

# Reading Scripture in public worship services

In all of our worship planning the principle that the Word of God is central must guide us. Since worship is our engagement with God, our group conversation with God, his Word must figure prominently. God's voice to us in worship is his Word. So it must be clear that God comes to us first. God initiates this conversation. God comes to us today in his Word, and his Word is primary.

## The Word Is Central

Worship planners will benefit from an assessment of the place of Scripture in worship. In your planning team meeting, examine a number of recent worship services and ask questions like the following:

How prominent and obvious is the Word of God in our services?

*It ought to be pretty central coming right after our approach to God - and a time with everyone - and prior to the sermon and our response to God's Word. It is signified with a particular introduction and concludes with an ascription of glory. The move towards informality in worship may jeopardise some of these principles.*

Did the sermon have exclusive right to determine which Scriptures were read?

*The alternative way to approach this is to ask whether the Scripture was the principle guide to the sermon's thrust. In our tradition and on the understanding that Scripture guides preaching, we read in worship the passage which will be preached on. If two or three passages, then fine; but we do not generally read what we will not reflect on.*

How many Scripture passages were read?

*The response is as above and depends on the number of passages which directly relate to the sermon.*

How influential was Scripture in shaping the tenor of the worship service?

*It ought to be primary, not least since it determines the focus of reflection in the sermon. Knowing the passage helps set the tone for the whole service. That's why it is often necessary to know Scripture passage and central thought of the sermon in order to craft relevant prayers and other elements in the service.*

**However, there is a danger this restricts possible issues to those contained in Scripture. How do we deal with the pressing issues of today if they are not contained in Scripture? This is a potential major weakness in Scripturally-oriented worship.**

Were Scriptures read engagingly and with interest?

*If they were not, there is arguably not only no point in reading them but their reading may be less than worthless, suggesting that God is dull or unknowable.*

How many different functions did Scripture fill in these services?

*Scripture not only informs but inspires, adds colour and texture, broadens horizons, comforts and encourages.*

Did the reader(s) present the Scriptures in such a way that they were clearly from God's Word?

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## Selecting Scripture to be Read

Integrating Scripture into the flow of the worship conversation with God is important. Since Scripture is God's voice, its location in the service should serve to advance the dialogue with God. There are several methods by which the selections for each service can be made.

### 1. Sermon-related.

The sermon, as the exposition of Scripture, will obviously have a leading role in determining which Scripture passages are included in worship. It may be a single passage, or multiple passages, read before the sermon, or embedded within the sermon. In addition, other supplementary passages can be selected and read before or after the sermon to prepare the way or to reinforce the message of the sermon. In any case, the theme of the sermon drives the selections made. This is generally, but not exclusively, the approach taken in St Kentigern's.

### 2. Liturgy-related.

A worship service should have integrity throughout. In other words, the entirety of the worship service is important, and each element should be planned carefully. Therefore, the elements of the liturgy and their location can be the determining factor in which Scripture passages are read. While it is usually best to be sure that all passages have a consistency to them, there are times when the liturgy will be more determinative of what is read than the sermon. Consider the following elements of a worship service, which are intended to be God's voice to us; each presents a unique need for the type of Scripture that can be read:

- The call to worship
- God's greeting
- The call to confession
- The assurance of God's pardon
- God's call to grateful living
- God's invitation to prayer
- The sending
- God's parting blessing (benediction)

Other elements in the liturgy that are intended to be our voice to God can often be expressed very meaningfully by taking the words of others within Scripture and making them our own:

- Our profession of faith and trust
- Our confession of sin
- Our prayers of thanks and praise
- Our songs



### **3. Lectionary-related.**

Many congregations profitably make use of the Revised Common Lectionary to determine the Scripture readings for the day. Some pastors use the Lectionary for selecting the passages on which they will preach, but the Lectionary also provides companion passages for multiple readings within the service—four passages each week for a three-year cycle (an Old Testament passage, a Psalm, a Gospel reading, and an Epistle reading). While some feel that the passages provided in the three-year cycle do not provide a sufficiently balanced selection of Scripture or prefer not to give up their own liberty to make such choices, such a plan does encourage us to include multiple Scripture readings in each service so that worshipers receive rich variety and regularity.

### **Methods of Scripture Reading**

Scripture reading in worship must be effective and meaningful. The Word of God is too precious for it to be read in any way that obscures his voice! Consider using a variety of methods:

- 1. The pastor reads Scripture.** Traditionally this has been the standard method, since the pastor was perceived as the one most fitting to read the Word of God. Especially for the passage on which the sermon was based, it was expected that the pastor would be the reader. This has been our traditional approach, largely for this reason.
- 2. Lay persons read the Scripture.** Increasingly we have come to appreciate the value of lay readers. The office of believer gives each of us the privilege of reading God's Word to his people. When multiple passages are read, multiple readers can be used. This is the approach we are moving towards.
- 3. Songs proclaim the Scriptures.** Both congregational songs and those sung by choirs or soloists can be effective means of setting God's voice before his people. This is not something we would generally do as a direct replacement for reading Scripture. Do you think we ought to?
- 4. Dramatic readings of Scripture.** Many passages of Scripture include multiple voices within a story and require multiple voices in reading to convey this. Other passages have different emphases within them that can best be represented by multiple readers. Narratives will become more real if they are presented in dramatic fashion by a readers group. This could become a more culturally relevant and engaging approach. It does, though, require much more preparation and would need to be done well to communicate clearly.
- 5. Video presentation of Scripture.** Increasing numbers of Scripture passages have been filmed professionally and can be displayed as entirely accurate readings of Scripture. They add background detail and can be effective in communicating God's Word - as well as influencing understandings.
- 6. Recrafting Scriptures.** At times the occasion may call for efforts that make God's voice more striking by setting it next to other passages or readings. Perhaps some of the complaints of lament Psalms can be juxtaposed with some of the promises of God. The words of warning from the prophets can be set alongside promises of hope.
- 7. Developing Scripture-theme services.** These are worship services which focus intensively on one chapter or passage of Scripture. The Scripture passage determines both the content and the structure of the service of worship. Over the course of the worship service, the entire passage is read.



## Partnership of Song and Scripture

Song and Scripture reading should not be two separate elements in a worship service. In many ways they join together and reinforce each other. Historically the book of Psalms has been considered both the prayer book and the song book of the ancient church. In our practice the first hymn is often, though not always, drawn from the Psalms.

Congregations can sing metrical versions of entire passages of Scripture, as in the first 150 selections in the 1987 edition of the Psalter Hymnal (which are the 150 Psalms) and in Bible song selections from the same hymnal.

Congregations can also join in a responsorial form of song as part of the Scripture reading. In such expressions a repeated refrain is woven through an extended passage. Many times it is helpful to play music simply and quietly under the reading of the passage (perhaps simply by outlining the basic chord structures) so that the unity of song and word is evident. The underlying music should never draw attention to itself, but serve to provide a seamless quality to the reading of the word and the response.

Using these as models, worship planners and leaders can design their own responses by combining shorter refrains with either Old Testament or New Testament passages.

Choirs or groups of singers can also participate in presenting Scripture. The words of anthems are both taken directly from Scripture and based on Scripture, and thus anthems can replace the reading of the passage, introduce the Scripture, or reflect on it following the reading of the Word.

## Some Practical Suggestions

In the interest of making Scripture reading in worship more interesting, noteworthy, and formative, here are some suggestions for worship planners to consider.

**1. Consider including more Scripture passages, not less.** Let God's voice come through multiple times in multiple ways in a worship service. When this is done it's usually best to carefully examine the length of each passage. A larger number of brief passages may be more effective than one long passage.

**2. Take a new look at the prayer for illumination.** Sometimes the church neglects this vital element of worship. When the Word of God is read and proclaimed, the worshippers acknowledge their need for the Holy Spirit's guidance in reading, preaching, and listening. This prayer may be offered by the preacher or a lay member, or sung by the congregation; it may take place before the Scripture reading or after it. But it makes very clear that we can receive God's Word only when the work of the Holy Spirit illumines our hearts. Our tradition has not been to emphasise this, but to include it as part of our prayer of supplication, seeking God's guidance early in our worship that we might listen, learn and act faithfully. Sometimes there is a short prayer prior to the sermon to the same end.



**3. Consider using an introduction to the reading of Scripture.** Since this is such an important act in worship, the congregation's attention should be carefully invited and encouraged. Identify the book, chapter, and verses, and possibly point the congregation to the page in the Bibles that are provided. A brief introductory statement may aid the worshipers in understanding the type of passage being read and knowing what to listen for. To invite their attentiveness, we generally begin with,

"Let us listen to God's Word as we find it in [Book name], chapter [number] and beginning at verse [verse number]. "

It is also a good idea to point out that the passage is printed in the service sheet so people are able to read along. Increasingly the effect of displaying each verse, or neighbouring verses making a single point, on screen so that people can read along directly with the reader. This encourages visual and auditory engagement with the Scripture passage.

**4. Encourage the congregation to respond to the reading of Scripture.** Whatever we do to highlight the importance of our reception of God's Word will aid our worship. A thoughtful response to the reading of Scripture reinforces in the mind of the congregation that this is no ordinary book. A response helps them to receive this as nothing less than God's voice to us. In our tradition, the reader of Scripture says: "Amen. Thanks be to God for this reading / these readings from his Word; to his Name be the glory and the praise."

Note that we do not say "May God add his blessing to these readings of his Word." That's because the reading of the Word is itself a blessing, not an act which needs further blessing by God.

**5. Encourage the use of multiple readers.** The Word of God belongs to the entire congregation and we exercise a great privilege when we read it to one another. Different voices of different ages illustrate the office of believer and the oneness of the body of Christ in receiving and sharing his Word.

**6. Provide both encouragement and training for readers.** All Scripture reading, because it is public, must be done in such a way that will enhance its meaning and make it easy for others to hear, follow along, and become engaged in it. Those who are readers must possess some gifts to be able to do this well, but we should also consider providing some encouragement and coaching for them. Reading publicly is a craft to be developed, especially when it is for a large group. With some, instructions and guidelines may be sufficient; with others times of rehearsal and practice may be necessary. At a bare minimum all readers must be sure they are familiar with the content and spirit of what they are reading. It is helpful to develop a worship project that involves multiple weeks of training sessions for those who are lay readers of Scripture in worship. This material is part of that process.

**7. Historically, some groups stood for the reading of Scripture.** Consider asking your congregation to do this, at least on an occasional basis for special seasons such as Advent or Lent. It will be impossible to overlook the seriousness of what is being read.



Here's a video about reading Scripture in worship which you may find interesting. You'll need to be connected to the Internet to watch this and your viewer will need to open the hyperlink.



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