

Using Spoken Word to Enhance Your Worship

What Is Spoken Word?

The term “Spoken Word” has been used to describe numerous artistic movements over the course of many years. The Ancient Greeks used Spoken Word poetry in their Olympic Games, as did the Poets of the Harlem Renaissance and the Beatniks of the 1960’s. All of these groups (and dozens of others) have connected to the artistic flow of Spoken Word. Though general similarities in style exist between these groups, it is worth noting that the style of Spoken Word used in worship is slightly different in execution. For our purposes, Spoken Word refers to a number of disciples performing a dramatic reading of the Word of God in a worship service.

Spoken Word is an animated art form in which a small group of readers powerfully speak the word of God while paying special attention to the specific words themselves. This style of performance emphasizes the dynamics of tone and the finesses of facial expressions while utilizing the occasional subtle body gesture. It is used to communicate passages from the bible in a creative and powerful way in an effort to draw a worshipper’s heart closer to God. Spoken word allows us to hear biblical passages in a way that is different than what we may be used to, bringing the scriptures alive and impacting the listener.

Finding Spoken Word in Scripture

It goes without saying, but there is a definite power exhibited when God’s words are spoken. When God speaks, things happen! In His grand wisdom and ultimate authority God chose to *speak* the world into existence, when He said “Let there be light” in Genesis 1:3, there was light! All throughout the Old Testament there are examples of priests and prophets standing and reading from the law for an entire day while the people of God stood and listened in focused devotion.

In 2 Kings 22 the high priest Hilkiah finds the Book of the Law in the temple of the Lord after it had been forgotten for some time. When Shaphan the secretary reads the book of the Law to King Josiah, Josiah tears his robes and begins to decree reforms across all of Judah and Jerusalem because he knew that God’s people had not been obedient to His word. We are told that Josiah stood before all the people of Judah and Jerusalem “from the least to the greatest”, and read “all the words of the Book of the Covenant”. This act of reading God’s words aloud led to God’s people renewing their covenant with Him and pledging themselves to follow and keep his commands with all of their hearts.

In Nehemiah 8, we see Ezra the teacher of the Law bringing out the Book of the Law of Moses and reading it before all of the God’s people. Nehemiah 8:3 says, “He read it aloud from daybreak till noon as he faced the square before the Water Gate in the presence of the men, women and others who could understand. And all the people listened attentively to the Book of

the Law.” We are told that the result of this reading was one of worship and a resounding “Amen” from those who listened.

Using Spoken Word is a great way to infuse God’s words into our times of corporate worship. As one body we can stand and listen attentively, pointing all of our focus to the words of our Lord.

Assembling Your Team

In Romans 12:4-8 we are told the following about the body of Christ:

“For just as each of us has one body with many members, and these members do not all have the same function, so in Christ we, though many, form one body, and each member belongs to all the others. We have different gifts, according to the grace given to each of us. If your gift is prophesying, then prophesy in accordance with your faith; if it is serving, then serve; if it is teaching, then teach; if it is to encourage, then give encouragement; if it is giving, then give generously; if it is to lead, do it diligently; if it is to show mercy, do it cheerfully.”

Both in scripture, and likely in our own experience, it is clear to see that God has equipped us all with different abilities to serve his body in unique ways. You will find that this also holds true in selecting Spoken Word readers. There are not necessarily any hard and fast rules that will lead to the creation of the perfect Spoken Word team, but as with anything else, special care should be used in positioning someone in this sort of role.

The ideal candidate for your spoken word team will possess the following traits:

1.) Oral Communication Skills

This can be summed up by saying that your reader must be able to speak powerfully, clearly, lucidly, and thoughtfully. Your reader must have the ability to speak publically in a comfortable and confident way; if the word of God is living and active your spoken word reader should emulate that! Reading energetically is of utmost importance. This in no way means that your reader has to be loud or explosive. Some of the most commanding moments are those characterized by soft energetic inflection. The aptitude for precision and the capacity to deliver a range of dynamics are absolutely essential.

2.) Theatrical Ability.

This trait encompasses many other traits, and is closely related to the skill set described above, but is slightly different. Your spoken word candidate needs to be able to communicate the words they are speaking through their body language and facial movements. This means that they not only have to understand what they are reading in depth, but they also must be able to take what they intellectually know and communicate it physically. In the same way that an actor must study a script and contemplate and rehearse how they are going to deliver each line, your spoken word

readers must be able to dig into the subtext of each word and the greater context of the passage in order to convey each line appropriately. Other theatrical basics include having a stage presence, understanding how to properly inflect, and the ability to paint imagery with word pictures.

3.) Knowledge of the Word of God

All in all, the most important trait for your Spoken Word readers to possess is to have knowledge of the word of God and a desire to serve Him humbly and faithfully.

Your readers will need to take some time in piecing together verses that are thematically coherent while being careful to not undermine the Word by taking anything out of context. Readers should have the spiritual maturity and ability to study out at length the full context of the scriptures that they will be reading to the body of Christ. Remember though that an intellectual understanding of scripture alone won't result in the most effective reader; the first two traits should absolutely be present.

As a last thought, your reader must be able to work well with a team, be adaptable, take direction, and act on that direction. You are looking for trainable, malleable people that can grow with you.

Final Thoughts

There are a lot of creative ways that spoken word can be used to enhance your worship services. It is certainly a way to allow for a smoother flow of the worship service from one element to another. Many worship songs are based on scripture, some of them word for word! This creates a great opportunity to either foreshadow or echo a song with a Spoken Word piece that topically relates to that song, tying them together and achieving an unbroken flow in your worship service.

Using Spoken Word is a vivid way to bring more of God's word into your worship service. When three or four skillful readers reach a point where they are able to play off of one another and appear to be one voice, the result can be very moving. In a skillful presentation of Psalm 150, you will be able to feel God's surpassing greatness in their tone, you will hear the sounding of the trumpet and the clashing of the symbols in their voices, and you will desire to "PRAISE HIM" in the resonance of their crescendo.

Ultimately the Word of God will speak for itself. The most important thing is to remember to listen as Josiah did, letting the Word lead our hearts to Him in Life Changing Worship.