

EQUIPPING FOR MINISTRY IN THE 21ST CENTURY

Feasting on the whole Word of God

Matthew 4:4 reveals that when Jesus was fasting in the wilderness for 40 days, the Enemy of God tempted Him to turn stones into bread. Jesus answered that temptation with the Word of God from Deuteronomy 8:3, “Man does not live on bread alone, but on *every* word that comes from the mouth of God.” In John 6:12, after Jesus has allowed people to feast upon the Word from His lips and feast upon the fellowship of the Word which is Himself, we learn that “when they had all had enough to eat, He said to His disciples, ‘Gather the pieces that are left over. Let *nothing* be wasted.’” (emphasis added) Not a morsel, not a crumb, not a word should be cast off.

Christians acknowledge that the Bible is the inspired Word of God and that every word of God’s Word is equally and fully revelatory of God’s nature and will. We dare not set ourselves as an authority over the Word by failing to read it in its entirety. Methods of interpretation aside, the people of God are without excuse for failing to feast on the whole revelation of God by reading the whole witness of God.

Jeremiah 36 illustrates the folly of those who regard the Word of God with arrogant contempt. The characters in the story include Jehoiakim, son of Josiah, who is king of Judah; Jeremiah, the prophet, barred from entering the Temple for reasons unknown; Baruch, the scribe who not only writes the Word the Lord speaks to Jeremiah but in turn reads the Word in the Temple and later in the palace; various princes and Jehudi who ultimately reads the scroll to the king.

The setting is Judah in the days after King Josiah. The Word from the Lord is captured in 36:3, “It may be that the house of Judah will hear all the adversities which I purpose to bring upon them, that everyone may turn from his evil way, that I may forgive their iniquity and their sin.” The scroll is to be read to all Judah during a fast to the Lord. That fast took place but neither the king nor the princes were at the Temple to hear it. So, Baruch reads it again at the palace. The princes in turn have the Word delivered to the king at his winter residence.

As the king sat before a fire in the hearth, Jehudi would read three or four columns of the scroll. Then the king would cut off those columns of God’s Word and throw them into the fire. This continued until the entire scroll was consumed. Jeremiah 36:24 says that save for three of the king’s men who implored him not to burn the scroll, everyone else present was not afraid. There was no fear of God and no honoring of God’s Word.

The Lord commands Jeremiah, “Take yet another scroll, and write on it all the former words that were in the first scroll which Jehoiakim the king of Judah has burned.” Then the Lord instructed Jeremiah to add specific words of condemnation for the king and his family because of Jehoiakim’s iniquity. Notably, Jehoiakim is no longer alive and no longer king. God is.

Nations rise and fall, kings come and go, but the Word of the Lord stands forever.

It is an offense to God that His Word should be cut short, edited



back or watered down. Putting the entire Word of God in the hands of the full people of God, in the vernacular of the day, was one of the passion points that ignited the Protestant reformation. And yet many people today presume to place themselves in authority over the revealed Word of God in the Bible. Some acts of fashioning a god of our own liking are subtle: replacing non-gender specific names for God where Biblical language offends the feminist agenda; discounting the need for a substitutionary blood atonement through the Cross of Jesus Christ by redefining sin; substituting a theology of the church

as raised to life on Easter for the physical bodily resurrection of Jesus incarnate. Maybe the most obvious example of hubris on the subject is the Jesus Seminar, where “scholars” vote on whether they think Jesus really ever said what the Bible says He said.

Most people in the pews of most churches are unaware of these more esoteric debates. But even if they knew, they may not be sufficiently Biblically-equipped to recognize error when they hear it, nor have the Biblical knowledge to correct it. Why not? Because if their church uses the Revised Common Lectionary (RCL) and they are not also reading through the Bible on their own or attending a Bible study that works through entire books of the Bible, then they are being served a butchered text. They have been served a piece-meal version of the Bible for so long they don’t know what they’re missing. If your church follows the RCL, you have not been getting the whole story.

The RCL and its predecessors have been in use for more than 30 years by many mainline Protestant denominations and their congregations. That means that a Presbyterian attending a church that utilizes the RCL for worship planning and educational ministries could have grown into adulthood without ever having heard of the books of Ezra, Obadiah, Nahum, II and III John and Jude. With that in mind, the Biblical illiteracy and failure to apply the fullness of God’s Word to life is understandable, even as it is also inexcusable.

When considering what’s been cut out of the Word of God in the RCL, most astonishing is the exclusion of Revelation 22:18-19, “I warn everyone who hears these words of the prophecy of this book: If anyone adds anything to them, God will add to him the plagues described in this book. And if anyone takes away words from this book of prophecy, God will take away from him his share in the tree of life and in the holy city, which are described in this book.”

For a more thorough accounting of what you’ve missed if your church follows the ecumenical RCL, I recommend “The Year D project” (<http://theyearproject.blogspot.com>). As the lectionary is set up in a three-year “ABC” cycle, the Year D Project covers the majority of the excluded texts in a fourth year.

Let us then feast upon the Word and in this study let us “gather up the fragments left over, so that *nothing* may be lost” (John 6:12).

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Week I: Genesis 6:5–8

The story of Noah's ark is one of the first learned by children in Sunday school or Vacation Bible School. The basics of the story can be reiterated by almost everyone. Noah built an ark. The animals boarded two by two. It rained for 40 days and nights. The ark came to rest on a mountain top. As the waters subsided, Noah sent out a dove that eventually returned with an olive branch indicating that some land had dried up for life to be renewed. God set a rainbow in the sky as a sign of His covenant to never destroy the earth again with a flood.

What's missing from most people's understanding is the *context* of the story. What provoked God to send the flood that covered the earth? What is revealed about the nature and character of God and His serious hatred of sin? What's missing is the depth of God's grief, so deep in fact that He was sorry He had made humanity at all. What's missing is the sense that the flood purifies and cleanses the earth of sinful humanity by literally washing them away. What's missing is that although Noah's family and the animals were preserved on the ark, every other living creature on all the earth, every other man, woman and child, every other bird and mammal and fresh water fish, died. All of them.

The verses that introduce the story of Noah and the flood, the verses that provide context and insight into the provocation for the flood, are excluded from the RCL. Read Genesis 6:5-8 where we learn that "the Lord saw how great man's wickedness on the earth had become, and that every inclination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil all the time. The Lord was grieved that He had made man on the earth, and His heart was filled with pain. So the Lord said, 'I will wipe mankind, whom I have created, from the face of the earth ...'"

We learn much about God in these few short verses. We learn that sin grieves God. We learn that when we do evil, even when we think evil thoughts, it causes God pain. We learn that God makes plans and we learn that those plans are for His glory alone. We confront the reality that God holds life in His hands. He made us and we are His. He is perfectly free to do with us what He wills and He is perfectly just when what He wills is global annihilation to eradicate evil. We don't like it, but it's true.

Like enjoying the benefits of the Resurrection without considering the cost of Calvary, the RCL butchers the story of Noah by trimming the Word of God to satisfy human appetites. In so doing, human beings have set themselves as an authority over the One who has revealed not only grace but truth in the redemptive narrative of the flood.

Questions for reflection and discussion:

1. Read Deuteronomy 8:3 and Matthew 4:4. Why is it important to read the whole Bible and not just parts and pieces of it?
2. Read Matthew 29:19-20. Focusing on the verbs, what are the five commands of Christ to His disciples in the Great Commission? What exactly does Jesus command His followers to teach others? What does that include?
3. Read Luke 24:25-27. In His teaching the two disciples on the walk to Emmaus, where did Jesus begin, what did He cover, and what did He leave out of what we know as "the Old Testament?" What does that indicate to us about the importance of reading the Old Testament in its entirety if we want to understand the character, will and purposes of God?
4. Read II Timothy 3:16-17. According to the Apostle Paul, which parts of Scripture are more inspired and useful for equipping and which parts are not?

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Week II: Other “excluded” verses in the RCL

There are 20 places in the RCL where verses have been stricken from the middle of a passage. The exclusion of those verses significantly changes what is communicated in the text. As most of the trimmed texts are just a few verses in length, it cannot seriously be argued that they are left out to make the length of the text more reasonable for reading in corporate worship or daily personal devotion. If all church-goers carried their Bibles with them to worship or used the pew Bibles provided in most sanctuaries, people would see for themselves what was being skipped. They might take note of the missing verses for themselves. However, many people rely solely upon what is read from the lectionary for the day, unaware that some of the substance of the text is being cast aside, trimmed to taste.

Space does not permit us to examine all the excluded texts here. It is hoped that a sampling will whet your appetite to gather up other fragments on your own, that nothing of the Word of God will be lost.

Revelation 22:15 and 18-19 are excluded from Rev 22:12-21 on the seventh Sunday of Easter in Year C. Read the entire passage highlighting the excluded verses. Verse 15 reveals Jesus saying, that “outside are the dogs, those who practice magic arts, the sexually immoral, the murderers, the idolaters and everyone who loves and practices falsehood.” Why cut this one verse out of the middle of Jesus’ description of what life will be like after His return? Are we so committed to believing that *all* will be saved and everyone will enjoy our vision of heaven that we set ourselves as an authority over the One who makes eternal life a possibility? If you have ever wondered how the seeds of universalism were planted in our common life, the exclusion of texts like Revelation 22:15 provide some explanation.

Matthew 11:20-24 is excluded from a reading of 11:16-30 on Proper 9 in Year A. The excluded verses read, “Then Jesus began to denounce the cities in which most of His miracles had been performed, because they did not repent. ‘Woe to you, Korazin! Woe to you, Bethsaida! If the miracles that were performed in you had been performed in Tyre and Sidon, they would have repented long ago in sackcloth and ashes. But I tell you, it will be more bearable for Tyre and Sidon on the day of judgment than for you. And you, Capernaum, will you be lifted up to the skies? No, you will go down to the depths. If the miracles that were performed in you had been performed in Sodom, it would have remained to this day. But I tell you that it will be more bearable for Sodom on the day of judgment than for you.’”

Apparently Jesus takes the issue of repentance very seriously. Why exclude these words of woe and judgment? Why exclude this clear call to repentance from Jesus Himself? If you have ever wondered why some people fail to know the fullness of Jesus’ teachings, excluded texts like this one provide some clue. The reference to Sodom is also stricken from the same story as recorded in Luke’s Gospel on Proper 9 in Year C. The Gospel reading on that Sunday is Luke 10:1-20 with verses 11-15 excised out.

On two successive Sundays in Year C, Proper 26 and 27, passages from II Thessalonians are pared down to taste. II Thessalonians 1:1-12 has verses 5-10 cut out and II Thessalonians 2:1-17 is missing verses 6-12. The exclusion of these verses substantively alters the text by omitting words of judgment. Chapter 2 verses

10-12 again illuminate the reality that, tragically, not everyone is going to spend eternity in the glorious presence of God. Those who are perishing, the excluded text reveals, “perish because they refused to love the truth and so be saved. For this reason God sends them a powerful delusion so that they will believe the lie and so that all will be condemned who have not believed the truth but have delighted in wickedness.”

Again, consider the impact of removing these verses from the hearing of God’s people in the context of worship over the past 30 years in churches that follow the RCL. We may not want to think that God sends powerful delusions nor that some people are going to eternally perish. But cutting those revelatory words of truth out of Scripture does not in fact make them go away. In fact, the opposite effect is achieved. People who might repent and turn to Christ if they heard the truth are instead held captive by lies, fed a paltry portion when the fullness of the Bread of Heaven is available.

Questions for reflection and discussion:

1. How does reading the excluded verses help you understand why people have different perceptions of the character of God?
2. Read Hebrews 13:1-16. Verses 9-14 have been excluded from the lectionary. How does the omission of those verses change the meaning of the text?
3. Read James 3:13-4:8a. Verses 4:4-6 are omitted from the lectionary. Read them aloud. Should not all sinners hear that it is impossible to be friends with both the world and God? What does it mean to be friends with the world? How is living the Christian life distinct from living as a friend to the world? How might the exclusion of this text over two generations have produced the fruit of social witness we are now reaping?

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Week III: II and III John

The 26 verses that comprise the entire books of II and III John are excluded from the RCL. Allowing the Word of God to speak for itself, read II and III John now.

Then, re-read II and III John from a study Bible that offers you historical context and answers to questions likely provoked by the initial reading.

Now, read I John and identify ideas and themes that the author is reinforcing in the second and third letters.

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ed instructing his	Woe to Unrepentant Cities
nt on from there to	²⁰Then he began to denounce the cities where most of his mighty works had been done, because they did not repent. ²¹“Woe to you, Chorazin! Woe to you, Bethsaida! For if the mighty works done in you had been done long ago in sackcloth and ashes. ²²But I tell you, it will be more bearable on the day of judgment for Tyre and Sidon than for you. ²³And you, Capernaum, will you be exalted to heaven? You will be brought down to Hades. For if the mighty works done in you had been done in Sodom, it would have remained until this day. ²⁴But I tell you that it will be more tolerable on the day of judgment for the land of Sodom than for you.”
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	Come to Me, and I Will Give You Rest
	²⁵ At that time Jesus declared, “I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, that you have hidden these things from the wise and understanding and revealed them to little children; ²⁶ yes, Father, for such was your gracious will. ²⁷ All things have been handed over to me by my Father, and no one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal him. ²⁸ Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. ²⁹ Take

Matthew 11:20-24 is excluded from the RCL reading of 11:16-30 on Proper 9 in Year A. Strike through indicates verses excluded from lectionary.

Questions for reflection and discussion:

1. What ideas and themes does John reiterate throughout his three letters?
2. What warnings are proffered?
3. What does John mean when he refers to the knowledge of the truth and what is he affirming when he celebrates “walking” in the truth? What then, is the relationship between Biblical knowledge and Biblical faithfulness?
4. What does John mean when he refers to deceivers and wicked work? What then, is the relationship between the truth and righteous service?
5. What is the message of II and III John to parents, grandparents and Christians actively discipling younger Christians when he says that, “I have no greater joy than to hear that my children are walking in the truth?”

EDITOR’S NOTE:

Carmen Fowler LaBerge is the author of the equipping section that appears in the center of each issue of *The Layman*. Your feedback is greatly appreciated as future studies are planned.

Share your comments with Carmen via e-mail at cfowler@layman.org, call 1-800-368-0110 or write her at P.O. 2210, Lenoir, NC 28645.

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Week IV: Jude

The entire book of Jude is 25 verses. It takes about three minutes to read. But for some reason there is not three minutes in the three-year cycle of the RCL to include even a word from the book of Jude. Take the time to read it now. This is the Word of the Lord:

Jude, a servant of Jesus Christ and a brother of James, to those who have been called, who are loved in God the Father and kept for Jesus Christ:

2 Mercy, peace and love be yours in abundance.

3 Dear friends, although I was very eager to write to you about the salvation we share, I felt compelled to write and urge you to contend for the faith that was once for all entrusted to God's holy people.

4 For certain individuals whose condemnation was written about long ago have secretly slipped in among you. They are ungodly people, who pervert the grace of our God into a license for immorality and deny Jesus Christ our only Sovereign and Lord.

5 Though you already know all this, I want to remind you that the Lord at one time delivered His people out of Egypt, but later destroyed those who did not believe.

6 And the angels who did not keep their positions of authority but abandoned their proper dwelling – these He has kept in darkness, bound with everlasting chains for judgment on the great Day.

7 In a similar way, Sodom and Gomorrah and the surrounding towns gave themselves up to sexual immorality and perversion. They serve as an example of those who suffer the punishment of eternal fire.

8 In the very same way, on the strength of their dreams these ungodly people pollute their own bodies, reject authority and heap abuse on celestial beings.

9 But even the archangel Michael, when he was disputing with the devil about the body of Moses, did not himself dare to condemn him for slander but said, "The Lord rebuke you!"

10 Yet these people slander whatever they do not understand, and the very things they do understand by instinct – as irrational animals do – will destroy them.

11 Woe to them! They have taken the way of Cain; they have rushed for profit into Balaam's error; they have been destroyed in Korah's rebellion.

12 These people are blemishes at your love feasts, eating with you without the slightest qualm – shepherds who feed only themselves. They are clouds without rain, blown along by the wind; autumn trees, without fruit and uprooted – twice dead.

13 They are wild waves of the sea, foaming up their shame; wandering stars, for whom blackest darkness has been reserved forever.

14 Enoch, the seventh from Adam, prophesied about them: "See, the Lord is coming with thousands upon thousands of His holy ones

15 to judge everyone, and to convict all of them of all the ungodly acts they have committed in their ungodliness, and of all the defiant words ungodly sinners have spoken against Him."

16 These people are grumblers and faultfinders; they follow

their own evil desires; they boast about themselves and flatter others for their own advantage.

17 But, dear friends, remember what the apostles of our Lord Jesus Christ foretold.

18 They said to you, "In the last times there will be scoffers who will follow their own ungodly desires."

19 These are the people who divide you, who follow mere natural instincts and do not have the Spirit.

20 But you, dear friends, by building yourselves up in your most holy faith and praying in the Holy Spirit,

21 keep yourselves in God's love as you wait for the mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ to bring you to eternal life.

22 Be merciful to those who doubt;

23 save others by snatching them from the fire; to others show mercy, mixed with fear – hating even the clothing stained by corrupted flesh.

24 To Him who is able to keep you from stumbling and to present you before His glorious presence without fault and with great joy –

25 to the only God our Savior be glory, majesty, power and authority, through Jesus Christ our Lord, before all ages, now and forevermore! Amen.

Questions for reflection and discussion:

1. Was this the first time you've read the book of Jude? If so, what surprised you? What intrigued you? What questions does it raise for you?
2. Reread verse 3. What does it mean to "contend for the faith?" What are the forces at work in the world today that are contending against the faith?
3. Like Jude, have you ever felt "eager" to focus on the Kingdom advancing issues of salvation but instead felt "compelled" to spend your time contending for the faith?
4. Reread verse 4. What does Jude describe as having happened in the church in his day? Can you draw parallels to your experience in the church today?
5. Reread verses 20-24. What does Jude instruct believers to do in the midst of a church that has been infiltrated by those perverting the grace of God into a license for immorality? How might that change how you contend for the faith in the context of the church today?

EQUIPPING FOR MINISTRY IN THE 21ST CENTURY

Read the Bible in 90 Days: It changes lives

By D. Wayne Bogue
Special to the Layman

Can reading the Bible through in a short time frame actually change lives? Talk to Ted Cooper Jr., founder/executive director of The Bible in 90 Days. By reading 12 pages of Scripture per day, Cooper not only read the entire Bible in 90 days, he also experienced the Spirit of God transform his and his family's lives.

Twelve years ago in 1999, according to Cooper, he and his wife were happy agnostics. Residing in Houston, Texas, the Coopers had a contented, successful life. Cooper was a businessman who specialized in computer consulting. The Coopers were busy raising three children, ages 11, 9 and 7.

As Cooper reported to Electa Draper of *The Denver Post*, "We were nice enough people. We just didn't happen to believe in any of this [faith in Christ] and didn't have time for it." But God, as He often does, brought faith into the family through its youngest members. The children, it turned out, had a curiosity about Christ and wanted to know more.

The Coopers believed their children should be able to make up their own minds about the spiritual direction of their lives. So Cooper began to take them to the Presbyterian church he had attended as a child.

All went smoothly. The family attended Sunday school and worship each week. Then questions began to rise – questions the children brought home to their parents, questions about God, faith and life that Cooper himself began to ask.

Cooper went to the Bible, albeit secretly, to find the answers. He began to read the Bible "undercover." In fact, he poured through the Scriptures at a fast pace, completing 12 pages per day for 90 days. He wanted to quickly put an end to the questions swirling around his household and his own mind.

Cooper finally shared with his wife that he was reading the Bible. He read aloud to her the parts he found amusing. "We made a game of it," Cooper said. "After several days, I quit making fun of it. I found myself engrossed in it. About halfway through, somewhere in Isaiah or Jeremiah, I started to believe what I was reading."

Cooper went on to read the Bible three more times in 1999. The Holy Spirit changed his life, awakened faith in Jesus Christ and transformed his family from friendly agnostics to passionate, and still friendly, believers.

This is not only the account of one family's transformation in Christ, it is also the story of a man's call to form a brand new ministry based on his discovery of the power of reading the Bible through in 90 days.

In 2001 Cooper offered a class on reading the Bible in 90 days to his own congregation. In 2002 Cooper left his secular career and started his new vocation: The Bible in 90 Days.

Cooper is clear about what The Bible in 90 Days is and is not. What it is: "The Bible in 90 Days is a Bible *reading* curriculum. It helps people read attentively the entire Bible – from cover to cover – in 90 days." (emphasis in original)



What it is not: "The Bible in 90 Days is *not* a speed-read through the Bible. Rather, it's akin to reading the Bible like a novel."

To help make reading the Bible in 90 days a successful venture, Cooper and his team produced a curriculum to facilitate group participation. Cooper understands that making the program a group effort increases the support that many need to complete the reading and gain the spiritual benefits.

The Bible in 90 Days offers both leader and participant guides. The participants guide is linked to a DVD and helps group members discuss the joys and challenges of their weekly readings. It also serves as a friendly form of accountability.

The participant guide provides a schedule so that individuals can keep track of their daily reading. The questions provided in the guide help pre-

pare for the weekly group meeting, but participants may bring any question they wish to the group.

The leader guide makes clear that this is not a class that is "taught" in a traditional sense. Rather, the leader serves as a facilitator who encourages dialogue, keeps the group focused and supports the group in its goal of reading the Bible in 90 days.

An NIV translation of the Bible specially designed for the program is available, as are DVD and audio resources.

This program works, says Cooper, for the following reasons:

- **Time frame:** 90 days vs. a year (or more)
- **Readability:** large print, easy to read translation
- **Community:** weekly meetings for support, fellowship, accountability and knowledgeable insight
- **Support materials:** we provide just enough additional materials to keep participants engaged in reading the Bible, but no more. We don't want participants reading support material instead of the Word.
- **A lowering of barriers:** by tending to many of the *practical* aspects of reading the Bible, we foster an environment in which the participant is *more likely* to recognize the leading of the Spirit that he or she read and be transformed by the Word.

The program has been and is being used across the denominational spectrum. It has also been used in prisons, drug rehab missions, corporate Bible studies and neighborhood small groups.

Cooper states that recently, small towns have invited their residents to take part in the curriculum. As of today, groups have ranged from 2 people to 1,000 people, across 47 states and several foreign countries.

The entire Leader's Kit, which includes a Bible, Participant's Guide, Leader's Pack (Teaching DVDs) and the Essential Bible Companion (a supplementary resource book) costs \$79.99 plus shipping. Individual components of the curriculum may be purchased separately.

The Bible in 90 Days is located at 7111 Harwin Drive, Suite 130, Houston, Texas 77036. Cooper and his team may be reached at 713-526-6800. The website is www.biblein90days.org.