

Superintendents' Certification Lesson 2

Finding the Power of the Word

Learning Objectives:

- Make the Bible real and accessible in the classroom.
- Help students find something immediate and vital in the hearing of the spoken Word.

Reading the Bible Aloud

Teachers would do well to read the Bible orally and to encourage students to do so, too. It is important to remember that people heard the original words of the Bible when a lector read it publicly. As the author of the Revelation says, "Blessed is the one who reads aloud the words of the prophecy, and blessed are those who hear and who keep what is written in it" (**Rev. 1:3, NRSV**). Public readings of Scripture are often hurried, sometimes barely understandable. Readers seem to want to finish their assignment quickly to allow more time for the sermon. But the earliest hearers of the Word were eager to hear about the deeds and words of their ascended Lord and each word by the beloved but absent apostle who penned it.

Generally in Adventist worship only small portions of Scripture are read, perhaps just a verse or two. Speakers often employ thematic approaches rather than expository ones. Consequently, contemporary Adventist students often have had less exposure to the Bible than earlier generations. They may regard the Bible as intended for private devotional reading or for study, and come to public worship to hear the sermon and music rather than the Word itself.

Because students have little prior experience in oral, public reading of the Bible, they do not know how to read biblical poetry and narrative aloud. Both religion and literature teachers should give instruction in how to read the Bible publicly: by speaking slowly, forcefully, and reverently, making certain all can hear. Biblical literature is generally composed of rather short clauses, so readers should allow time for each one to be received by hearers. The goal is to encourage a meditative response. Occasionally, readers can look up to see whether the audience is following, perhaps employing a ruler or marker to avoid losing their place in the passage.

Above all they should enunciate distinctly and without excessive dramatics. Before the day when the reading is scheduled, they should practice reading the Scripture aloud, and do a little research to discover how unfamiliar names or words are pronounced. Simple technical competence is not enough. The reader should keep in mind that he or she stands in a long line of biblical interpreters whom the Spirit has used to bring hearers to greater intimacy with God.

Oral Traditions

Folkloristic analysis. To better comprehend the connection of the Bible with oral speech, an acquaintance with folkloristic analysis can be useful, for it helps us to see the differences between cultures that are largely oral and ones that depend more on texts.

Speakers emphasize their points by drawing broad distinctions, while writers develop more subtle comparisons. The speaker paints quickly with large strokes, while the writer has time to create detailed pictures. Growing out of a culture that was largely oral, the biblical text was rooted in

speech rather than writing.

A seminal article on folklore by Axel Olricks suggests a number of “laws” or broad characteristics of oral narrative. Among these are “The Law of Contrast (*das Gesetz des Gegensatzes*)” and “The Law of Twins (*das Gesetz der Zwillinge*).” These two laws can help us understand why biblical literature is so different from modern literature. The story of David and Jonathan, for example, comes under “The Law of Twins.” The two are remarkably alike in age and character. Although unrelated, they seem to be brothers. On the other hand David and Saul fall under “The Law of Contrast.”

Modern authors. Today authors use more subtle ways of composing. They use metaphor or understatement or observe subtle psychological traits. But when we understand the differences between oral and written expression, it becomes clear why biblical texts seem less sophisticated. It is simply that the speakers wanted their hearers to understand and remember the points they wished to make. This is part of the reason the book of Revelation makes a black-and-white contrast between the rulers of the Roman empire and God’s suffering people.

Listen. Listening, as opposed to reading, brings the hearer into closer proximity with the speaker. One senses this intimacy in the opening lines of the Gospel of John, “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.” John especially prizes the words of the Jesus he loved so much. Someone who has contact only with the written word can ultimately feel connected with the Divine, but how much closer does a living person speak the tie when one hears the word!

Oral Culture in Later Times

Oral culture did not end with the biblical period. For centuries afterward people continued to listen more often than they read. In *Beowulf* a scop or bard recited to audiences.

The Middle Ages. People learned about the Scriptures through pictures in stained-glass windows and mystery plays. Indeed, such art existed not simply to teach but to bring people close to the Divine. Nearness to God was the goal of illuminated biblical manuscripts like the *Book of Kells* and the *Lindisfarne Gospels*. People did not simply look at or even through this art. This art, like the eye of God (which truly it was), looked through them.

The fifteenth century. With the development of printing in the fifteenth century people could afford to own and read books. This significantly changed culture. Then the printed word became an affordable witness of God. However, Martin Luther continued to think of the Word of God (and especially the New Testament) as essentially oral. The Lutheran theologian Paul Althaus suggests that “for Luther the word is first and last the spoken word, that is, the living proclamation which takes place in any particular situation” (*The Theology of Martin Luther*, Robert C. Schultz, trans., Philadelphia: Fortress, 1966, p. 72).

Twenty-first century. After the advent of electronic technologies like radio, television, and computers we are witnessing another revolution that involves new ways of experiencing the Word. In some ways, this technology is similar to the earlier oral culture. We can hear and see speakers on radio or television, even when they are only recorded. But for many, the personal dimension may still be absent if one regards, for example, a movie on the life of Christ as simply entertainment.

Creatively Respond to the Text

- Memorize a scriptural passage in the current lesson, and then recite it in a family devotion or for your Sabbath School class. This will help you to get inside the text.
- Write a poem based on this week's lesson or drawing from the lessons for this quarter.
- Write a story, or a dramatic scene, using biblical characters or plots from this quarter's lesson studies.

Too many students know the Bible only as a source of moral admonitions. Creative assignments allow them to see God's Word as an imaginative construction, and to understand that when we respond imaginatively we are imitating God the Creator. Some may then be inspired to change their lives or culture in revolutionary ways.

Resources

The Encyclopedia Judaica is a treasure trove for anyone wishing to see how characters such as Abraham and David in the Hebrew Bible have been presented over the centuries. The articles also note examples of their development in subsequent Jewish literature and in medieval or modern literature, art, and music. Other helpful resources include:

- The two volume *Chapters Into Verse: Poetry in English Inspired by the Bible: Volume 1: Genesis to Malachi*; and *Chapters Into Verse: Poetry in English Inspired by the Bible: Volume 2: Gospels to Revelation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993, edited by Robert Atwan and Laurance Wieder).
- David Curzon's *The Gospels in Our Image: An Anthology of Twentieth-Century Poetry Based on Biblical Texts* (New York: Harcourt, 1995).

Models

Methods of reading the Bible that have been practiced for centuries:

- Meditation, using colloquies with the Lord or other Bible characters. St. Ignatius of Loyola's *The Spiritual Exercises of Saint Ignatius*, Anthony Mottola translation (Garden City, N. Y.: Image-Doubleday, 1964).
- Devotional methods in poetry. Louis L. Marz, *The Poetry of Meditation: A Study of English Religious Literature in the Seventeenth Century* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1954) suggests that Ignatius' devotional methods were used by such English poets as John Donne, George Herbert, Robert Southwell, Richard Crashaw, and Henry Vaughn. He even suggested that the Puritan preacher Richard Baxter recommended some Ignatian techniques in his *Saints' Everlasting Rest*, 1650, Martin L. Short provides an up-to-date explanation of how to do this in chapters 7 and 9 of *The Word Is Very Near: A Guide to Praying With Scripture*.