



Preparing to read the lesson

TN1 Training Notes series: Communication

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These notes give a brief outline of two sections of a training event for those who are asked to read the Bible aloud in church services.

Using these you could create your own training event for those who hold this responsibility. It is a ministry that deserves study and practical training. The public reading of Scripture is something that is worth doing well.

If you want people to grasp the meaning of the Bible passage through hearing it read, you first need to understand that meaning yourself.

Part of the problem is the failure in most churches to read long sections, focusing instead on just a few verses. The listeners hardly have time to understand the context before the reading is over.

So your own preparation is a crucial part of letting people hear, understand and obey God's word. You may need to help your listeners get into the passage quickly with a helpful introduction or summary. Here are ten ideas to help you as you prepare.

1 **Pray**

...that you will understand the passage and discover something of its meaning for yourself. This is the fundamental key to all preparation.

2 **Note the type of literature**

The Bible is not one book, but a richly varied collection of many different types of writing: narrative, history, story, poetry, prophecy, concentrated teaching. Your approach for a section of one of Paul's epistles will need to be different from that for a Gospel narrative, which in turn will need to be different from that for a Psalm.

3 **Study the context of the passage**

You will probably only be reading a paragraph or two, and these may make little sense on their own. Take, for example, a passage which starts 'Therefore ...', or 'As he was walking ...', or one that comes in half-way through a narrative. What has just happened? Where are we? Who is involved? Why is this happening? You may need to guide people in with a brief introduction, so you need to read round the passage yourself as you prepare. If you use an introduction be careful to keep it brief and not to colour it with your own interpretation.

4 **Grasp the mood of the passage**

What is the mood? Is it one of excitement or sadness, of urgency or fun? Moods can change within a passage as in several of the Psalms or consider crucifixion to resurrection in the Gospels. Your style of reading needs to match the mood, especially if you are reading quoted speech. If the Psalmist commands us to praise the Lord, let's do it! But it is best done by letting it come out naturally from your own engagement with the passage. So, if your understanding of the Psalm has already made you want to praise God, you will find yourself communicating this as you read. If you simply switch an emotion on because you think you should, it won't come across as genuine.

5 **Discover the meaning of the passage**

What is the central message of this passage? What is the writer saying? What would be the sub-editor's headline? You may need help here, even from a commentary or someone who understands more of the Bible than you do. You cannot read for others if you do not first understand what you are reading. In this case you will simply be reading out words one after the other, not seeking to put across the underlying message of each sentence and paragraph. And, to get the meaning across, you need to see the passage as a whole not just as individual sentences. Let one of Jesus' parables flow, for example, then give a pause before reading on with what follows. This enables the listener to grasp when the story-telling stops and the explanation or subsequent narrative takes over.

6 **Visualise your listeners**

What kind of people are they: adults, children, visitors with little Christian background? How will they be feeling at this stage of the service? What are their needs? Do you need to add in more explanation than usual at the start? Will they be following in Bibles or reading the text on a screen (see footnote about this below)? Now turn these thoughts into prayer for these people so that God's word might have an impact on their lives. You have the privilege of being the channel to allow this to happen.

7 **Consider practical issues**

These include knowing the point at which the reading comes in the service, which Bible version to use, pronunciation of tricky names, how and when to get to the front, PA/volume and how to use a microphone well, how to open and close (page numbers, standard phrases and where they are written out), where to sit, your children (if relevant), what to wear (yes, it matters, so that nothing gets in the way of helping people listen to the Word of God). Get in a mess and you direct people's attention to yourself instead. *(This point is expanded in an extra section to these notes on page 3.)*

8 Practise the passage

Read it through several times finding what you regard as the appropriate emphasis on different words and speed for each section (*another section of the training event covers all this*). You practise, first, so that you get the basics right and read without tripping up at any point; next, to bring in the right tone of voice to help people understand the meaning. Now practise out loud, possibly to a friend and perhaps in the building where you will be reading.

9 Decide to review afterwards

Determine to improve. Listen to any recording made of the service, ask friends, learn from mistakes. Listen to and observe professionals (for example, TV news readers). If you feel you made a mess of it in some way, take that to God but don't let it worry you (you probably noticed it far more than others). Instead list the lesson you learn so that you don't make the same mistake again.

10 Pray again

...all the way through this process for putting the passage across well, for not letting yourself get in the way of God's message to his people (by wrong voice, mannerism or emphasis), and that people will want to go out and study the passage for themselves after the service. It really is a privilege to read Scripture out loud because you are taking the words of God to the people of God.

Practical issues

Here in a little more detail are some of the areas the reader might like to consider under point 7 above.

- i **Movements:** seating, cue, mannerisms – the secret is to avoid any rush or panic.
- ii **Appearance:** nothing that might make people focus on you instead of listening to the reading.
- iii **Bible:** whether to take your own or use a lectern Bible, paper v electronic, having the place marked (could you find Zephaniah 3:1 in a hurry?), strange names to check out in advance.
- iv **Voice:** how to get your voice to carry, the use of PA, varying speed, tone, etc.
- v **Eyes:** eye contact with the congregation at the start, but don't lose your place!
- vi **Nerves:** use a finger to follow if that helps, hold on to the stand, write out the opening and closing words if your church uses particular forms of words, don't rush.
- vii **Start:** pause, let people find the passage if they are following (but see below), no hurry.
- viii **Finish:** don't rush the words to close or make them sound unimportant – nothing is worse than 'This is the Word of the Lord' mumbled as though it did not matter one bit!

The aim is for the reader to fade into the background and let the words speak to each person. Any muddle will have the opposite effect.

Run your own training event

Any church can put on a training evening for their readers, perhaps based on the above points. I add in an introduction on points such as the power of God's word and the privilege of reading out loud for the whole congregation.

If you do this it is a good idea to do some practical work at the end, with different people having a go at various passages and others giving helpful criticism. I use the following passages for such an exercise to provide three very different types of literature:

- Psalm 100 – it's poetry and it's not very long which gives you quite a challenge.
- Mark 8:22-30 – two short extracts from a narrative at a defining moment in the Gospel.
- Ephesians 2:11-22 – a closely argued passage which makes it difficult to understand for the listener who has not been prepared for it.

A further point to consider

A number of churches encourage the congregation to follow the passage in either their own Bibles or in 'pew' Bibles provided. Increasingly churches with digital projection now put the passage up on screens, verse by verse.

I want to challenge these ideas. Don't get me wrong: when it comes to the sermon I want everyone to have Bibles open or to have the passage on the screen in some way. But for the public reading I am uneasy about this practice. The processes of listening and reading are very different. When Scripture is read I want to listen to it, even perhaps with my eyes closed. If it is read well (big 'if!'), I find myself taking the text in in new ways. I can experience the passage, not just process the words. Reading while listening muddles it all up.

These notes are available at <https://www.john-truscott.co.uk/Resources/Training-Notes-index> then TN1. They cover one aspect of a possible evening or half-day training event for lesson readers in any church. For other Training Notes on public worship see Training Notes TN16, *Interviews in church services*, TN47, *Breathing life into the intercessions*, TN82, *Print or screen?* and TN93, *And now for the notices*. See also Article A19, *Speaking so that people listen*.

Contact John if you would like to enquire about the possibility of his running an event for your lesson readers.

Cartoons are by Micki Hounslow for filing categories of Leadership, Management, Structures, Planning, Communication, Administration. File TN1 under Communication.

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