

The Living Word: Restoring Life to Scripture Reading In Worship

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The Reformation succeeded in bringing scripture to life in the hearing of God's people. Not only was it read in the vernacular in Protestant churches, it was placed in the hands of believers to read and interpret on their own. For centuries, now, Christians have been free to read the Bible privately, to read it in family and small group devotion, and to hear it read publicly in Protestant and Catholic worship. But, in many instances, the publicly read Word is still regarded as a distant, impenetrable thing. While not read in Latin, it is often still spoken in tones that are without meaning or power. Lay readers shy from interpreting the text for others, assuming that they do not have the skills to bring proper meaning to a text through their presentation. Even clergy are tempted to read the text in a lifeless way, assuming that the Spirit of God needs no help in bringing meaning as long as people listen. But, why should people listen when the Word is rendered woodenly or without preparation? Oddly, we don't usually apply this same reasoning to lesser texts. Listen to any adult read a story to children, for example. The reader instinctively knows that adding emphasis and expressiveness makes for a lively reading and a meaningful hearing. Our task in worship is to restore life to God's Word when it is read aloud. It is a living Word; it should be read as if it mattered.

The art of bringing printed material to life through public reading is known as oral interpretation of literature. The skills of oral interpreters include techniques relating to textual study and interpretation, embodiment, and articulation (what some call emphasis, or vocalics).

The public reading of scripture in worship depends on these techniques in order to bring the reading to life in the hearing of God's people. Some will argue that a reading should be spoken evenly and without human interpretation. The assumption is that God will allow each person to interpret for him or herself the meaning of the text when it is intelligibly articulated. The fact is that every reading of a text *is* an interpretation of it. To read the text in a clear, but flat manner is not to allow it to speak for itself. An even, unexciting reading of a text simply indicates that the reader does not find the text interesting. The listener receives the unmistakable impression that God's Word is not a lively, vital word for today. The message given and received is that the Word of God is boring; not worth the reader's time to prepare well; not worth the listener's time to hear. Because reading scripture is, however, a principal means of proclaiming the Word of the Living God, it both

deserves our best interpretive and performance skills, and it *requires* their use so that the Word will be heard clearly and understood by all in the worship assembly.

Study and Interpretation of the Text

In order to interpret a text in a meaningful way, the reader needs to study it and come to an understanding of its meaning. Some texts are straightforward and take little research. A psalm or a parable might stand on its own. Other readings are complex and require greater investigation. Historical passages or theological material from the epistles may require deeper study. Those with skills in exegesis and use of biblical languages can undertake a thorough investigation of the text in preparation for public reading. Others may consult Bible commentaries in order to gain a sense of the background and meaning of a text. When the research is done, the reader will have a sense of how the text needs to be interpreted. Choices need to be made, for there are many ways to interpret a text. But, rather than choose no means of interpretation, the reader is called upon to select a fitting means of interpretation, one borne of careful study of the text. Readers can gain confidence in their interpretive work as they pray over the text, asking God to guide their interpretation and expression of the reading in worship. Generally, the reader will need to investigate these kinds of things in preparation of a text for meaningful interpretation:

- What comes before and after the assigned reading? How does this reading relate to its literary placement?
- Who is the author of the material and what circumstances gave rise to its being written?
- What is the overall theme the biblical author addresses in the book and how does this reading relate to it?
- What are the elements that need to be looked up (place names, people, events, related passages, etc.) in order for the reader to understand the material of the assigned reading?
- To whom was the reading originally addressed?
- What is the tone of the material? Does the tone change?

- What is the direction of communication (is the textual voice spoken as if to a church community? to the nations? to God? etc.)? Does the direction of speech change (as from a word of prayer to a statement of declaration)?

Introducing a Scripture Reading: Some readings require an introduction in order for listeners to understand who is speaking and what is being discussed. Selections from the writings of Paul, for example, usually require a brief explanation before they are read. Other readings, such as psalms and stories about Jesus, may need little or no introduction. Readers should take care to craft introductions that are clear and brief. Generally, one or two sentences are sufficient to provide a meaningful background for the hearing of a lesson. Introductions should not interpret the material, but set the stage for an interpretive reading.

Embodying the Reading

The reading of a text in worship presupposes that the material has been carefully prepared for clear and meaningful interpretation. But, it also allows for the realization that the material has not been memorized. For memorized enactments of a text, much more use of the body and movement is expected. Textual recitations may call for multiple gestures, movement of the entire body for emphasis, even walking about the stage or chancel. Those who *read* biblical texts are not expected to move from behind a lectern or to wander about during the lesson's presentation. They need only be concerned about the following aspects of embodiment: breath control, vocal production, and the use of eyes, face, and hands.

Breath control: The reader should generally stand erect either holding the Bible or placing it on a lectern. Good posture is essential for gaining breath support. (Note that reading from a Bible is a stronger symbol of the importance of the Word in worship than reading from a paper, a bulletin, or a screen.)

Breathing is something taken for granted. We do it thousands of times a day as an involuntary act. But, those performing in public worship ministries need to consider it more carefully. Breath is drawn when the abdominal muscles relax outward. The voice gains air support as the abdominal muscles press inward to create a flow of air through the lungs and out the mouth. The articulation of abdominal muscles is the key to "breathing through the diaphragm." The diaphragm is a muscle

that lies beneath the lungs and is difficult to manipulate on its own. But, it comes into play in breathing when the abdominal muscles are employed. Relaxing the abdominal muscles outward drops the diaphragm and allows the lungs to be filled with air. Pressing inward with the abdominal muscles raises the diaphragm against the lungs, pushing air outward in a controlled manner. Filling the lungs with ample breaths of air allows for the voice to speak in the volume and tone that a reading requires.

While erect posture is generally called for in reading scripture, there are times when the tone of the reading calls for another posture. For example, in reading a lament psalm, one might choose to bend forward slightly to visually indicate a tone of despair. Regardless of stance, attention to breath control is key to vocal production.

Vocal Production: Fueled by the breath, the voice creates vowel sounds that are separated and articulated by consonants. The reader should remember that the sound of the voice carries on the vowel sounds, along with a few voiced consonants like l, m, n, r, v, ng, w, y, and z,. Vowel sounds carry best when they are allowed to resonate within the throat and vocal chamber. It should be remembered that the sound emitted by the vocal chords (folds) is small and inarticulate. Its strength and quality come through the way that the sound is shaped while traveling through the body's mass and cavities. A closed, reduced vocal cavity creates a small, pinched sound. An open, relaxed vocal cavity creates a round tone that is pleasant and appropriate to most public speech. It is this tone that can be projected best in places where there is no electronic amplification of the voice. To achieve this quality, note how the mouth opens, both in the front and in the interior, when one is surprised. Act surprised and say the word "Oh!" This will give you the sense of the open-throated sound that good speech requires.

Oral interpretation of scripture requires that the reader return the written word to life through the voice. In normal speech, we naturally know how to pace our words, vary our pitch, and cast tones that articulate our intended meanings. The scripture reader needs to work with the words and phrases of a text until he or she knows how to incorporate the natural skills of vocal inflection, pause, pace, and use of tone to capture a meaningful interpretation. This is achieved in practice through trial and error as the reader assesses different ways of articulating each sentence, thought, or phrase. As a means of practicing this skill, try speaking the following sentence four times. Each time, emphasize a different word; take note of how the meaning changes as the emphasis shifts. "I don't know the man!"

Once an interpretation is settled upon, the reader should find a means by which to mark the reading with cues to guide its oral presentation. Whether you actually make marks in your Bible or print the text on a page that can be cued for performance, it is useful both to experiment with phrasing and emphasis, and to mark the text as a performance script. In keeping with the suggestion above about reading from an actual Bible, a printed and cued page of text can be placed discretely within the Bible as it is held. Its presence still stands as a strong symbol.

In using the voice, the following issues should be kept in mind:

- Vowel sounds should be round and natural; they carry the words.
- Emphasis can be achieved in a word when a vowel sound is elongated and allowed to resonate.
- All formal public speech, and especially the Word of God, requires that words be fully formed and articulated. Say, for example, “going” instead of “goin’,” or “let me,” instead of “lemme.”
- Stressing consonants in a phrase allows for a percussive effect that indicates action, tension, or energy.
- Pitch and tone should vary in public reading in the same way that it does in ordinary conversation. These elements should be practiced with every reading so as to capture what is necessary for meaningful interpretation. Though we typically know to do this in ordinary conversation, we often place the stress on the wrong words or syllables when we read in public.
- Pitch and tone should not fall into predictable patterns, creating a sing-song effect.
- The reader should become familiar with proper use of electronic amplification systems when they are available. When such tools are unavailable, the speaker should project his or her voice and speak distinctly enough for all to hear. The speaker should remember to enunciate, articulate, and exaggerate speech when projecting to a large room. Saying these

three words crisply is a common technique for practicing clear expression (Say “Enunciate! Articulate! Exaggerate!” and repeat as necessary to limber the mouth and tongue for clear speech.)

Use of Eyes: Because the reader of a text does not have it memorized, he or she is not expected to keep constant eye contact with the audience. Nor should the reader feel the need to keep frequent eye contact with the all parts of the audience. This creates a bobbing head effect that does not add meaning to the reading. The reader can use the eyes in three ways. The first is, to look down at the written material, both to see the printed words and to observe those visual cues added during practice which remind the reader of interpretive choices. The second way to use the eyes in reading is to cast them in the direction of the audience. While many readers look up and down frequently, as if eye contact with the audience were an implied regulation in oral interpretation, it can be done sparingly and thoughtfully. There are two purposes accomplished by looking at the audience during a reading. The first is to gauge audience response to the reading. You may determine the need to speak more slowly, or loudly, depending on what is observed while looking at the audience. The second purpose is to use a glance to add emphasis to a phrase or sentence. For example, one might choose to look up at the audience at those places in the text where visual contact with the listeners would highlight certain words. It is easy to imagine, for example, how powerful it will be during a reading from a Passion narrative, for the reader to shout Peter’s third denial of Jesus, while looking directly at the audience: “I do not know the man!” When employing this technique, the reader needs to rehearse the words so they can be delivered without a clumsy glance back at the written material.

The third way to use the eyes in reading is to cast a glance off into space as if to suggest an idea or object for reflection. The audience will see the distant image as if it is projected there by the reader and imagine what the speaker is imagining. This technique is something we do regularly in ordinary speech. We do not simply stare unwaveringly at our listeners. We look about and imagine ideas as if they were out in space before us. Think of how this technique might work if you were reading the opening lines of Psalm 121. “I lift up my eyes to the hills,” you might say as you glance upward, above your audience. Then, looking directly at them, you continue: “From where is my help to come?”

Use of Gesture: We typically think of hands when we speak of gesture. But, facial gesture is more important in reading scripture than hand gesture. While adjusting one's posture can help create an appropriate mood, most of the visual mood of a reading is captured by the look of the reader's face. The face, being visible from a long distance, provides a clue to meaning in oral communication. It should match the tone and mood of the reading as your appearance shifts according to your interpretation of the text. Readers should practice facial gestures to capture delight, anger, doubt, despair, gratitude, and so forth.

The use of hand gestures in reading a text is to be discouraged. While not strictly wrong, it is unnecessary and often distracting in a reading. While there is a strong expectation for the use of hand gestures and body movement when a text is enacted from memory, such expectations do not apply when a text is read.

Articulation of the Reading

In addition to the attention given to the careful articulation of words in a reading, the reader needs to consider other aspects of oral interpretation that provide emphasis and meaning. They include the use of phrasing, pause, pace, inflection, and volume.

Phrasing: Phrasing is achieved in a reading through the use of pause, inflection, pace, and emphasis. A guide to the use of pause in a reading is punctuation. Beware, however, because punctuation can be a faulty guide for oral interpretation. The original biblical languages did not use punctuation to guide the readers of ancient texts. Such markings are common in today's Bibles; they are added to provide clues to meaning as a text is read silently. The reader needs to know, however, that these markings function differently for silent reading than for reading aloud. Because we don't have pause to articulate meaning in silent reading, we need grammatical marks, like commas. But, while commas make things clear for the eye, they can confuse the ear. A common mistake, for example, is to pause at every comma. Readers should practice reading aloud so as to determine how to separate ideas, images, and phrases according to sense units. Pausing at every comma usually makes for a choppy delivery.

Emphasis also creates a sense of proper phrasing. Within each sense unit, the reader needs to determine which words to emphasize and how to vary pitch and pace to achieve meaning.

Pause: The use of pause in reading and public address achieves two effects: it gives the listener time to process what has been said, and it allows the listener to prepare for that which follows. Inexperienced speakers and readers often use pause too infrequently and too briefly. A long pause is needed when the scene or mood changes in a reading. Carefully placed pauses, even if frequent, add meaning to the delivery of a reading.

Pauses are also useful to add emphasis to words and phrases, to indicate changes of scene or attitude, and to cast impressions (like doubt or inquisitiveness).

Pace: The pace of a reading needs to be appropriate to the material. Scenes of action, for example, are best delivered quickly, with emphasis on short words and percussive consonants. Pastoral material is better delivered at a slow pace with pauses for reflection. In addition to pause, the pace of a reading can be regulated by the careful articulation of the syllables in each word. Readings sound hurried when pause is eliminated and when words are slurred or rushed together.

Inflection: The natural use of the human voice involves a high degree of pitch fluctuation. Few people speak in a flat or monotone delivery during normal conversation. This should be especially avoided in public reading of scripture. It signals to the listeners that the reading is uninteresting and unimportant. Readers should practice bringing the natural range of their vocal musicality into their readings.

Volume: While readers always need to speak audibly, variations in volume can add meaning or emphasis to words and phrases in a reading. A strong effect can be achieved when a person suddenly speaks in a volume that is different from the general volume in a reading. For example, a shout is emphatic when it comes as a surprise. Likewise, a sudden whisper can often be more effective than a loud tone.