

On the Public Reading of Scripture in Worship

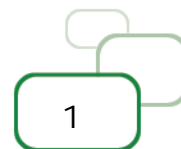


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Cal Habig

1 Timothy 4:13-*Until I come, devote yourself to the public reading of Scripture, to preaching and to teaching.*

Back when I was regularly judging oral interpretation presentations for Christian and home schools, I saw the huge difference that exists between reciting a passage and reading a passage. In recitation, the words are often rushed, monotone or sing-songy and there are often awkward phrasings and pauses. The goal of the student is to get through the text perfectly (i.e. without leaving part of it out). Reading, on the other hand, was a totally different animal. The material may very well be memorized (for school competitions, it was required). But you heard the meaning of the words. The reader communicated what was behind the words.

If students can/want to do that with “The Gettysburg Address” how much more should we do it with the public reading of scripture?

We think anyone who knows how to read should be able to read scripture out loud in front of a group of people without practice or instruction. . Not so! We cannot read the Word of God without interpretation.

Take the sentence: “Her name was Elizabeth.” The emphasis you put on the words communicates something differently each time:

“HER name was Elizabeth.”

“Her NAME was Elizabeth.”

“Her name WAS Elizabeth.”

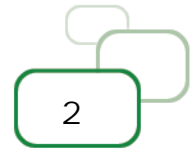
“Her name was ELIZABETH.”

Likewise when we read scripture with no inflection or with the wrong inflection, we likely will communicate things that we do not mean and which the text does not say!

Reading

Rules for preparation:

1. A variety of people should be asked to read scripture: men, women seniors youth, different ethnic and socio-economic groups. This will add a richness to the worship.



2. If you do not have time to prepare to read scripture, please decline to do so. Reading the Word of God to God's people is an important ministry. It takes preparation.
3. Early in the week begin to pray about the text. Ask god to help you in your reading and to help you understand more fully what is being read.
4. You will probably be told what version of scripture to use. If not use a current language version of the Bible. Do not use the King James or other older versions unless specifically asked to do so. Likewise, don't use paraphrase such as The (original) Living Bible, The Message or others that paraphrase what the scriptures say instead of translating what they say. If you do not know what the difference is, ask the one who will be preaching for advice. Good choices are: TNIV, NIV or NRSV.
5. Read the text silently and OUT-LOUD at least thirty times before public reading. By this time, you will have virtually memorized most of the passages. Practicing it out loud is essential. Phrasing and inflection can only be prepared by speaking it out-loud. Many times I have read a text out loud from the pulpit for the first time (I have read it silently many times in my office) and suddenly realized I neglected or misread an important part of the text that should be reflected in my sermon and it is not!
6. Know the pronunciation of all the names and places. A good Bible dictionary (usually available in a church library) can help with this.
7. You don't need to do a complete exegesis, but you must know the point of the text & how it fits into the context of the larger scripture from which it is drawn. Consult commentaries if necessary, or ask the one who is to be preaching.

Rules for the body itself.

1. Keep your hands on the Bible. Hold the Bible up at least chest high. DO NOT lay it on the lectern and read down into the pages of the book. Hold the book high with one hand. With the other hand you can keep your place in the text. Read OUT so your voice projects. This important technique was taught me by the Fuqua School of Christian Communication at the Crystal Cathedral almost two decades and has always served me well.
2. Unless you're reading from the law or epistolary, there will be some kind of action happening. Imagine a window at the back of the auditorium and all of the action happening through that window. Resist the temptation to bring the action up on stage with you. If you do that, you'll wind up looking at characters that don't exist right beside you. However, if you see it through the imaginary window at the back of the auditorium, chances are your audience is going to see that scene as well.

3. Most of the characters in the reading are going to have a specific place on the back wall through that window. Keep the characters separated, and let them exist about six inches above the heads of the people in the back row.

4. When you're quoting someone, always look at the person to whom you are speaking. For example, if David is speaking to Saul and I'm reading David's line, then look at Saul near the center of the back wall out six inches above the heads of the people on the back row.

5. Maintain as much audience eye contact as possible. It might sound like we would constantly be looking at the scene we're creating. But that's not the case. At every opportunity I'm going to come back to my audience and engage them in eye contact. The strongest communication tools you have at your disposal are your eyes.

There are particular times we want to look at the audience: during the introduction, during shifts between scenes, and when we read important lines. If there is a line that says, "These things were written to you that you might know that Jesus is the Christ," I want to look right into the eyes of the audience. A fourth time to look at your audience is when you want to associate them with good people during the reading. If I have a chance to associate my audience with those to whom Paul is writing in a positive vein, then I will do that.

Looking at an imaginary scene

There are four scenarios when you want to look at the image about which the scripture is speaking.

- a. Look at the character being addressed when one is talking to another. If I am David addressing Saul, I'm going to look at Saul.
- b. Look at the image you're creating when there is intense action. If you're reading from Ezekiel 1, describing wheels within wheels, then you want to focus on that image. It will help them if they see us see something specific on that back wall. That's the power of imaginative connectedness.
- c. The third time to look at the image through the window is when the Word is describing a wonderful vision. In Isaiah 6, when I'm looking at the Lord in prayer, I want to make sure that I am addressing God. Now, there is a place to address God that's not too high and not too low in terms of where our gaze is fixed. The usual place in an auditorium is where the ceiling meets the wall. If you go higher than that, then the audience will be looking up your nostrils. We want to look at a place on the wall where they can still see our facial response and respond in an appropriate way.
- d. Look at the image when there is an evil influence or a crowd that I don't want to associate with my audience. I'm going to place those negative

influences on the left side of the scene through the window. If I don't, and I look at some one in the audience, that person may feel that the pastor is associating the evil character with him.

6. Try not to look at the text as you're reading it aloud; you will virtually have the text memorized, after all. The only time we should look down is for a strategic reason. You want to give the people a little break, a little time to reflect, or you want to shift images. When you glance down you can grab the next block of text just by looking at the first word in that block. and maintain eye contact with that individual, then everybody else in the audience will feel as if they are being addressed individually.

7. Speak as naturally as you can. You need not change your voice dramatically to portray a character that is foreign to you. What's important is that you interpret what you read in your natural voice in a way that's going to be clear, interesting, accurate and relevant.

8. Concentrate on your images. If you see them, chances are your audience is going to them. If you don't see the images, they won't either. Anybody can stand in front of an audience and articulate words on a page. But everybody has the discipline to look at the words on the page, create the image in their own mind and relate that image to people. The only way to do that is to concentrate on the image that you have created in rehearsal.

9. Take your time. Don't rush the words. Give us time to see the images. Give us time to hear the words. Let it soak in. Don't rush through God's Word. When I was doing a unit of Clinical Pastoral Education at Wesley Medical Center in Wichita Kansas back in the 1980's John Kuenneth was my supervisor. Whenever John read scripture (morning devotions, etc) he read it incredibly slowly. At first I got impatient and was thinking "Come on...get on with it!" But as it went on, I realized the benefit of reading scripture slowly & making generous pauses. It allowed the Word to sink in & allowed me time to ruminate on the text as it was read.

10. See the image. Here's the principle. See it before you say it. Hear it before you report it. If there is a loud sound, you the reader hear it first, and then you tell the audience what you're seeing as you look at it. Once you've established the image, then come back through that window and look at the audience telling them the wonderful or horrific image you have just perceived.

11. When you make mistakes (and you will at some point) simply stop & re-read the verse. It is not necessary to say "Sorry" or "Excuse me." Simply continue reading knowing that God expects faithful worship, not perfect worship. If you accept that it is OK to make mistakes, this will lessen your nervousness.

What about the close?

1. On the last verse slow your pace down and put a cap on the reading. That communicates that we're near the end of the reading and getting ready to stop. Watch how news anchors end stories. They gradually slow down, coasting to a stop so the ending doesn't feel abrupt.
2. If you are the assigned reader and someone else is preaching, try closing the Bible at the same time as you look at your audience. Closing the Bible puts a visual cap on the reading, so people know that now the reading is done. Don't rush off the stage once you've closed the Bible.
3. Confidently stride back to your seat carrying the Bible close to the body. Be sure to turn around and face the audience prior to seating yourself.

Some of the material in this e-book was drawn from a workshop done at First Presbyterian Church of Schoolcraft, MI, a resource in my files entitled, "Worship Reader (Lector) Site [<http://www.jameslove.com/lectors.html>] and in an interview with Reg Grant on PreachingToday.com.