

Reading Scripture in Public Worship

The public reading of Scripture should be clear, audible, and attentive to the meanings of the text, and should be entrusted to those prepared for such reading. (Directory for Worship, W-2.2006)

These guidelines are provided for pastors, elders, deacons, and others who are invited to read Scripture aloud in public worship. It is vital to the proclamation of the gospel that readers be well prepared for this important task. While anyone may read Scripture in worship, it is especially appropriate for deacons to do so (G-6.0402); church tradition holds this to be a significant aspect of diaconal ministry, along with service to the poor, sick, and suffering.

The centrality of Scripture. Consider the profound significance of what you have been called to do! The Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) Directory for Worship says:

The church confesses the Scriptures to be the Word of God written, witnessing to God's self-revelation. Where that Word is read and proclaimed, Jesus Christ the Living Word is present by the inward witness of the Holy Spirit. For this reason the reading, hearing, preaching, and confessing of the Word are central to Christian worship. (W-2.2001)

Those who read Scripture in public worship give voice to the Word of God — testifying to what God has done and is doing in the world, and bearing witness to the good news of the gospel. Furthermore, by the gift of the Holy Spirit, Christ himself is present in the proclamation of the Word; the reader of Scripture has an integral part to play in this awesome event. This is a great honor and tremendous responsibility, demanding deep reverence and appropriate preparation.

Preparing to read. When you learn that you have been asked to read Scripture in public worship, set aside time to read the Scripture passage(s) several times, carefully and prayerfully attentive to the meaning of the text and how the Spirit might be speaking through these words. (Worship planners, please note: this means that in most circumstances it is inappropriate to call on readers at the last minute or recruit them just before the service begins.) Find out what translation of the Bible your congregation typically uses; different translations can make a difference in how Scripture is received and understood. Ask a pastor, elder, or teacher about the pronunciation of unfamiliar words. Be sure to read the passages before and after the assigned lesson, so that you understand the larger context of the reading. (In some cases, it is difficult to tell who or what is the subject of the passage without reading the previous section.) You may also wish to consult a study Bible or commentary on the passage; study Bibles and sets of commentaries are often found in church libraries. Again, above all, read carefully, thoughtfully, prayerfully — this is the Word of God.

Practice aloud. When you are familiar with the passage(s) you will read, find an opportunity to practice reading aloud. Ideally, this should take place in the sanctuary or worship space where you will be reading Scripture, and under similar circumstances (using the same Bible and lighting, and with amplification, as applicable). This is especially important the first time you prepare to read Scripture in worship. If possible, ask a pastor, elder, teacher, or family member to listen to you read and offer constructive feedback. Here are some good questions to ask the one listening:

- (1) Was the reading audible? Could you understand every word?
- (2) Was the message clear? Did the sense of the passage come through?
- (3) How was the pacing and energy? Too slow or too rushed? Boring or overly dramatic?
- (4) Were you engaged in the reading? Did the Scripture seem important?
- (5) What message did you hear? Did you feel you could trust or believe it?

Pray before reading. When the time comes to read in worship, you may privately ask God to indwell and enliven your speech so that, by the gift of the Holy Spirit, Christ will be truly present and the gospel will be fully proclaimed. Here are two simple prayers from the psalms — easily memorized — that will serve this purpose:

Let the words of my mouth
and the meditation of my heart
be acceptable to you, O Lord,
my rock and my redeemer. (Psalm 19:14)

O Lord, open my lips,
and my mouth will proclaim your praise. (Psalm 51:15)

In Presbyterian / Reformed worship, it is also customary to speak aloud a Prayer for Illumination before the reading of Scripture in public worship, asking the Holy Spirit to enlighten our understanding, instruct our response, and empower our living of the Word. As the Directory for Worship describes:

In preparation for the reading, proclaiming, and hearing of God's Word, a prayer seeking the illumination of the Holy Spirit is appropriately offered. (W-3.3401)

Leading the Prayer for Illumination may or may not be part of your reading assignment; inquire with the pastor or another worship planner. A number of Prayers for Illumination can be found in the Presbyterian *Book of Common Worship* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1993); here is one common example:

Lord, open our hearts and minds
by the power of your Holy Spirit,
that as these scriptures are read
and your Word is proclaimed
we may hear with joy what you say to us today.

Read from the church's Bible. Readers are often tempted to use a familiar Bible from home, or loose-leaf pages with the text enlarged. While this is occasionally necessary (as in the case of a reader with impaired vision), it is preferable to use a large, common Bible belonging to the church. This practice communicates that Scripture is a shared story and a common Word, one that stands at the center of the church's life and liturgy. Using a large and dignified looking Bible also more adequately conveys the weight and significance of God's Word in Christian life — not a disposable thing (like a loose scrap of paper), but an enduring inheritance, a priceless treasure, a source of wisdom and guidance for the ages. If circumstances require a separate sheet of paper, it may be discretely placed in the church's Bible.

Framing the reading. Begin the reading by stating its source in Scripture; for example:

A reading from the book of Genesis.

Paul's letter to the church at Rome.

The gospel according to Matthew.

If the Scripture passages are listed in the bulletin or on a projection screen, one generally doesn't need to cite chapter and verse; a general orientation to the place of the reading in the Bible is enough. You may also include an invitation to the congregation such as:

Listen for the Word of God.

or

Hear what the Spirit is saying to the church. (Revelation 2:7)

It is occasionally helpful to provide a brief remark about the context of the Scripture lesson; consult with the pastor or worship planner about this, so that such comments will be in accordance with the sermon and other elements of the service. In any case, long introductions are unnecessary; a sentence or two should suffice. At the conclusion of the reading you may say:

The Word of the Lord.
Thanks be to God.

Holy Wisdom, Holy Word.
Thanks be to God.

Filling in the blanks. Depending on how the passage begins, one must sometimes replace pronouns with proper nouns, fill in missing information, and eliminate transitional words or phrases. This kind of editing must be done with great care, of course, relying on the larger context of the Scripture lesson. For instance, in the case of Mark 4:35-41, the gospel reading for the Twelfth Sunday in Ordinary Time, Year B, the first verse reads:

On that day, when evening had come, he said to them, “Let us go across to the other side.”

Supplying missing information and dropping the transitional phrase, that verse might read:

[W]hen evening had come, [Jesus] said to [his disciples], “Let us go across to the other side [of the sea].”

Or in the case of John 10:11-18, the gospel reading for the Fourth Sunday of Easter, Year B, the first verse reads:

“I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep.”

Here it would be helpful to indicate the one speaking, as follows:

[Jesus said:] “I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep.”

Find your voice. Effective Scripture reading — that is, reading that conveys the real promise, challenge, wonder, and joy of the gospel — requires a certain spirit or quality of presentation. (This is not to say that there is only one correct approach, of course; different liturgical settings may require different styles of reading.) Good vocal presentation embodies the *Scripture’s* voice in such a way that listeners can be caught up in what the Bible is saying. It is marked by sincerity, simplicity, authenticity, humility, clarity, and conviction. By way of contrast, consider a few common pitfalls. Some readers err on the side of a dry, boring, or even disinterested speaking style that may cause listeners to doubt the sincerity of the one reading — or worse, question the significance of the Scripture. Other readers are overly dramatic, speaking with over-the-top energy and inflection that only draws attention to the reader and detracts from the meaning of the text itself. (For instance, it is unnecessary and distracting to use different voices for different characters in the story.) Some readers speak in a stuffy “stained glass” voice, perhaps in an affected accent or with exaggerated diction that comes across as pretentiousness or insincerity. (The radio announcer or television anchor voice is a variation on this problem.) Other readers can be too casual or chatty in their presentation, giving the impression that the Scripture is not to be taken very seriously.

Pace yourself. Don’t rush through the reading of Scripture. A common mistake is to speak too quickly, not allowing space and time for the meaning of the text to sink in, or for the listeners to consider the words they are hearing. At the same time, don’t read so slowly that the all life and energy drain out of the words. Don’t hurry to or from the lectern, pulpit, or aisle where the reading takes place; go calmly, confidently, and deliberately. And don’t be afraid of silence. A brief period of quiet contemplation (perhaps before but especially after the reading) can deepen the congregation’s understanding and experience of the Scripture.

Location, location, location. Consider carefully the worship space where you are speaking. A cavernous cathedral or soaring sanctuary may require a louder voice and a bigger presence in order to communicate clearly and effectively. On the other hand, a large cathedral voice would be completely inappropriate (and even off-putting) in an intimate chapel or small group gathering. In any space, of course, the availability of amplification and other acoustic features must be taken into account. This is one reason why it's so important to practice aloud in a new space, and with someone who can offer constructive feedback.

Content and context. Of course, different passages of Scripture will demand different approaches to reading. A psalm of thanksgiving or praise should be energetic and exuberant, with a smile in the voice. A prophetic warning or cry of lament has a more serious or somber tone. Narrative texts need particular attention to the plot and pacing of the story. Different kinds of worship services also require different speaking styles. A Scripture passage at a funeral or evening prayer is spoken in a different way than a Bible reading at an outdoor conference or youth event. Use common sense and good judgment, adjusting your approach accordingly.

Heart, soul, mind, and strength. Good Scripture reading isn't simply the product of a well trained voice; it takes heart, soul, mind, and strength. Let your reading of Scripture be infused with love for the people of God. Remember that the reading of Scripture is a spiritual practice or discipline, and that your breath is supported by the Holy Spirit's power. Read with your mind engaged, thinking deeply about the meaning of the words as you say them. And read with your whole body — stand up straight, plant your feet firmly, breathe deeply, and make eye contact as much as possible.

Let God's Word speak. The point is to let the Word of God speak through you, and — insofar as you can — get out of the way and allow that to happen. Imagine that you have some important news to share with a dear friend or member of your family. Imagine that this message comes from one with great power and authority, and that it has been entrusted to you to share. Imagine that this good news has life-saving, world-changing implications. That, after all, is what readers of Scripture are called to do: to share the living, life-giving Word of God with sisters and brothers in Christ, who will in turn go forth to share this gospel with all the world.

David Gambrell, Associate for Worship
Office of Theology and Worship, Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)