



The Common Lectionary

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The accusation that interest in the worship of the church is characterized by an excess of fussiness over trivia has long plagued those who struggle to make the liturgy an authentic expression of the faith and life of God's people—an accusation that unfortunately has sometimes been deserved. Liturgiologists are a chastened lot these days, seeking with greater humility the key to the mystery of worship. The Second Vatican Council, the great watershed in the experience of the church of our age, gave powerful support to the work of the liturgical movement. But no golden age followed; expectations have not been fulfilled in any of the great communions of faith. As a result liturgiologists have had to take great gulps of the fresh air of God's Spirit to be able to run the long race which faces them. This is no time for fussiness in details but a time for clear thinking and true feeling. It is a time for seriousness.

I. THE RISE OF THE COMMON LECTIONARY

A number of years ago, Massey Shepherd, responding to a question about what makes for good liturgy, remarked that the true test of a parish liturgy was not whether it followed rubrical direction; the true test was to be found in the lives of those who celebrated that liturgy. Dr. Shepherd was simply affirming the obvious truth that is so easily forgotten, namely, that worship has to do with the diaconal ministry and witness of the church. When the connection is broken, worship loses its very heart. This connection between worship and the life of the people is a major issue in the present study of the lectionary by representatives of churches, Roman Catholic and non-Roman Catholic, on both sides of the Atlantic and "Down Under."

Those whose experience of worship began when the old Roman lectionary was the standard can recall with joy the thrill felt as we began to discover the treasures of the post-Vatican II *Lectionary for Mass* of 1969. Unlike the ancient lectionary, the new lectionary was based on a three-year cycle, permitting what Vatican II had directed: "more abundant, varied, and appropriate reading of

the sacred Scripture."¹ The council had insisted, in words which have since become well-known, that a new lectionary be prepared in which "the treasures of the Bible should be opened up more lavishly so that richer fare might be provided for the faithful at the table of God's word."²

This the new Roman lectionary certainly did—so well that in the brief seven-year period between 1970 and 1976 the lectionary was adopted and adapted in North America by the Presbyterians, the Episcopalians, the Lutherans, the Consultation on Church Union, and the United Methodists. Others joined the parade as time went on. The new lectionary became the

focus of an unpredicted and astonishing ecumenical industry of commentaries and homiletical resources. Over the years ecumenical study groups sprang up at which the texts of the lectionary provided rich resource.

The fly in the ointment came by the decision of various groups working independently of each other to make desirable improvements. Thus, what was a sign of unity also testified to our disunity, because each group made its own changes in lectionary and calendar. Enter the Consultation on Common Texts (CCT). This is an ecumenical group originally established by the Episcopal, Lutheran, Presbyterian, and Roman Catholic Churches of North America. They were soon joined by other churches in Canada and the U.S.A. The group meets to share resources and information and to supply the participating churches with textual resources for worship. The CCT has no authority other than the persuasiveness of its accomplishments. It submits its work to the various communities of faith for study and review. They are encouraged to make use of the CCT's work as a witness to unity to the degree that such work serves each denomination well.

Among the matters submitted to the CCT by the churches was the lectionary which united and yet separated the churches. The CCT conducted a conference on the matter in Washington, D.C., March 29-31, 1978. Representatives of thirteen churches came to present their churches' views. Each asserted the value their church placed on the lectionary and encouraged the effort for greater unity and consensus in the three-year lectionary. The cycles of gospel readings were affirmed. As little change as possible was to be made in their case. They agreed that a commonly accepted series of psalms was needed. The second lessons were not seen to require much change, other than an occasional adjustment of beginnings and endings and perhaps a more judicious selection from within some of the writings.

The list of first readings required more difficult choices. The group directed that these should be revised "in order to provide readings that are more completely representative of the Hebrew Bible and not simply prophetic or typological."³ The choice of Old Testament lessons on the basis of a typological tie to the gospel of the day had been the feature of the lectionary most seriously criticized by scholars and pastors.

The CCT created the North American Committee on Calendar and Lectionary to study these recommendations and to prepare a consensus lectionary. The result of that effort was published under the title *Common Lectionary: The Lectionary*

¹Second Vatican Council, "Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy" (*Sacrosanctum Concilium*) Art. 35, *Acta Apostolicae Sedis* 56 (1964) 109.

²*Ibid.*, Art. 51, *AAS* 56 (1964) 114.

³"Minutes of the Consultation on Common Texts" (Washington, D.C., 28-31 March 1978).

Proposed by the Consultation on Common Texts (New York: The Church Hymnal Corporation, 1983). Analysis of the special features of *Common Lectionary* can be found in Horace Allen's introduction to the book.

II. RESPONSE AND REVIEW

The lectionary was submitted to the participating churches for study and trial use for a three-year period. Some churches in effect made the *Common Lectionary* the official lectionary of the denomination for that period of time. Some made a commitment to the lectionary by

including it in their official service books. Some conducted the three-year test and then set the lectionary aside to await the test results and future revision. The response in the churches was generally favorable, but discomfort was felt by those who missed the usual support resources or a direct link to catechetical resources. Acute displeasure was expressed by some with the treatment given the readings from the Hebrew Scriptures during the Sundays after Pentecost (or Sundays in Ordinary Time). Revision in the light of the reports of the churches was planned, but in the meantime churches in the nations of the former British Commonwealth discovered *Common Lectionary* and requested an opportunity to join the process of evaluation and revision. This request was made through the English Language Liturgical Consultation (ELLC), an international consultation which CCT had joined in founding. The timetable had to be extended, first three years and then again. CCT established a new working group to make recommendations in the light of the many reports and studies. Two representatives of ELLC serve on this group.

The task force on the revision of *Common Lectionary* faces a formidable challenge. Not only does it have a large body of material to consider, but the task has been complicated by the addition of concerns other than those which occupy the churches in North America. In addition to the questions which precipitated the *Common Lectionary* revision, time has injected very important issues of justice (such as the absence from the older lectionaries of significant emphasis on the role of women in the history of God's people). The current dialogue between Christians and Jews and the continuing impact of the holocaust and questions about anti-Semitism in the church open another area of concern for lectionary revisors. Given the nature of our times, it is likely that new sets of issues will appear more quickly than lectionary revision can be completed and received into long-term use.

III. THE PLACE OF THE OLD TESTAMENT

The use of the Hebrew Scriptures in the lectionary is still troubling. On the one hand there are those who find the so-called typological approach satisfying, correct in a liturgical context even if not in the context of a class in exegesis. They prize it because it effectively sets forth the center of Christian worship, the paschal mystery of our Lord. Its consonance with traditional catechesis strengthens the case of this approach to linking Hebrew and Christian Scriptures in the context of the liturgy. Adherents see it as a wise and proven course.

On the other hand some complain that that approach presents a packaged faith which smooths away the tensions between the Hebrew and Christian Scriptures. They argue that this approach makes light of God's revelation to the Jews and robs it of its integrity, making of it something preliminary and incomplete.

Yet another consideration is the criticism that the Roman lectionary fails to include the sweep of historical narrative which plays so important a part in the Hebrew Scriptures. In the Roman tradition that narrative is allocated to the lectionary for daily prayer. That same possibility presents itself in every tradition in which daily prayer plays a significant role. However, it is seldom if ever experienced by the majority of lay Christians. Should they be denied this experience? Black American Christians in particular have objected to a scheme that denies them their traditional practice of preaching on Old Testament narrative in a semi-continuous fashion. These narrative texts present material which is taken for granted in the New Testament. Without

knowledge of this material the New Testament itself begins to become opaque.

Common Lectionary proposed a compromise solution to the issues mentioned above. During the Christmas and Easter cycles it retained most of the texts from the Roman lectionary's list of readings from the Hebrew Scriptures. But for the Sundays following Pentecost it offered a new scheme. In Year A material from the Pentateuch, beginning with Abraham's call and concluding with Moses' death, was to be read in semi-continuous fashion for twenty weeks. This was followed by three Sundays of readings from Ruth and three from prophetic eschatological material. In Year B fourteen Sundays of the David narrative (from his anointing to his death) are followed by four Sundays of wisdom literature and eight Sundays substantially following the Roman lectionary. The time following Pentecost in Year C begins with ten Sundays of the Elisha-Elijah narrative (beginning with Solomon's dedication of the Temple and concluding with Elisha's death). These are followed by fifteen Sundays with readings from the major and minor prophets and one Sunday retaining the reading from the Roman lectionary. The revisors were of the opinion that although these Old Testament readings were not correlated directly with the gospel selections, the pairing of pentateuchal material with Matthew, David with Mark, and the prophets with Luke respected the concerns of each of the three evangelists. In this way the framers of *Common Lectionary* sought to meet the criticism directed at the Roman lectionary's treatment of the Old Testament and also to add some readings from biblical literature otherwise not adequately represented in the lectionary.

This has not won general approval any more than the Roman scheme did. The task force guiding the work of revision is presently following two courses of action at once. The CCT semi-continuous narrative readings are being critically reviewed in a conscious attempt to make the selection more comprehensive and to do justice to the role of women in Israel's history. This is not without its dangers either. For example, a proposed pericope is the Hagar story in Genesis 21:8-21. But does inclusion of this story have negative connotations for our Islamic neighbors?

In addition to this review of the narrative texts in *Common Lectionary*, the task force is also reviewing the Roman lectionary first readings in an attempt to offer a more comprehensive use of the Hebrew Scriptures within the typological and fulfillment patterns. The more strained relationships between Old Testament and gospel readings are also being examined.

In short, the task force is offering a two-track proposal. Conceivably, if the CCT accepts this proposal at the end, some churches might choose to print in their books two sets of Old Testament readings during the post-Pentecost season. Some

might publish only the semi-continuous narrative readings and some only the revised Roman readings. How common such a Common Lectionary would be is open to question.

IV. PROSPECTS AND PITFALLS

All this makes it evident that lectionary revision is not a matter of concern only to those who have an interest in esoterica or in advancing a specific theological agenda. The selection of readings guides the church in worship. Because worship is inevitably related to the church's diaconal ministry and witness, lectionary selections become expressive not only of the church's attitude toward Scripture but also of its attitude toward the world.

This can be seen again in current consideration of the second reading, specifically of

certain selections from the letter to the Romans. Some argue that parts of the New Testament reflect a sort of institutional anti-Semitic bias. Can such parts of Scripture properly be read before the Christian assembly in view of the probable anti-Semitic bias of some of the hearers? Should such portions of Scripture be reserved for other situations where they could be discussed with the necessary corrective guidance?

Can lectionary revisors take upon themselves the task of protecting the church from the possible misuse of the Scriptures? Granted, if human beings are to create lectionaries (and who else can?), some principles must be established and followed. All such principles will reflect judgments of a purely provincial character. But that can not deter us. If today we eliminate texts which may be offensive to one group, on what basis will we continue to read texts which may one day be offensive to another group? Sooner or later the number of Arabs in the U.S. will outnumber the number of Jews. Should that alter our perception of what may appropriately be read in the liturgical assembly?

How is the important matter of justice addressed? Rubricists strive diligently to prevent deadly harm being done to the liturgy, but it never works. Can sincere lectionary reformers use the selection process to protect the church from error? Must some matters be reserved for catechesis?

Someday the process of revision will come to a temporary halt. A new edition of *Common Lectionary* will appear and be submitted to the churches for consideration. Some may choose to make it their only official lectionary. Some may choose to make it an authorized alternative to their present book. Some may not find it useful. Certainly the new edition—however it deals with controverted matters—will not satisfy all points of view. Must it?

Roman Catholics are presently chagrined by Rome's refusal to permit authorized use of *Common Lectionary* in North America despite the American bishops' request. Yet Catholics continue to support this effort. Any hope they have of gaining approval for its use depends on its existence and acceptance by a growing number of churches around the world, particularly the Anglican communion.

Christians in Great Britain are interested in *Common Lectionary* as a possible alternative to their own two-year lectionary which is based on a radical restructuring of the calendar. Whatever the merits of that scheme, it separates them from Roman lectionary practice. *Common Lectionary* may offer them a graceful resolution to their isolation. Anglican churches in the former colonies are uncomfortable with

the two-year scheme and seek a lectionary that permits them to be in harmony with both Roman Catholic and non-Roman Catholic churches in their own lands and which at the same time is used in Great Britain.

Churches in North America which have not had a previous lectionary tradition have found *Common Lectionary* a rich resource. In increasing numbers they are making use of it as a gift that in times past they would not have valued.

Common Lectionary has won a place in the churches of North America and may yet win a similar place throughout much of the English-speaking world. Many churches will continue to use *CL* whatever the shape of the final revision. Some may mutter darkly about theological indifference, but that would be untrue, for those committed to the project have an abiding belief

that some things cry out to be done together—the reading and proclamation of the Scriptures is one of those things.⁴

⁴For further reading: Horace T. Allen, Jr., “Emerging Ecumenical Issues in Worship,” *Word & World* IX (1989) 16-22; *Common Lectionary: The Lectionary Proposed by the Consultation on Common Texts* (New York: The Church Hymnal Corporation, 1983); Donald Grey, ed., *The Word in Season: The Use of the Bible in Liturgy* (Norwich, England: Canterbury, 1988); “Lectionary and Catechesis,” *National Bulletin on Liturgy* 22 (1989) 69-107; “Introduction,” *Lectionary for Mass* (Washington, United States Catholic Conference, 1969)—this introduction can be found in most printings of the Roman Lectionary; Calvin Storley, “Reclaiming the Old Testament,” *Lutheran Quarterly* 1 (1987) 487-494.