

The New Common Lectionary

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Most thoughtful pastors by now are aware of the benefits of using a lectionary. At least those who are genuinely concerned for the larger, common Christian witness so testify in great numbers. My correspondence and phone conversations continue to credit lectionary use for an evident resurgence of biblical preaching, and a welcome relief from the drudgery of always "coming up with something new." Especially reassuring is the recovered sense of the relevance of Scripture. Biblical preaching is a tough art that separates the weak-kneed obscurantist as well as the sentimental pietist. The recent publication of Dieter Hessel's *Social Themes of the Christian Year: A Commentary on the Lectionary*¹ is a real break-through and should claim the attention of discerning preachers as well as pew holders.

It is now fourteen years since the publication of the Vatican II lectionary and the explosive impact it made on preaching all across denominational lines. In that span of years a flood of new service books and liturgical aids has appeared, most of which are cordial to the new thrust, but the stubborn persistence of several serious problems has been forcefully illumined. Although the recently approved adaptations of the 1969 Roman Lectionary by Protestant denominations show an amazing degree of consensus, there is still much work to be done.

The most energetic ecumenical response to the remaining problems has undoubtedly been the work of the North American Committee on Calendar and Lectionary, (NAACL) established in March 1978 after a thorough and highly critical scrutiny of the situation. The NACCL was brought into being by the already much respected Consultation on Common Texts (CCT) and asked to address these problems and make recommendations.

Foremost among the problems identified was the much complained of method for choosing Old Testament readings for pairing with Gospel passages. The choices made in the Vatican II lectionary were seen by many as an overly simplistic use of the familiar prophecy/fulfillment method. The consequences of using this method so heavily were manifold. The Old Testament deserves to be heard in its own right, and not so rigorously employed in a predictive sense. The integrity of any book can be hazarded if it is broken up into snippets rather than allowed to flow as much as possible at its own pace. More "continuous reading" is called for. The prediction/fulfillment method also tends to reduce the amount of narrative material used, much to the detriment of wonder, fascination, and climax that characterize so much of Scripture. The expansion of the story dimension in lectionary revision will certainly be welcomed by many who are openly grateful for the impact made in their maturing years by the derring-do of Bible stories.

The NAACL has completed its work and has reported to the Consultation on Common Texts in anticipation that its work will be published in full in September or October by the Church Hymnal Corporation, 800 Second Avenue, New York, N.Y. 10017, as another in the long-time series of *Prayer Book Studies*. In the meantime its proposals are under study by participating commissions, both Roman Catholic and Protestant.

The proposed revisions endorsed by the Consultation on Common Texts will be published as its *Common Lectionary* for a three-year trial period ending December, 1986. Dr. Horace T. Allan, Jr. who chairs the CCT anticipates that reactions from the participating churches can then be taken into account for the final (?) version of the *Common Lectionary* in 1987.

As indicated above, the most readily evident changes in the currently used lectionary tables will be in the Old Testament readings for Sundays after Pentecost. There will be more extended "readings in course" (*lectio continua*), and more narrative material. Correlation of Old Testament to Gospel will no longer be attempted on a Sunday-by-Sunday basis but seasonally to a particular Gospel. Year A ("The Year of Matthew") will focus on patriarchs Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, and on fifteen successive Moses pericopes. In accord with a concern to illumine the role of women in sacred history, Year A will include three readings from the Book of Ruth.

Year B ("The Year of Mark") provides David narratives for fourteen Sundays, four selections from Wisdom Literature, and classic passages on the Suffering Servant, the Remnant, the Great Commandment, and the Son of Man. Year C ("The Year of Luke") includes nine stories from the Elijah/Elisha cycle and fifteen typical selections from the writings of the prophets. In all three years the last Sunday after Pentecost is observed as Christ the King Sunday, an appropriate eschatological emphasis as the Advent season is ushered in.

In accord with increasing ecumenical usage, the Transfiguration is observed on the last Sunday after Epiphany, but for those who are wedded to the second Sunday of Lent alternate readings are provided.²

The above comments must suffice as a quick preview of the major revisions of pericopes as proposed in the forthcoming *Common Lectionary*. Their full publication as a *Prayer Book Study* will include:

1. Introduction, giving a full description and a statement of principles and goals
2. Table of readings and Psalms, listing all of the pericopes with Revised Standard Version versification
3. Lists of titles used for seasons, Sundays, and special days, and the system of "Propers" employed in the *Common Lectionary*
4. Comparative list of titles for coordinating "propers" with "Sundays in Ordinary Time" and "after Pentecost"
5. Explanatory notes on the underlying reasons for the decisions about readings and Psalms
6. Index of Scripture, a list of all the readings and Psalms in their biblical order, showing the days on which they are used
7. Questionnaires for use by congregations and individuals in evaluating the *Common Lectionary* (When completed, these should be sent to de-

nominal offices for forwarding to CCT, or directly to the Consultation on Common Texts, 1234 Massachusetts Ave., N.W. Suite 1009, Washington, D.C. 20005.)

Perhaps of even greater impact than the proposed changes in the actual table of readings are the calendar proposals made by the NAACL. The shifting of Transfiguration from Lent 2 to the last Sunday after Epiphany has already been mentioned. But more than anything else about the use of the lectionary, the varied ways the several Christian bodies name and enumerate the Sundays in the church year have resulted in confusion bordering on chaos. The problem is rooted of course in the fact that Easter (and therefore Pentecost) are movable feasts. Easter can occur as early as March 22 and as late as April 25. When Easter is early, it encroaches on the number of Sundays "after Epiphany," reducing their number, as necessary, from as many as nine to as few as four. When Easter is late the number of Sundays "after Epiphany" is increased, but the number of Sundays "after Pentecost" is reduced from as many as twenty-seven to as few as twenty-two. Lectionary readings must be provided for every Sunday and in such a way as to take into account the movement of the date for Easter.

It should be readily apparent from even this brief summary of the problem that a simple and readily understood and agreed-upon system is desirable. Different Christian bodies have followed different systems. The Roman Church designates the thirty-three or thirty-four Sundays that fall between Epiphany and Ash Wednesday, and between Pentecost and the first Sunday of Advent as "Sundays of the Year," numbering them consecutively. Sunday readings not needed are dropped at the beginning (not the end) of the period after Pentecost, so as not to omit the eschatological readings listed just before Advent. Episcopal and United Methodist lectionary calendars do the same.

Presbyterians since their 1970 *Worshipbook* have provided readings for as many as nine Sundays after Epiphany and as many as twenty-eight Sundays after Pentecost, omitting readings not used after Epiphany and Pentecost as a particular year might require. The United Church of Christ also followed this pattern.

Lutherans in their 1978 *Lutheran Book of Worship* in essence followed the Presbyterian/UCC system, but observed Transfiguration on the last Sunday after Epiphany, and Christ the King Sunday on the last Sunday after Pentecost.

The Episcopal Church has brought forward what seems to be a truly inspired solution for avoiding such complicated confusion by tying the all but universally used sequence of Gospel readings to the calendar date of Sundays, counting back from the fixed date of the first Sunday of Advent, which always falls on the Sunday nearest November 30 (Nov. 27 to Dec. 3).³ In effect, Sundays after Pentecost in the *Common Lectionary* will utilize the readings ("Propers") listed for each Sunday according to their calendar dates, but will be known as numbered "Sundays After Pentecost."

To avoid possible confusion about what date a particular Sunday is closest to, the *Common Lectionary* will list inclusive dates. For example, proper 10 is the set of readings appropriate for the "Sunday between July 10 and 16 inclu-

sive." We are indebted to the Methodists for this welcome refinement.⁴

In this system of "Propers" any given set of readings (Old Testament, Epistle, and Gospel) will always be read every three years on the Sunday that is the same distance in time from November 30, but not necessarily the same distance in time after Pentecost. When this system is followed we "come out even" every year with no unused sets of readings left over. It is also true that a given set of readings will be used at differing "Sundays After Pentecost." Proper 10 readings (for use between July 10 and 16) will be read on July 15, 1984, the fifth Sunday after Pentecost. In 1985 Proper 10 readings will be used on July 14 which will be the seventh Sunday after Pentecost.

At first glance all of this appears to be more confusing than helpful, but when seen in tabular form the simple logic of it is readily evident. In any event the simplest thread to follow is the sequence of Gospel readings, which remains unchanged. A particular Gospel reading will always have the same Proper number and will always be used between the same inclusive dates. Can anyone propose a simpler system?

NOTES

¹ Dieter Hessel, *Social Themes of the Christian Year: A Commentary on the Lectionary* (Geneva Press: Philadelphia, 1983).

² For more detailed information prior to the publication of the actual tables of the *Common Lectionary*, see the writer's articles in the current issues of *Reformed Liturgy and Music* (Summer 1983) and *Liturgy: Journal of the Liturgical Conference* (3, no. 2)

³ As in the *Book of Common Prayer*, 1977 revision.

⁴ See their *Seasons of the Gospel: Resources for the Christian Year* (Abingdon: Nashville, 1979).