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So **you**'ve been asked to . . .

Read Scripture



HARVEY A. SMIT

Acknowledgment

Harvey A. Smit served as editor in chief of Faith Alive Christian Resources, Grand Rapids, Michigan, until 1997.

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You've been asked to read a passage from the Bible during an upcoming worship service. You have confidence in your own reading ability, so that is no obstacle. But you are aware that it takes more than just being a good reader to carry out the task you've been asked to do. What more does it take?

Lots of people who can read well would never dream of standing up before a group of people and reading aloud, let alone doing that during a service of worship. They lack the needed confidence in themselves and in their speaking or reading ability. On the other hand, reading the Bible during public worship does not require three to four years of seminary training and a number of courses in public speaking. Nor does such training guarantee that the person has become an effective reader of Scripture.

What does it require? Here is a quick answer:

- a clear voice that projects well
- the ability to read well
- an essential understanding of what is involved in reading the Bible during worship
- some basic training on how to read Scripture worshipfully and effectively

The clear voice and ability to read, we presume you possess. The essential understanding and basic training, we will try to give you in this brief pamphlet.

While reading this pamphlet and practicing what we advise would be helpful, arranging for someone skilled in public speaking to act as your coach, or attending a class in reading Scripture led by some qualified person in your church would be even better. Those choices are not, however, available to most of you. And even if they are available, preparing to read Scripture aloud still remains your own personal responsibility and task.

A Little History

In the experience of some of us, it wasn't too long ago that virtually the only person who stood up before the congregation in public worship was the pastor, who spoke, read, preached, and prayed. Aside from congregational singing and perhaps some responsive readings, ordinary church members were expected to remain quiet. All, or almost all, of the official acts of a worship service were performed by a minister.

That was not the experience of the early church as described in 1 Corinthians 14, and it is not the experience of many Christians today. Some church traditions have always included active participation by a variety of members, from the altar boys (and now girls also) in the Roman Catholic churches to the lay preachers in the Baptist tradition. Some church communities even continue the long-standing tradition of having a special office of Scripture reader, called the lector. In the Netherlands, many Reformed churches had a small lectern standing in front of the tall pulpit (from which the pastor would preach). From there, one of the elders would read the Scripture lesson for the day, the text that the preacher would be using in his sermon.

In recent years many churches have begun to recognize the practical implications for worship of our belief in the priesthood of all believers, and in the truth that the Word of God belongs to the people of God, not to the preacher. This growing recognition has led to broader participation of the members in worship and in leadership roles. As a result, more and more congregations are asking men and women, young and old, officebearers and non-officebearers, to read Scripture during worship services. To do this in a way that is spiritually edifying to the worshippers, it is important that the readers have a true understanding of just what they are doing.

Understanding What's Involved

Reading the Bible during a worship service is not the same as reading a speech at a school graduation or reading a poem at a literary society meeting. In fact, it is quite unlike any other act of public reading. How so?

First, it is part of a public dialogue between God and the people of God. It is one of the acts of adoration and praise that worshipers bring to their Lord, and it also includes the words of instruction and counsel that their Lord directs to them. It is a reading done in the presence of God. This fact may never be forgotten or neglected.

Second, this is a reading of the Word of God. What is being read is far different and far more important than a church council decision, a presidential Thanksgiving Day proclamation, or even a message from the Queen. When we read God's Word in worship, we stand in the tradition of Moses on Mount Sinai, who "took the Book of the Covenant and read it to the people" (Ex. 24:7). We are imitating the Lord Jesus when,