



THE PASTOR'S VOICE

Insights from Church Leaders

The Pastor's Voice Podcast: Episode 15

Transcript: How Can Churches Encourage The Reading of Scripture?

Reuel Sample: Pastors are still seen as the quote professional Bible readers, but the reform movement, you attend a reformed church, I'm a Presbyterian. The reform movement was based in large part about bringing the Bible to everyone. So how can pastors encourage their people to read their Bibles and develop a healthy worldview out of that?

Tom Vander Well: I think that and probably the pulpit is the place that it starts and the expectations that are set. With technology, there is no excuse for a pastor and a church not to be able to provide resources for the people in your local body, whether that be. We're going to do this together and we're going to post it online, what everyone's going to read each day or we're going to you know what? We're going to make audio accessible. My, you know, so my own pastor and I just talked last week and this is fascinating rule. So here we are in in rural Iowa, which is Iowa, is one of the most educated states in the country. It has one of the best educational systems in the country. And my pastor said that he has. Had several members of our consistory. Uh, they're they're doing a book study within within the Consistory, which is kind of the the leaders within the church. And he said he's had a handful approach him and say and confess to him they can't read. Interesting, interesting. I mean, he blew me away and he was blown away as well, and he's like, What is this mean? And in grappling with that, it's sort of like, you know, let's stop making assumptions that everyone can, and maybe we need to make things accessible by audio rather than just reading anyway. Fascinating. I just think being able to provide resources, being able to set expectations.

One of the things that we do among our local body and both spaces that we use for worship is more and more. We are having discussion questions and we're making space on Sunday morning to say, Um, OK, read this passage and talk about it, or here's the question. Get together, we call them with your neighborhood groups because everyone sits in the same spots, right? Everyone sits in the same place every week.

Reuel Sample: And you better not sit in somebody else's spot?

Tom Vander Well: Exactly. So look, you all know each other and see each other every Sunday anyway, because they're all relatively in the same space every Sunday. So just turn around, talk to the person next to you and we give it a lot of grace and say, our pastor is always great, he says. Like, if you don't want to do this, just pretend to pray and it's OK. But over time, what we've what we've seen happen, and it's taken a couple of years to get there, but we do this now almost every week and people are really enjoying. Talking about the scripture together or talking about the question together, and that is making, I think, connection not only between pastor and listener, but now between listener and listener, and we're expanding the conversation even on a Sunday morning. And I think that's been helpful as well.

Reuel Sample: What you're saying is Scripture can actually be exciting and fun to interact with. If we give our people a chance to do

Tom Vander Well: So, yes, yes. And I would also say one of the things that we did, you know, our pastor, Kevin and his wife lost the one of their sons, who was in his 20s, tragically passed away a few years ago and right after that. The two of them together, pastor and wife, did a series on some twenty three. As they're processing their own grief of walking through the valley of the shadow of death, they just kind of said, Well, let's let everyone in on this. And so as they and their grief walked us through that, one of the things that we did as a family of believers was the idea was to memorize Psalm, 23, everyone. So every week. We recited it together every week we set it. And by the time the series was over, I'll bet you just out of repetition. On a weekly basis, most people could have recited at least most of it by heart. I thought that was an interesting way to get it into the hearts of people

Reuel Sample: And memorizing portions of scripture is a whole other conversation. There is there is something that keeping phrases important phrases in your brain is also an essential

Tom Vander Well: Part of reading scripture. Absolutely. And when I was young and when I was first disciple as a teenager, that was one of the first things that I was taught was to memorize key verses. And to this day, I can, you know, recite, but that's part, what did I say earlier? It's part of the digesting of scripture. It's part of not just reading it, but eating it, consuming it, making it a part of you so that no matter what happens in my day. Holy Spirit immediately has access to that in my brain and spirit and can immediately go, Tom, remember that that you can trust God with all your heart. Lean not on your own understanding and all your ways. Acknowledge him. He will make your path straight. You're confused right now, but remember this this verse from Proverbs three, five and six that you memorized when you were a teenager and if I if that's not in me. Then how can the Holy Spirit bring that up and remind me and encourage me and help me have faith in what God has written? What that means is now there's a much larger, there's a much larger journey that I have to take to go, Oh, I'm confused. Maybe I need help from God's word, so I go to God's word and say, Where do I find it? So then I find a resource. Oh, let's Google Bible or scriptures about confusion. How long does that take to get to that scripture? But if I memorized it and it's inside of me, it's immediate access and all of a sudden that changes in the moment. How I feel about this, this confusion.

Reuel Sample: One of the things that I like that you're focusing on is we are reading scripture so that I can live a better life so that I can best serve instead of this whole cultural war idea that we memorize scripture. So we're good at sword drills so that we can throw the Bible over that, that big fence that we have built around our churches at the outside world.

Tom Vander Well: Yes. So I can I can fight the good fight against the evil that, you know, people that don't agree with me. And certainly, we are supposed to great fight the good fight of faith. But what is that fight about? It's about love conquering hate. It's about goodness conquering evil. It's about blessing those who curse us. And too often we get that mixed up.

Reuel Sample: It's about discipleship and connecting with people based upon the scripture that we read, loving them, talking to them and not throwing things at them. Like, here's here's here's a scripture that you should really, really read.

Tom Vander Well: And I mean, you're absolutely right. It's about transforming me so that I become the aroma of Christ, the light of Christ. And that transformation starts with with scripture, with understanding God's word. You know, once I'm a believer, once I have Christ in my heart, it's one of the four key things scripture, prayer, fellowship and being a good witness.

Reuel Sample: One of the things that you and I were talking about before our podcast was the ways that your church is using this interactive idea of scripture to develop teachers and preachers. Can you talk about that a little bit more?

Tom Vander Well: Yeah, I'm really excited about this. And part of it, Reuel comes out of my own experience. I really thought that I was going to be in pastoral ministry. God called me to preach when I was a young man, and I always thought, Well, what does that mean? It means I need to be a pastor. And then God made it very clear that no, I was going to be a very non-traditional proclaiming of God's word in that I was going to not be a pass from ministry, but I was going to be in business. And so I've always kind of had this a little bit of a rebellious streak against the institutional way the church for, you know, for 1500 years has prescribed who who ministers are what it means to be a minister rather than it being. We are all part of the royal priesthood. We've made it into this professional vocation in which you have to jump through certain hoops. And so for a long time, I believe, you know, read the scripture. Read First Corinthians. Everyone who is in Christ, the Holy Spirit gives to every believer. Gifts for the good of the body of Christ. Now those gifts aren't given when you reach a certain age. They're not given when you reach a certain educational level. They're not given, Oh, well, you have to go to seminary and get a mass master's degree in divinity in order to get the gift of preaching. That's not the way it works. The Holy Spirit gives the gifts to anyone, no matter of age, gender, educational, social status, economic status. And so my, you know, my local church has said we have people in our midst, people who are working the line at appellate court, or they're people who might be in a business or merchant here in town.

Tom Vander Well: Or it might be mom of four kids who has been given by Holy Spirit, the gift of preaching and teaching. So what we basically said is let's identify these people. Let's. Develop the gifts within them and give them an opportunity to use those gifts among us. And it's been so cool because now, rather than just the pastor being the one everyone listens to every Sunday, and he's the only voice anybody hears, and he is the revered, revered up on a pedestal in the spotlight. And you're, you know this as a pastor, he's just after a while. You just sort of feel like the spotlight is always on me, and I'm always the one that stands up. And when you stand up in the spotlight, you're the one with a target on your chest. Exactly. And so that's a heavy burden, and I don't think that was ever God's desire. That's why he designed the body system. And so we're just trying to get back to that and develop develop people with gifts. We had just this last Sunday, young man in his 20s who is actually in financial services, just starting his career. He's single and he preached his first sermon. It was fantastic. And no matter what happens, if he can develop this gift now, no matter where God leads him in life, he can be used by God in amazing ways, wherever he ends up.

Reuel Sample: We often forget that the two main figures of the New Testament, Peter and Paul, came from two different education levels two different social stratas. And yet they were absolutely essential to the development of the Christian Church.

Tom Vander Well: No question about it. And when you look at the resume of the original 12 that Jesus picked, it is, I mean, what a motley crew of misfits

Reuel Sample: Would you want? Would you want them on your board of elders or your board of Deacons or your church board?

Tom Vander Well: And even even as of the last night of Jesus time on Earth, they were still bickering with one another and they still didn't get what he'd try to teach him for three years, and yet he still left them with the job. And I just we forget that all the time.

Reuel Sample: So I think one of the things that you're saying is that pastors have to understand or should understand that their role as shepherd of their flock and their call to that. There's no question that that the New Testament says that the role of pastor is indeed a gift and a calling. But one of the things that pastors should do or think about is developing this, calling of teaching or preaching in their people. You know, seminary is

important. I think you're right. Seminary needs to be redefined and rethought through. But I think pastors should look at ways. How can I bring teachers and preachers out of the congregation?

Tom Vander Well: Right? And that's a good point. And I let me back up and I don't want people to hear what I'm not saying. I think that there there's, of course, a place where where education and where those who really feel called to full time pastoral ministry can develop those gifts and develop their knowledge. But I feel like so many times throughout history. What has happened is that we create a professional ministry class. And now all of a sudden, everyone who's sitting in the pew, everyone, all the other members of the body are relegated to less than status from a spiritual perspective. And we're off the hook. Well, that's what we pay our professional staff to do. And that was never God's paradigm. The paradigm was no, no, no, no. You everyone who follows me, develops their own spiritual gift, and everyone is a minister of the gospel in your work, in your community, in your home. And we need to get back to that. If I think if we're going to see the revival we need in this world and we're going to see the gospel continue to thrive.

Reuel Sample: Well, that is exactly the reason why I started the pastor's voice. I think the church has relegated itself to a minor role in culture, and we do so because we don't train our people. We don't bring up our people to preach, to teach, to interact with scripture in such a way as to develop their own worldview and to influence the world view of others. And pastors need to find ways to develop these skills in these gifts. And are people, of course.

Tom Vander Well: And I really do. I think that because of the internet, because of the technology revolution. In the same way, I'm going to put on my amateur historian hat here. But in the same way, the Reformation and the cataclysmic change in Christendom that happened after it was just shortly after the implementation of the invention of the printing press when everybody had access to scripture and in their own language. That's what precipitated this major spiritual shift that we call the Reformation. In the same way that the internet and the technology age is the same kind of fundamental shift in our world that I think is radically changing the church and the gospel and how it works in our modern culture. I think we're just on the cusp of it and we're going to have to

adjust if you try and stay stuck in your old institutional Christendom ways. I think you're going to you're not going to make it.

Reuel Sample: I agree. And I think we're, as you said, we're in the middle of a cultural and technological shift right now and how churches adapt, use, modify this. This technology and this culture view is going to determine their existence for the next century.

Tom Vander Well: Well, and it's going to be really interesting rule because I, you know, we're even having this conversation locally as well, because right now there are these conversations going on among the larger churches and, you know, powerful congregations here in the U.S. about the role technology is going to play and there's kind of two different camps. What I'm seeing is there's the camp that says we have to go whole hog into technology and become cutting edge innovators. And if you don't, we're going to we're going to lose out. Then there's the camp that says, No, we just need to stick with the tried and true fundamentals of being a local body and developing discipleship and things in technology doesn't have to be a part of it. And when I whenever I see things like this, I kind of go. The truth is always at the point of tension between the two extremes. I think there are places where technology we could go so quickly and fully down that road. We lose the baby with the bathwater, or we can completely deny it and miss out on the things that could really help us in what we need to do. I think there's a place in the middle there that we need to find.

Reuel Sample: And if church leaders, pastors, the elders or whatever the governing body is, are faithful in seeking the guidance of God. They'll find that balance.

Tom Vander Well: Absolutely. And I think that this shift and this is just my perspective, but I think the shift needs to continue to not focus on how many likes and views. And you know, again, going back to the stats and the numbers. And anybody who's listened to the rise and fall of Mars Hill podcast, that's kind of is a great example of why I say that. But I think that we need to get back to the local churches. Role is to make sure that the members of the local church are being. The light of Christ in our own local community and that we are ministering to our sphere of influence. Anything beyond that? That's gravy, man. If the Holy Spirit uses that, awesome, but we need to focus on. On our circle of influence and where the Holy Spirit leads from there.

