. It's a little manual of like discipleship from the early church. It's really interesting.

Mostly, some of it's like how to perform baptisms and the kind of catechism or instruction new converts are to be given. You pray the Lord's Prayer every morning and every night, you fast once a week.

Jon: For how long?

Tim: One whole day. One day a week you don't eat to dedicate yourself to prayer. It's a little window into early Eastern Christianity. But even that doesn't give you like the—

Jon: That's what? A couple generations in?

Tim: Yeah, totally. We're decades out from the era of the apostles. This gets us more into controversial territory because both the Catholic tradition. The Eastern Orthodox tradition makes a claim that the Liturgy of the mass have ancient roots that go all the way back to a period of the apostles. People have debates about these kinds of things.



## E2: Is Reading The Bible Together Just a Form of Group Think?

But essentially we don't have anything like the apostle describing what the worship gathering ought to look like. The only thing we know for certain is that it was a meal which at some point reenacted to take Last Supper, the Passover meal with Jesus.

Jon: And it was always a meal. Is that right?

Tim: Well, we don't have any indication that these references to meals were anything other than the actual meals.

Jon: It's just so weird for me. For some reason, that's so shocking, and I think it's because that's so rare in the tradition I grew up in to actually have a meal. Like that one happens once a year. It's like the church potluck. And it's a bunch of work.

So like, 1% of the gatherings involve a meal. Every gathering involved a meal, that just seems crazy. But I guess you got to eat when you're in your house.

Tim: It was a house based movement. The central symbol of the gathering was reenacting the bread and the cup.

Jon: Which has the same kind of influence that reading scripture aloud would should have, which is, let's remember.

Tim: And we discover also the reading aloud of the scriptures of the writings of the prophets and then the apostles taking the bread in the cup together, which is food so is in the context of a meal, and then the reading aloud of the apostles and prophets.

Jon: They never just like said, "Hey, we've already eaten or some of us will eat when we leave, so let's just take little bits of bread, little sips of wine?"

Tim: This is a huge problem in the churches in Corinth that Paul lays into them for because there's no status in the Roman world. If you're wealthy, you could come early to the meal, and they would eat all the food and drunk all the wine before or later people who had to work. And then they get to work later, Paul calls them those who have not come. And everybody else is already little tipsy because they drank too much wine. And Paul's just like, "You call this the worship gathering?" He thinks it's a shame. Anyway, he's laying into them, but it gives us at least some clues that people are getting there at different times.

Jon: So interesting.

Tim: Then, later on, 1 Corinthians 14, he says, "What do we say, brothers? When you guys come together, different ones of you, one has a hymn to share, one has a word of

## E2: Is Reading The Bible Together Just a Form of Group Think?

instruction, teaching, one has a prophecy, a tongue or interpretation. That's a whole other thing. Paul says, "Everybody contribute so the community can be built up." Then he gives instructions about how tongues and prophecy works because the Corinthians were getting out of control.

Jon: Would it have been possible during these early gatherings then since there are so many elements now that there would be times where scripture wasn't read?

Tim: Oh, interesting.

Jon: Before it was like that's all - you got together, you read the scripture, you did a little bit expositing, and then that was it. Now it seems to have more. To such a degree it's like you got a meal, someone brings a hymn, someone have a prophecy, there might be all these different things. And then it's like, "Guys, we ran out of time, and we haven't cracked the scroll."

Tim: We don't have the manual. All we have are these little tidbits in the New Testament itself and then the later from later [inaudible 00:19:05].

Jon: It just feels like it went from the thing to now one of many things.

Tim: I understand. That's interesting.

Jon: Is that the case?

Tim: Yeah. It seems to be that the bread and the cup becomes the center symbol, but we all know that the reading of Scripture and the reading of the Torah, prophets, and apostles was also a part of what Paul had happened in his house Scripture.

Jon: And he told Timothy not to neglect it?

Tim: Told Timothy, "Make sure you keep reading scriptures aloud to people." It starts to sound more and more like a church gathering except maybe a more modern setting. The bread and the cup have become disconnected from an actual meal from most communities. I still don't understand the Protestant tradition of having the bread and the cup just once a month. It's utterly bizarre to me.

Jon: But when it's not a meal, it's kind of a weird thing to do every week.

Tim: Kind of. But as such at crucially...talk about identity formation. Because the bread and the cup are you're eating story. Instead of reading aloud, you're consuming the story. You're engaging in it in a really powerful way that reminds you of who you are,

## E2: Is Reading The Bible Together Just a Form of Group Think?

and who Jesus is, and the kind of life that I'm called to. And that gets you to look backwards.

Like in Josiah, we look back, and we lament ways that we haven't been faithful. And then, like Joshua, you look forward to the new horizon that lay ahead and what kind of person the story makes you into. That's really what this is about.

The public reading of Scripture, whether it's connected to a worship gathering, or whether it's a more of a one off thing like in Joshua's day, the whole point is identity formation. It's the creation of reality for people. And that's really the goal.

[00:21:37]

Tim: You're really interested in this - the history of worship gathering.

Jon: Yeah, I'm sorry.

Tim: No, it's okay. I know. Now that I think about it, it's like, "Of course, you would be interested in this." It's context for you. It's like, how did we get—

Jon: I would be afraid to make such a stand of how important...All of a sudden, I just started getting this sense of, "Oh, yeah, the Lord's Supper actually is probably more important than reading scripture aloud in the early tradition."

Tim: I see.

Jon: And that was the thing that you would always do. Actually reading scripture was really important, but that you could maybe miss. But you wouldn't not eat the meal. Anyways.

Tim: I see.

Jon: I'm also very interested in identity formation. I've thought a lot about and read about how our identity is shaped by our myths. In particular, trying to think through that in a modern context of what are the myths that we are told and reenact—

Tim: By myth, you mean in the technical sense of a foundation story?

Jon: Yeah.

Tim: Whether or not it's rooted in historical events or not, isn't the point. It's story begins to shape your sense of who you are and your role in the world.

## E2: Is Reading The Bible Together Just a Form of Group Think?

Jon: For Americans, there are certain stories that really form an American identity. A lot of them are these Western stories. You get these Clint Eastwood kinds of characters. And that becomes a sort of mythology of like the self-made, like, take care of yourself kind of guy. There's the American Dream kind of entrepreneurial myth. I don't mean myth in that it's not true. It's just like story that defines who you are.

Tim: This is how sociologist uses the word myth. Regardless of whether it's anchored in historical events, or not, a mythical myth or historical myth function in the same way.

Jon: Maybe there's a better word that doesn't need this kind of—

Tim: Yeah, it's a good word. When you're saying that for America, I think even both of those are rooted in an older one, which is like the liberation freedom narrative. Freedom from the British rule.

Jon: Yeah, we celebrate that.

Tim: So it' we've carved out who we are in this new place. We won't tolerate this oppression of these institutions from our past, the self-made reality that assumes freedom and liberty of the individual and that kind of thing. These are core narratives in American culture.

Jon: When we think of myths, we think of what Greek people told each other back in - 2000Bc? I don't know, about Zeus and different things. And yeah, those were myths that shaped their identity. But then there are myths that shape our identity.

Then there's also practices that we have, these kind of almost liturgical practices of like...I guess this doesn't happen as much anymore, but growing up for me was like going to the mall. It's like a liturgy almost. It becomes the temple and it's where you gather, and it's all around.

Tim: And the story is?

Jon: And the story is about consumption and about identity of what you're wearing and who you are around. So that becomes part of the mythos.

Tim: One of the most important sociologists of the 20th century was a guy named Peter Berger. His most significant book was called "The Social Construction of Reality." Then his follow up volume was called "The Sacred Canopy."

In both of these books, he reshaped the whole study of anthropology and human culture, and so on. His basic point was the story of human civilization...First of all, it's the claim that he made that no human experiences reality in some kind of pure form,

## E2: Is Reading The Bible Together Just a Form of Group Think?

but that every human is already born into a particular interpretation of the world through thousand forms of media and socialization and family and so on.

It's like this metaphor that I found helpful of the fish swimming in water. So the tropical fish who by nature has been shaped as a being to inhabit warm, shallow waters among a reef, and then a shark because it inhabits the deep, cold, cold, dark waters, they have no framework.

If you were to ask them, "Oh, how do you like these warm, shallow waters? What's your opinion about the deep waters out there?" Of course, the tropical fish is like, "What water? What do you mean? What is water? What do you mean shallow?" That's just reality.

His point was, that's exactly how human cultures are. But paradoxically, humans create those environments. So we are both the creators of those environments and we are also created by them.

Jon: And we have the intelligence to then step back and talk about them in a meta kind of way.

Tim: It's really interesting. "The Sacred Canopy" was about how religious communities do this for people. Anyway, as this interesting process that he talks about how it's this constant replaying cycle of humans...he calls the externalization where we create something to help shape our environment. Like create the mall, that's a human creation right within recent history.

But then because objectification that this institution, he calls it, hardens, and then people just begin to take it for granted. Then within a few generations, the mall isn't something humans created. It's now something that's creating human.

Jon: Interesting.

Tim: This is as fascinating. So every human's inhabiting the world by already being created with some vision of who we are, the story we're in. And so, how does this relate to the public reading of Scripture? The public reading of scripture in the story of the Bible is completely wrapped up with this sense of forming identity.

Jon: It's supposed to be that thing that forms you. It's like when the mall has been around so long, and you become a part of it, it's now forming your identity just by participating in the exercise of going to it. That's reading the Scriptures.

Tim: It acts on you. And that's exactly the role that the scriptures have played throughout their history. That's why they came into existence was to retell the story of what God

## E2: Is Reading The Bible Together Just a Form of Group Think?

has done to save and redeem the people, and then to invite those people into a covenant relationship into a new way of life.

The question is, how do you sustain that way of life when it's not the norm? That's precisely what the role of these scriptures are, and it's why the public reading aloud of the Scriptures has played such an important role throughout Jewish and Christian history.

There's something that happens there that's intangible. When you have one verse up on a screen and a sermon is given, that could be a very powerful way of reflecting on a biblical truth in a depth that you've never experienced it. But there's also something about hearing the whole story of the Exodus from chapter 1 chapter 15 read aloud to you. It raises all these crazy questions. But you walk away challenged with a view of the world. And it gets you thinking like, "Oh, yeah, who's is really in control around here? God or Pharaoh?"

I think I told you this story of Roman. He watched The Bible Project video on Part one. He and I gotten some conflict, I was asking him to do something, like come to dinner and put his Legos away and he didn't want to. He's five he got really ticked off.

It escalated to the point of essentially, like, "Don't tell me what to do." And I was like, "Buddy, there are sometimes where I just need you to do what I'm asking you to do." Then he brought Jesus into it. He got angry with me. As way of dissing me, he said, "I want you to be out of my family."

Jon: Paxton says it too.

Tim: Then he said, "I'm going to tell Jesus what to do. I'm going to kill Jesus. I want to be like Herod."

Jon: Wow. He's taking control.

Tim: He's being honest. He's being honest but he's using the biblical story to express what he feels. And he can tell this is a moment where I don't want to follow Jesus. I want to tell him what to do. In fact, I want to eliminate any opposition to my will. And Herod is what came to his mind.

Jon: It becomes the language that we use to describe our experience.

Tim: Totally.

## E2: Is Reading The Bible Together Just a Form of Group Think?

- Jon: And that's another beautiful thing, then, is that as a community, you have a common set of ideas and images, and pictures to express yourself and to interpret things. It bonds you too as well.
- Tim: I mean, I wasn't pleased with how he was treating me in that moment so we had to work through the consequences of his words and behavior.
- Jon: But imagine what he does that someday because of some profound truth or a moment of expressing his gratitude for something and he's using the biblical imagination to express it?
- Tim: Correct. I didn't teach him. We just read the story of Luke at dinner during the Christmas season and he watched the Luke video. Now that's the framework for helping him understand his experience.
- Jon: That insight by - what's his name? Burger?
- Tim: Peter Burger.
- Jon: ...that we both create these structures and then the structures create us is such a great insight when it comes to how we're going to live our lives. I feel like the people I read as outside of Christianity, who are talking about business and different things, startup culture, entrepreneurial culture, a lot of it is just about habits and psyche and things to just make yourself a better person - more productive, happier, and all these different things. A lot of self-help kind of stuff.
- Just that insight of when you create structure in your life, that structure is then going to recreate you on anything and then specifically thinking of it as why I want to follow Jesus, then putting structure in your life where you listen to the Bible being read is going to create who you are.
- Tim: It's one piece of a larger set of habits that historically played a really important role in shaping God's people.
- Jon: The Lord's Supper being another one.
- Tim: Then here we go out into the whole Christian spiritual tradition. It's really amazing in orthodox, Catholic and Protestant expressions of spiritual practices of what a hospitality and generosity of silence and solitude of having building these rhythms in your life that sustain a healthy follower of Jesus for over the long haul. Historically, hearing the scriptures read aloud has this intangible effect on the human imagination.

## E2: Is Reading The Bible Together Just a Form of Group Think?

Jon: It's basically the saying, "You are what you eat," right?

Tim: Yeah. Or you are what you listen.

Jon: Yeah, you become what you listen to.

Tim: That's a fairly simple and profound way of putting it.

[00:34:36]

Tim: A number of years ago, there's one of the few rock star theologians living today who now an outside of nerdy theology circles, a guy named NT Wright wrote this really interesting essay called "How is the Bible Authoritative." He begins by saying, "The Bible is fundamentally a long narrative, not a law book. And what does it mean for a long narrative have to be a divine authority in your life."

In the conclusion of the essay, he has this great statement. He says, "This I think is one of the reasons why God has given us so much story, so much narrative in Scripture because story authority is the authority that really works because stories determine how we see ourselves, others, and the world, and how we experience God.

If you throw a rulebook at someone's head or offer them a list of doctrines, they can duck or avoid it or simply disagree in one go away. But you tell them a story, you invite them into a community of people living by that story, and you're inviting them into a different world, you invite them to share a whole new worldview.

When someone enters into the Gospel story and finds how compelling it is, it begins to quietly shatter that worldview that they were in beforehand. Then there's no telling what can happen when God Himself breathes new lives and new worlds into being through His Word." It's kind of combining this Peter Berger observation with this ancient practice of scripture reading and the story of the gospel.

There's actually a really formative essays for me many, many years ago, where I resonated deeply with that because that was my experience. Even if going to this outreach ministry, the skateboarders and just hearing the stories of Jesus talked about or read aloud, the teachings, they quietly worked on me for year.

Jon: Yeah, they are quietly working on you.

Tim: Just like the story of Luke has been quietly working on my son's imagination.



## E2: Is Reading The Bible Together Just a Form of Group Think?

Jon: I think that perspective is what was lost for me. What I think I picked up on being lost in my tradition was the way we did sermons and lessons and everything, it's always about a very quick razor sharp, "Here's what's you got to believe, and do it, make the decision make the change."

It's very decisive, very quick instead of the slow burn of it forming your imagination slowly and appreciating that. It still would happen that way but there was no space to just let that be and to appreciate that. It was always about what's the next very decisive doctrine or application.

I wrote an essay about how story is powerful and the metaphor that came to mind was the difference between a knife and a sun. A knife is sharp and decisive and you can really clearly articulate something or systematize something quickly.

But the power of a sun it's very different. Slowly it takes millions of years to form, but once it gets heated up, it gets so hot and radiate and it just starts to affect everything. Then it has its own gravity that everything gets attracted to it. It's a different kind of power. It's not fast and it's not so decisive, but it's much more powerful in a way.

Tim: It's more permeating.

Jon: The energy is permeating. It also has a gravitational force that pulls things to itself. The same way a good story, it creates a world where everything gets pulled into that way of looking at things.

Tim: It gives you this framework that you cannot fit all your experiences into this framework.

Jon: I could quickly give you a bunch of doctrines or rules and it's quick, it's decisive, it might make a change right now. But if it hasn't really like formed your imagination and your value and your identity—

Tim: Theologian James Smith, "Desiring the Kingdom," then he wrote another book called "You Are What You Love" more recently, his whole point is that Christian discipleship is about taking an active role in shaping what you love.

He focuses not just on the imagination, but on your affections - what you desire, what you want, what you want out of life, what gets you most excited, what you'll make sacrifices for those. You do this for things that you love. And he thinks a Christian discipleship is about creating environments and communities that through habits begin reshaping what we love.

## E2: Is Reading The Bible Together Just a Form of Group Think?

Jon: There are Christian traditions that do that well, I'm sure.

Tim: Yeah, totally. Transcends, the Sunday gathering. The Sunday gathering can play a role, but it's just one role in a much larger way of life. The scriptures have a huge role to play in that too.

Jon: It's freeing for me to value that because the measurement of success is a lot more obscured. Like, when the sun is being successful? It's like, you know when a knife has been working well and it's made a good cut or something. But a sun is just you get all these trillions and trillions of these particles coming together and then as it gets so packed in, it ignites, and it turns into a new...But just this slow formation of your affections, your imagination. It's harder to measure.

Tim: To bring back to something earlier, in this case, it changes the role of the Scriptures from being this thing that we act upon to something that acts upon us. You have to read it but then metaphorically speaking, it also is reading you right and you find yourself addressed by this word, this ancient word. And it's why - this is true to my own experience - when the scriptures are read aloud, when I'm with a gathering of followers of Jesus, I'm more compelled on a personal level than when I'm sitting by myself reading. That's just my experience.

When I'm by myself, I'm compelled in a different way. It's usually very different. But there's something about standing or sitting next to a bunch of other people in my community, and I'm like, "We're trying to follow Jesus together." It actually makes it more believable to me. Because when you're by yourself - at least this is kind of our inner skeptics speaking - but you're like, "Okay, that's really challenging. Well, God did that and that story or what?" It's kind of weird, like the Bible's weird. But then when we're a group together we're like, "Yeah, this is our story and we're going to live by the story."

The church is creation of an environment that then begins to create us. I find the Christian worldview more believable when I'm with other Christians. And the scriptures play a role in that and that's important, I think, to recognize.

Jon: I'm imagining someone really skeptical listening to this conversation and going, "Well, it sounds like what you're talking about is just brainwashing?" I guess you have to start with, "Are you going to follow Jesus and you believe that the Bible has some sort of divine authority in your life?" You kind of have to get there first before you can say that is important to let it work on you.

Tim: But even underneath that it is a form of identity formation called brainwashing. But the point is, is that the person poking holes in that is themselves exposing

## E2: Is Reading The Bible Together Just a Form of Group Think?

themselves constantly to a different form of brainwashing of just a different story about the world. Of course, the question is, which of those stories offers a better account of the human experience and of reality? You can use uncharitable terms like brainwashing, but it's the social construction of reality which is just—

Jon: And it happens with everything.

Tim: It happens with everything. The modern Western story is also a construction of reality.

Jon: I really loved about that book "Sapiens." I think I brought up before, is guy who wrote that...his name's escaping me. He talks about how many of our normal cultural practices are constructs of nothing but money. Money doesn't actually exist. Like what is money?

Tim: Sure, sure. It's a construct.

Jon: It's a total construct. We just all believe in it, but it's make-believe.

Tim: Perceived value.

Jon: It's absolute make-believe.

Tim: Abstract perceived believe.

Jon: And we're totally fine with it. So we've been brainwashed. It's a belief that it's valuable. Same thing with democracy or different things. It's like—

Tim: Or a social position like social capital where I have achieved these credentials, or I had this position and now there's a value and a weight and an authority that I can use to my benefit or whatever.

Jon: These are all based off of essentially the myths that we believe in—

Tim: About what's valuable.

Jon: About what matters.

Tim: I just had breakfast with somebody who grew up in South Africa this morning and he was talking about veterans, how in South Africa everybody's serves. It's just a part of everybody's story there. Like many countries, you get out of high school and you serve in the military. But he was talking about when he moved to America that was one of the things we noticed was—

## E2: Is Reading The Bible Together Just a Form of Group Think?

- Jon: Some people did, some people didn't.
- Tim: Yeah. But how veterans who volunteered it becomes this social honor. Anyway, that's a different narrative, a different mythology about military that creates value.
- Jon: So the question becomes, what is actually reality? That's the tricky—
- Tim: And you can describe it in terms of Math and chemistry, but even that, itself, is just one aspect of reality. So humans by nature - this is Genesis one. Rule the earth, subdue it, create, shape the creation, take the raw potential within it, and then make new creation out of it that you will then inhabit.
- Jon: Think about what money as a construct has done to then shape us as people. If you go back to the Burger insight, we've created this thing that didn't exist and now it works on us, and it shapes us. All to say reading scripture aloud as identity formation, the work you have to do is show up and then let it work on you.
- Tim: That's right. You can put a lot of energy into a church worship gathering and architecting that to bring people to an encounter with Jesus through the scriptures and the bread and the cup, but there's another way that you can do in addition that's much simpler. And that's what we're interested in.
- Jon: Thanks for listening to The Bible Project podcast. If you've been enjoying these podcast episodes, one way you can help us a lot is by giving us a review on iTunes. Another way you could help is go to our website, [thebibleproject.com](http://thebibleproject.com), and just check out all the other stuff we've got going on. We've got free videos and resources, and we have a growing number of supporters who make this whole project possible. So thank you.

If you're encouraged to maybe try to bring some people together to do some reading of scripture in a group, we'd love to know how it goes. Remember, you don't have to do a sermon, it doesn't even have to be sharing time, just get some people together and read through a book of the Bible - it could be a short one, to begin with - and let the slow burn of those words work on your hearts and minds.

We love to hear stories. If you do it, you can email us at [support@jointhebibleproject.com](mailto:support@jointhebibleproject.com). And we're on Twitter @JoinBibleProj and we're on Facebook, [facebook.com/thebibleproject](https://facebook.com/thebibleproject). Thanks for being a part of this with us.