

Bible Reading Guidelines

by Allister Lane, June 2011

Reading Scripture in public worship is the high point of our worship as we attend to God's Word for us. Reading Scripture publicly is different than reading in private; it is itself an act of worship.

Scripture that is read well can prepare listeners to hear more, while Scripture read poorly can move people to reach for their bulletins to see what is coming next. The Bible Reader declares the good news together with the preacher.



Here are some tips for reading Scripture.

If you are reading from the lectern Bible, make sure you bookmark the passages before the service. You may want to print the reading in larger type so that it is easier to read. This also allows you to highlight the passage, underlining important words or phrases for emphasis. Please use the same version as the lectern Bible (NRSV) which is available on <http://bible.oremus.org/>. If you do print out the reading, please paper clip the page/s into the lectern Bible. This prevents the papers from being a distraction to the reading, and confirms the proper context of the reading within the rest of the Scriptures.

Read through the day before. Surprisingly, some won't do this, and yet reading out loud is very different from reading silently. Hearing the flow will help you identify the words and phrases that can more difficult to speak out loud and need more practice. Read it a number of times, correcting problem areas as you go along.

If you come across words you do not know how to pronounce (and the Bible usually has at least one in every passage!) here is a great website that plays out loud many of those tricky words using the correct pronunciation: <http://netministries.org/Bbasics/BBwords.htm>

Experiment with changing the speed of your reading. Reading faster or slower can create emphasis or tension that helps convey the meaning of what you are reading. Even longer pauses can be important for the impact of a passage.

Experiment with your intonation and emphasis. To convey the meaning of the passage you need to know the meaning. Use proper dynamics that portray the message. If the section demands quiet, sombre tones then use them. If this is a passage expressing celebration then by all means reflect that in your reading. Stephen Webb suggests a balanced approach:

Good readers try not to deflect attention from the Bible with too much variation in cadence and pitch. They use their regular voices, yet they heighten the sense of purpose in their tone. They speak plainly but seriously, as if the Word of God were written especially for each listener, and each listener will know what to do with it when the reading is done.¹

¹ Stephen H. Webb, *The Divine Voice: Christian Proclamation and the Theology of Sound* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2004), p210.

Speak clearly. Our aim should be to speak distinctly. That usually means slowing down a bit, especially when we are nervous. Reading is different from singing. When singing the vowel sounds are what makes beautiful music. The spoken word needs more emphasis on consonants. The tendency is for us to run words together. Our brains are amazing in that most of the time we can fit the breaks and consonants in places they belong even when they have not been spoken distinctly. That is why it is so difficult for us to learn a foreign language; we don't know when people are jamming words together (and remember, some in our congregation have English as their second language).

The microphone will pick your voice up fine if you simply face directly at it. The noise made if the microphone is knocked is very distracting, particularly those using the hearing aid 'loop', so please take care when turning pages.

Accept that, at some point, you will make a mistake. Everyone stumbles over some words at times. When you make a mistake, simply pause, say it correctly and continue reading. There is no need to joke about it, to make a big deal out of it or to be embarrassed by it. We read the Bible not as professional performers, but as members of the body.

It is important to conclude well. At the end of the passage, pause briefly before reading the words affixed to the lectern: *"This is the Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God."*

This is a declaration of our conviction that the Word of God has been proclaimed, so ensure you maintain your voice right through to the last word without turning to walk away before finished – as though you want to get away from the lectern as quick as you can!

Finally, **thank you** for reading God's Word, and doing so with dedication to this ministry. The reading of God's Word is central to our understanding of worship – it is the declaration of the good news². Confident reading of the Bible helps people not to "zone out" during the readings. When you do your part to present the readings in a purposeful way it will help people to engage in this form of worship, listening actively not passively; discerning what God is saying.

*With grateful thanks to the ideas 'borrowed' from Rev Mark Tremblay,
for The Elders Institute of Canada.*

² There are two other key moments in worship when the full weight of the gospel is proclaimed: The Assurance of Forgiveness and the Benediction.