

Reading the Bible aloud at Unichurch

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Aim: the purpose of this paper is raise issues for discussion regarding the practice of public Bible reading at Unichurch with a view achieving a better understanding of its role and purpose that will influence our practice.

Note: The bulk of this essay is based on ideas by Clifford Warne, who expresses these ideas more fully, more clearly and more powerfully than I in a short, entertaining 20 minute talk available for free download. I highly recommend listening to his talk in conjunction with this discussion paper. It won't take long, and it will flesh out, and demonstrate more clearly, lots of the idea that I have tried to capture in summary in the first section. The talk, called '[The Art of Reading Aloud](http://www.podcastirectory.com/podshows/1657172)' is available to listen to at: <http://www.podcastirectory.com/podshows/1657172> or to download from http://your.sydneyanglicans.net/images/uploads/mp3/Clifford_Warne/The_art_of_reading_aloud.mp3

Why it is worth reading the Bible well when it is read publically, aloud, at church:

1. It is God's word and thus is instructive in all matters of faith and conduct.¹
2. We believe that God speaks clearly in his word and that in the case of most passages, its truth can be easily understood. This is especially true of the New Testament letters, which were intended to be read aloud to the churches.² Thus:
 - a. The public reading of the Bible is not futile, in that people will be able to largely understand its truth when read clearly
 - b. The public reading of the Bible is not merely symbolic, or merely preparatory for the task of preaching. In and of itself it is authoritative, clear and instructive.
3. Because the way in which you read a text (pause, speed, phrasing, emphasis) conveys meaning, not just the words themselves, and we believe meaning is important.³ Thus:
 - a. there is no such thing as a 'neutral' reading of a text. A reading of a text can either:
 - i. make clear the meaning, and so allow God's word to speak to God's people
 - ii. disguise the meaning, and so make God's truth seem distant, unclear or irrelevant
 - iii. distort the meaning, and thus distort God's truth
 - b. there are things that you can do to improve your ability to read the Bible, such as:
 - i. study the passage carefully to understand the meaning of the text
 - ii. practice reading the text in a way which conveys this meaning
 - iii. get feedback from others to improve one's technique
4. Because reading Scripture poorly may convey false impressions about the text, such as:
 - a. that the Bible needs to be explained in order to be understood
 - b. that the Bible is not relevant until it is explained and applied

¹ 2 Tim 3:16 as a classic example

² Col 4:16, 1 Thes 5:27, 1 Tim 4:13

³ Clifford Warne very powerfully demonstrates this in his talk 'The Art of Reading Aloud' (see references).

- c. that the Bible reading is of symbolic importance and the sermon is the real 'meat' of our church meeting
5. To model how to read the Bible aloud, and so to train people in this skill

If these points hold true, then I think we should consider making some changes to the way that Bible reading is organised at Unichurch

What does it mean to read the Bible well?

Or how long is a piece of string? I think we all can recognise it when we hear the Bible read well. But exactly what we mean when we think that is often hard to characterise. From the above points, it seems that the key element of reading the Bible well is to **effectively convey meaning**.

How is this achieved? Several points quickly present themselves

1. The listeners are ready to listen. There is no point in starting the reading until people are ready to hear. Since we have a habit of people following along the reading in their Bibles, we must give time for people to find their Bibles and find the passage. Inevitably this takes a few moments and must be paused for.
2. Context is important. We are well aware of the importance of understanding where a particular text sits in light of the rest of the book, at very least. If we are serious about helping people see the relevance and meaning of a Bible reading, then we must furnish them with the appropriate information to make sense of the reading as it is read.
3. Read in a way that highlights the meaning of the text. Clifford Warne spends 50 minutes exploring this topic in his talk (see references) so I will not labour to poorly summarise it here. However, more basically, reading to illuminate the meaning requires:
 - a. a thorough understanding of the meaning of the text itself. Depending on the passage and the maturity of the reader, this may present varying degrees of challenge
 - b. a basic knowledge of the way spoken language is used to convey meaning
 - c. thorough practice of the reading

What changes might need to be put in place to make this happen?

1. Change in culture:
 - a. Currently, I think it is a widely held perception (by the congregation, perhaps not by its leadership) that Bible reading is a simple, harmless, 'first step' in becoming involved at church. It is also used as a very practical way to invite people to become more involved and welcome them to church. However, while these are noble aims, I think this way of thinking undermines what should be our purpose in reading Scripture in church
 - b. I think we need to establish a culture at church that reading the Bible is an important, responsible task in the meeting, and one that requires effort and preparation. Our musicians spend hours before the service faithfully rehearsing and preparing for a role which although important, I believe is of lesser significance than reading the Bible. The preacher spends days or weeks preparing his talk that will be based on the text that is read, praying and striving diligently so that what he will speak is faithful and true to the text, which ironically is often read hurriedly and without much thought for meaning.

- c. This change in thinking will probably need to involve a discussion with different elements of the church community. Some of the issues that might be discussed could be:
 - i. Why do we read the Bible aloud at church?
 - 1. Compared with reading it privately to ourselves?
 - 2. Compared with reading it beforehand?
 - 3. Compared with just hearing it as part of the sermon?
 - ii. Can 'anyone' read the Bible at church? If not, why?
 - iii. How should we go about selecting Bible readers?
 - iv. How should we go about training Bible readers?
2. Change in procedures
- a. (Currently I am not aware of the process or thought behind selecting or training Bible readers. So I write in ignorance).
 - b. There are many changes in practice that could be implemented to achieve these aims:
 - i. Running a training course which people interested in reading the Bible at church should attend
 - ii. Developing a document 'Guidelines for Bible reading' that all Bible readers could be given. (various people have attempted to do this^{4,5,6,7} with varying success, but far and away the best for Scriptural grounding and practical advice would be Clifford Warne's audio)
 - iii. Organising that the Bible reader should meet with the preacher (or service leader) to discuss the meaning of the passage and a summary of the context of the passage in the week before
 - iv. Developing a 'roster' of Bible readers where people can know a few weeks in advance that they are reading and thus have time to prepare
 - v. Running a group where people could meet to practice reading the Bible to get better at it, and to get feedback from others, and Bible readers could be selected from that group
 - vi. Encouraging people to read the passage and its context before coming to Church. Unichurch currently does this very well. However I do not think for a moment this negates any of the previous points about the necessity of reading Scripture, and reading it well, at church.
3. Other:
- a. Recent research on Cognitive Loading Theory at UNSW^{8,9,10} has challenged the notion that people understand a text best when they both read it and hear it at the same time. It might be

⁴ Beeners, WJ. Getting the story off the page: advice on putting life into Scripture Reading. Available at: http://www.reformedworship.org/magazine/article.cfm?article_id=300

⁵ Schmit, C. Ten Tips for Reading Scripture in Public Worship, Available at: http://www.calvin.edu/worship/stories/scripture_memory.php

⁶ Brown, T. The Power of Words: Speaking God's Word requires our best. Available at: http://www.reformedworship.org/magazine/article.cfm?article_id=1408

⁷ Kenneth Baker: When You Read Scripture...: Suggestions for helping lay readers be more effective; Available from http://www.reformedworship.org/magazine/article.cfm?article_id=772

⁸ <http://www.smh.com.au/articles/2007/04/03/1175366240499.html>

⁹ <http://education.arts.unsw.edu.au/research/clt.html>

worth discussing the practice of inviting people to read along in their own Bibles at the same time as a public reader. Might this actually be counter productive? If we read the Bible well, might it be better to have people *listen* to the reading, then open their Bibles as the preacher comes to speak? A topic to consider...

References:

Clifford Warne; 'The art of reading aloud'. [Audio]. Available from http://your.sydneyanglicans.net/indepth/mp3_library/

When redundant on-screen text in multimedia technical instruction can interfere with learning.(Training, Education, Instructional Systems).Slava Kalyuga, Paul Chandler and John Sweller. *Human Factors* 46.3 (Fall 2004): p567(15). Abstract below:

It is frequently assumed that presenting the same material in written and spoken form benefits learning and understanding. The present work provides a theoretical justification based on cognitive load theory, and empirical evidence based on controlled experiments, that this assumption can be incorrect. From a theoretical perspective, it is suggested that if learners are required to coordinate and simultaneously process redundant material such as written and spoken text, an excessive working memory load is generated. Three experiments involving a group of 25 technical apprentices compared the effects of simultaneously presenting the same written and auditory textual information as opposed to either temporally separating the two modes or eliminating one of the modes. The first two experiments demonstrated that nonconcurrent presentation of auditory and visual explanations of a diagram proved superior, in terms of ratings of mental load and test scores, to a concurrent presentation of the same explanations when instruction time was constrained. The 3rd experiment demonstrated that a concurrent presentation of identical auditory and visual technical text (without the presence of diagrams) was significantly less efficient in comparison with an auditory-only text. Actual or potential applications of this research include the design and evaluation of multimedia instructional systems and audiovisual displays.

¹⁰ When redundant on-screen text in multimedia technical instruction can interfere with learning.(Training, Education, Instructional Systems).Slava Kalyuga, Paul Chandler and John Sweller. *Human Factors* 46.3 (Fall 2004): p567(15). (8458 words)