

How to read the Bible in church

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Why is it that we cringe and complain about the music in our services, but we hardly bat an eyelid when the Bible is poorly read, or even misread? And why are we so selective about who sings and plays music at church, yet we seem to let just anyone do the Bible reading? In this short article, Simon Roberts takes a brief look at the skill of reading the Bible aloud in church.

So you thought your job was simply to read the Bible passage. That's easy—you check you have the right passage, you look over it a couple of times and then you get up and read. Surely that's all there is to it. But I'd like to suggest that there's a whole lot more to reading the Bible than simply standing up front and saying the words. Just as we are no better off if we haven't understood the Scriptures we have *read*, we've wasted our time reading the Bible aloud if no-one has understood what we have *said*.

Here are three big ideas for people who read the Bible aloud:

- your job is to communicate, not just read;
- you can't communicate what you don't understand;
- meaning is not conveyed through words alone.

Your job is to communicate, not just read

It's possible to read every word from a passage perfectly and clearly, but in such a way that no-one understands what the passage actually means. Worse, it's also possible to read a passage in a way that gives people a wrong understanding of the Scriptures. Take 1 Corinthians 14:26: "What then shall we say, brothers? When you come together, everyone has a hymn, or a word of instruction, a revelation, a tongue or an interpretation. All of these

must be done for the strengthening of the church" (NIV). I once heard this verse read with the emphasis as, "All of these **must be done** ...". The speaker was trying to convince me that Scripture commanded us to speak in tongues and that, if we didn't do so, the church would not be strengthened! Thankfully, every other time I've heard this verse read, the emphasis has been where it should be—on the words, "for the strengthening of the church". Reading the same words differently completely changes their meaning. Your job as a Bible reader is not to 'just read the words' but to communicate what those words mean.

You can't communicate what you don't understand

If you're going to communicate the meaning of a passage, it stands to reason that you have to understand the passage yourself. Before you even think about getting up to read the Bible in church, you need to have a sound understanding of your allotted passage. You will need to have answered questions such as, "What type of writing is this—narrative, law, prophecy, poetry, letter? Are there any words that seem particularly important? Are there any significant connecting words? What is the main point of the passage? How does the writer make that point—with logical argument, humour, metaphor or irony?" Comparing a couple of good translations will help stop you

making major mistakes in interpretation. Once you know what a passage means—what it's getting at and where it is going—then you can start to think about how to read it aloud.

Meaning is not conveyed through words alone

This brings us to the third big idea: meaning is not conveyed through words alone. We saw this in my earlier example from 1 Corinthians. Having understood the meaning of the passage, you need to use your voice to communicate that meaning. The way you do this is by appropriate phrasing (pause and pace) and emphasis (pitch and volume).

Pausing breaks the text into meaningful phrases. Romans 1:7 is a good example of where an inappropriate pause changes the meaning of the text: "To all those in Rome who are loved by God and called to be saints". If you read it as, "To all those in Rome [pause] who are loved by God and called to be saints", you have communicated that everyone in Rome is loved by God and called to be a saint—i.e. everyone in Rome is Christian! Clearly this is not what Paul is saying and there should be no discernable pause between the words 'Rome' and 'who'.

However, when reading John 19:30 ("When Jesus had received the sour wine, he said, "It is finished," and he bowed his head and gave up his spirit"), we might leave a long pause before and after the words, "It is finished", to

communicate the drama and importance of this climactic moment. In addition, we might slow down our reading pace.

The meaning of a passage can also be communicated by emphasis. Take Pilate's question in John 18:38: "What is truth?" Normally when we ask a question aloud, we end with an upward inflection—i.e. we raise the pitch of our voices. But here in John 18, Pilate isn't expecting a reply from Jesus; he's

raising or lowering our volume. Lowering the volume is an effective strategy for communicating drama. In Mark 8:33, Jesus rebukes Peter because he refuses to accept that the road ahead of Jesus involves suffering and death. When we come to the part where Jesus says, "Get behind me, Satan!", we could speak louder, but we risk sounding a little unnatural and, if we become too loud, people will be distracted from the passage itself and focused on us

meaning of the Scriptures by the way you read them. It's a serious ministry and, like any ministry, it takes time and effort. But it's also a tremendous privilege; you are bringing God's word into the lives of other people so that they can understand it and, with God's grace, accept it.

Some practical steps to better Bible reading ...

1. Spend time with the passage. Read it a week or two in advance. Think about it over a period of time, re-reading it every couple of days. If your church is not well-organized, you might need to call the service leader or preacher to find out the passage(s) so that you have enough time to prepare.
2. Print off a copy of the Bible reading. (Most translations can be found on the internet, e.g. www.gnpcb.org/esv/ or www.ibs.org/niv, and you are allowed to use limited sections of the text for this sort of purpose.) Start writing on this copy. Mark important words, bracket groups of words that belong together, and highlight important connecting words (e.g. 'but', 'therefore', 'so', 'then').
3. Having understood the passage, decide on appropriate phrasing (pause and pace) and emphasis (pitch and volume).
4. Print off a second copy of the Bible reading in a font and size that you can read easily. If you can, format the reading using a word processor so that there is a new line where you want to pause and no line-breaks where you don't.
5. Practise your reading using the printed copy or the Bible you will use when you read in church. If you think that your expression is a little 'over the top', it's probably about right.
6. Make sure that you are well-hydrated before you read. Drink lots of water and avoid coffee or coke (caffeine dries you out). This will ensure that your vocal cords can do their job.
7. Get your mouth moving and your tongue loose so that you can read clearly and accurately. Make sure you speak into the microphone so that everyone can hear. **B**

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making a statement and a fairly cynical one at that. He's saying that Jesus has no claim on him. So we need to read John 18:38 with that in mind and use no inflection, as though his words are a statement.

We can also emphasize a word by

instead. By speaking softly but firmly, we convey the strength of the rebuke and we do so in a way that focuses people on Jesus and his words.

If you read the Bible aloud in church, your job is to be much more than 'just a reader'. Your job is to convey the

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