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Reading Scripture in Public: A Guide for Preachers and Lay Readers

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This is no longer the case (if it ever was). Congregations and communities have always inculturated their own liturgy, albeit unofficially and unconsciously. Recently more organized attempts have appeared in Spanish, indigenous, and gender-neutral revisions. Inculturation of liturgy among us has been scattered and often discouraged by the official guardians of the Lutheran liturgy.

But now the door is wide open. Inculturation will not go away; nor will it tolerate restraint or deterrence, whether it be creative and forward-looking (as in Zaire and India) or retrospective (as in the Phillipines). Chupungco has given us a window on how the process is being viewed and conducted in Rome. It will be up to us to adapt our liturgy to our own culture.

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Reading Scripture in Public: A Guide for Preachers and Lay Readers

Thomas Edward McComiskey
Grand Rapids: Baker, 1991
196 pages

"I am surprised," writes the author, "at how frequently I hear the Scriptures read carelessly with little attention to the reader's responsibility to interpret the biblical author's thought or intention" (9). This is true of people who ought to know better; it is truer still of the many lay readers who are untrained, or unrehearsed, or carry some notion that because Scripture is "holy" it must be read dully. McComiskey's book is a laudable and welcome manual designed to improve just this situation. It is a "self-help tool" whose purpose is "to set forth principles of oral interpretation as they relate to the public reading of Scripture" (9). His thesis—and it is an important perspective for every reader of Scripture to grasp—is that "effective public reading is interpretation, and the effective use of vocal emphasis is exposition. One should read in such a way that the hearers will feel they have caught the sense of the passage" (9–10).

The book is divided into two parts: (1) Understanding the Principles of Reading Scripture in Public; (2) Applying the Principles.

Part 1 begins with a chapter on the importance of the public reading of Scripture. Two chapters are devoted to "finding and communicating meaning" in, respectively, narrative and poetic materials. Chapter 4, "finding and communicating meaning in sense structures", examines the smallest units of meaning, viz., clauses and sentences which are coherent literary

units; some attention is also given here to epistles. Chapter 5 is devoted to "using the techniques" uncovered.

Part 2 has helpful and suggestive chapters on "Preparing to Read" (ch. 6), "Fine Tuning Your Public Reading" (ch. 7), and improving and using the voice effectively (chs. 8, 9). The last chapter, "Creative Use of Scripture Reading in the Worship Service" (ch. 10), is worth more than its brevity implies; he suggests using music as background for some readings, the use of chimes before and after, antiphonal and responsive reading, the use of several voices, the gathering of verses under themes (good for responsive readings), the use of appropriate lections (e.g., Psalms) as prayers, and interspersing a reading with explanations.

The strength of the volume lies in the exercises carefully chosen and clearly articulated at the end of each chapter. These are designed for self-help, and it is obvious that the true value of the book may be realized only by working one's way through the exercises of each chapter. In most cases an exercise assigned is followed by the author's analysis so that readers can compare their analyses of the passage with his.

There are some problems with the book. While Parts 1 and 2 purportedly identify and apply "principles", it is not at all clear just what these principles are, beyond "the importance of reading Scripture" and "doing it effectively". Part 2 is simply concise discussions of the practical aspects of reading in public. At another level, chapter 5 seems redundant; its material on narrative and poetic materials were better integrated into chapters 2 and 3, and its section on epistles could well have been expanded into a chapter on other genres. As well, the typefaces of the subheadings in this chapter are confusing.

Teachers of speech and public reading and experienced readers will have some differences of opinion. In his advice on the parallelism of Hebrew poetry, for example, McComiskey is so concerned to appreciate and communicate the rhythm of parallelism he falls into the trap of too many pauses. Again, he insists that readers should observe punctuation marks with pauses, even commas (154). This is nonsense. Punctuation is "for the eye" of the reader; the writer puts it in in order to make the meaning clear to the eye, then it is up to the lector to communicate the meanings. Only Victor Borge communicates punctuation marks, but that's another thing altogether!

These matters aside, the author is to be highly commended for stressing the profound significance of reading Scripture in public, and thanked for compiling a work-book which should be in the hands of every lay reader and required of every worship leader.

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