

STRANGE ENCOUNTERS OF A LECTIONARY KIND

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Introduction

Churches of Christ have a strong tradition of arbitrarily choosing sermon texts over the course of a year. These decisions are sometimes made with careful planning and evaluation of community needs and comprehensive coverage of Scripture. But sometimes these decisions are made every week with little forethought about the comprehensive diet the congregation is receiving over an extended time. Almost universally, these decisions are based upon the wisdom of the local evangelist. In recent years, for many mainline Protestant denominations, there is a growing momentum for recovering the age-old practice of lectionary preaching revolving around the Christian Year. This trend remains foreign to our fellowship.

The purpose of this investigation is to inquire into the strengths and weaknesses between two alternative approaches of sermon planning. This investigation will describe one preacher's methodology in detail to enhance future efforts, resolve past difficulties, and rectify faulty practices. More specifically, an answer to the following question is sought: What contributions will a lectionary based upon the Christian Year give to a tradition that is not familiar with such practices? Or, what contributions will a lectionary based upon the Christian Year make to a preacher in a tradition familiar with neither a formal lectionary nor the liturgical year upon which it is based?¹

¹ A quick and handy guide is J. G. Davies, *The New Westminster Dictionary of Liturgy and Worship* (Philadelphia: Westminster 1986). This is a comprehensive dictionary that covers all aspects of form and function of worship. The stated purpose is "understanding." Over one hundred contributors from a variety of denominational affiliations make this volume practical, balanced, and ecumenical in nature. There is a wide range of religious bodies covered.

History of the Christian Year

The Liturgical Year, in its cycles and feasts, celebrates a Christian understanding of time.² First, there is an “incarnational” understanding of time rooted in the mediation and disclosure of God in the world through Jesus. Second, there is an “eschatological” time which views time as moving forward to Christ’s return yet aware of the past and present.³

Originally every Sunday was a “little Easter.” It was the week rather than the year that constituted the primary unit of time for the first Christians. The resurrection changed everything. The first believers began worshipping on the day of the week on which Jesus rose. Many of the Jewish Christians may have still observed Sabbath and simply added the “Lord’s Day” to their weekly observance. Though there were variations in local customs, the usual worship service included reading of Scriptures, preaching, several kinds of prayers, singing, and the Lord’s Supper.⁴

The Liturgical Year evolved from three primitive festivals: Epiphany (recalling the advent and baptism of Jesus), Pascha (the passion and resurrection of Jesus), and Pentecost (which included Ascension and celebrated the gift of the Spirit). These celebrations were not reenactments

Bibliographies and cross-references are an added bonus. See also James F. White, *Introduction to Christian Worship* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1990). White’s book is the standard introductory text for most Protestant schools. See also any of the works by Geoffrey Wainwright, especially *Doxology: The Praise of God in Worship, Doctrine, and Life: A Systematic Theology* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980); and *The Study of Liturgy* (London: SPCK, 1992).

² For an extended treatment of time see Robert Taft, “The Liturgical Year: Studies, Prospects, Reflections,” *Worship* 55 (January 1981) 2–21. Taft also reviews recent literature on liturgical studies. This article presents a comprehensive statement concerning a theological explanation for the practice of following the Liturgical Year. For those in our fellowship, and they are legion, who oppose liturgical studies *a priori*, this article would present a good beginning place for healthy dialogue. He states on page 18, “This is what we do in liturgy. We make anamnesis, memorial, of this dynamic saving power in our lives, to make it penetrate ever more into the depths of our being, for the building up of the Body of Christ.” The Christian Year and the use of the lectionary is designed to make historic faith present reality. See also, Robert Taft, “‘What Does Liturgy Do?’ Toward a Soteriology of Liturgical Celebration: Some Theses,” *Worship* 66 (May 1992) 194–211.

³ Elizabeth Achtemeier, “Aids and Resources for the Interpretation of Lectionary Texts,” *Interpretation* 31 (April 1977) 154.

⁴ See Everett Ferguson, *Early Christians Speak* (Austin, TX: Sweet Publishing Company, 1971) for many examples of early Christian worship practices.

of history but rather a participation in the action already accomplished by Jesus.

The Christian Year is divided into two parts. The first half begins in Advent and extends to Pentecost. The emphasis during this time should stress the life of Christ. The Year reenacts the life of Christ in the following ways: (1) Advent looks forward to the first and second coming of the Messiah; (2) at Christmas we join the shepherds in worship and adoration; (3) during Epiphany we bring our treasures with the Magi; (4) throughout Lent we join our Lord for forty days and nights in the wilderness; and (5) Holy Week and Eastertide bring us into fellowship with the sufferings of Christ in full assurance of the glory to be revealed.⁵ This reenactment of the life of Christ is not simply a biography of Jesus or a celebration of past events but an opening up of the church itself to the memory of the Jesus story in such a way that the risen Christ is disclosed even now.⁶

The second half of the Year is the long season of Pentecost (twenty-seven Sundays), which stresses the teachings of Jesus. This emphasis balances the earlier seasons that emphasized Jesus' life. These teachings cause the church to look at the early Christians to see what the Spirit-filled community began to do and teach as they responded to the life of Jesus. The response of these early Christians is reflected in Acts and the Epistles. The question is asked, "What is God's Spirit saying to us today?"⁷

Easter was the first great event to be celebrated by the early church. All the imagery of the Jewish Passover was brought into the rite, namely, the Exodus, the Passover, and the entrance into the Promised Land.⁸ The Church does not limit the celebration of the Lord's resurrection to Easter Sunday but continues it until the day the Lord sends the Spirit.

Whether the formal celebration of Easter began in the apostolic period or in the second century is uncertain, but from the beginning it was a commemoration in a single feast of both the death and the resurrection

⁵ Massey H. Shepherd, Jr., *The Worship of the Church* (Greenwich, CN: Seabury, 1952) 105.

⁶ Michael D. Whalen, *Seasons and Feasts of the Church Year: An Introduction* (New York: Paulist, 1993) 8.

⁷ David Steel, *Preaching through the Year* (Atlanta: John Knox, 1980) 19.

⁸ Marion J. Hatchett, *Commentary on the American Prayer Book* (New York: The Seabury, 1980) 38. See also R. T. Beckwith, "The Origin of the Festivals Easter and Whitsun," *Studia Liturgica* 13 (1979) 1–20, and T. J. Talley, "History and Eschatology in the Primitive Pascha," *Worship* 47 (1973) 212–21.

of Christ. Hippolytus gives a description of the ceremony indicating that the celebration originated in Rome before 215 A.D.

The Easter liturgy, following a day of fasting, consisted of a vigil of readings and prayer throughout Saturday night, with the celebration of baptism and the Eucharist at dawn on Easter Day. The church used this time to bring new initiates into the fellowship. Baptism, symbolizing the death, burial and resurrection, has had long historical and theological roots connecting it to Easter.

The Easter story brings continuity to the entire Christian Year. The early Christians celebrated Easter every Sunday, at every baptism, and at every Eucharist. The Easter story is not merely a recounting of past events, but it also celebrates the present reality in the hearts of faithful believers and anticipates their future consummation.

The Gospels devote a third of their space to describing the events of Holy Week. Christ's death and resurrection are the two dominant themes in the sermons in Acts. The Epistles do not concentrate on the earthly life of Jesus but on the events of these eight days. The development of the Christian Year came from a biblical emphasis of what this week signifies. The church must maintain that emphasis if it is to present a balanced and truly Christian faith to the world. Holy Week origins are found around the fourth century.

The historical approach to the liturgies of Holy Week was also applied to the Great Fifty Days before Pentecost.⁹ The Sundays following Easter continue the same Easter proclamation. On Easter Sunday, the congregation "proclaims and declares" the truth of resurrection. The Sundays that follow are opportunities for the preacher to deepen the congregation's understanding of the resurrection's meaning and significance. The preacher can show how the resurrection fits into God's plan for our redemption.

Pentecost comes fifty days after the Passover. For the Jews it marked the celebration of the giving of the Law and the Feast of Weeks, a celebration of the harvest, the firstfruits that are poured out by God's grace. For Christians, it meant the fulfillment of the promise God made through the prophet Joel, namely, that God would pour out his Spirit upon all flesh.

Pentecost is the season of the Church Year when preaching explores what it means to live as members of Christ's body. The season celebrates

⁹ R. C. C. Jasper and Paul F. Bradshaw, *A Companion to the Alternative Service Book* (London: SPCK, 1986) 46.

the gift of the Holy Spirit to the church and reflects on how God's people live under the guidance of the Spirit. What does it mean to be members of God's new covenant people in Christ? The preacher will need to focus on a realistic attitude of Christian living. Ascension Day emerged as a separate celebration around the fourth century.

From Easter, the period of discipline known as Lent developed. This was a time to strengthen one's devotion. The earliest celebration began around the period of the Council of Nicaea (325 CE). Its origin probably lies in the formal and final period of preparation of candidates for baptism at Easter, with which those undergoing penance rapidly became associated. It slowly developed into a preparation for Easter by all. The season of Lent consists of forty weekdays. The six Sundays during Lent are exempt from the fasting and penance because they were to remain days of celebration of resurrection. This season begins on Ash Wednesday and continues to Palm Sunday (Passion Sunday). Lent is a mixed season of mourning for sin and anticipated joy of the triumph over the grave. It is a preparatory time to move the community toward Easter; therefore, Lent is an annual renewal that is not to be bogged down in penance. The themes during Lent are (1) Temptation, (2) Repentance—renewal not remorse, (3) Sin, and (4) The offer of forgiveness. Lent has a movement toward Holy Week. The preacher needs to help the congregation bridge that gap.¹⁰

Christmas and Epiphany emerged about the fourth century. The origin of these two seasons is clouded in mystery. Many hold to the opinion that the celebrations of Epiphany and later of Christmas were attempts to counter the pagan festivals surrounding winter. December 25 was a day set aside in 274 CE for the pagan celebration of the birthday of the sun, *Natalis solis invicti*. The Roman Chronograph of 354 CE indicates that the city acknowledged Christmas just sixty-two years later. Epiphany is a season marking the manifestation and revelation of God's gift of himself to all. The Epiphany season begins in January and extends to Ash Wednesday (four to nine Sundays, depending on the year).¹¹ The traditions of Christmas first developed independently of one another (Epiphany in the East and Christmas in the West). Epiphany began as a tradition to celebrate the Lord's birth on January 6 and his baptism. However, due to the overshadowing of January 6 by December 25, Epiphany is now a celebration of his baptism and the visit of the Magi.

¹⁰ Steel, *Preaching*, 39.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

Advent, originally modeled after Lent, was the last season to take shape—around the fifth or sixth century in Gaul. It is intended to be a period of preparation for Christmas and Epiphany. Originally Advent contained six Sundays, but today that number has been reduced to four Sundays before Christmas.¹² It developed from the period of fasting and worship prescribed for those who were candidates for baptism on Epiphany. The Christian calendar today begins in Advent. Advent speaks of the promise of God coming into the world. Believers are expectant that God would reveal himself both in the incarnation and the second coming. The next advent points to our future expectation and hope for the coming revelation of God.¹³

Many Saints' Days were added throughout history. Some of these find their origin as early as the second century when Christians celebrated the death of local martyrs. These days were added to the calendar gradually to the point that most days in the year had one such commemoration attached to them.¹⁴ The calendar, however, should not be seen as a collection of special days, but as a Christ-centered whole focused on the saving work of Christ. The predominate character of the Christian Year is christological.

Liturgical preaching, although rooted in historic faith, is not content with mere description of the way things were. Its concern is with the present reality of the death, burial, and resurrection in the lives of the believers.

Methods of Selecting Texts for Preaching

There are several methods for selecting the texts and topics for preaching on any given Sunday. First, external events that affect the life of our nation may call for attention on any particular Sunday. Many in the pew will have the day's events fresh on their minds and will need a Christian voice to help them put these matters in perspective. As the preacher examines world events, he can be sensitive in the selection of texts so that a Word from the Lord will be spoken.

The pastoral concerns of the congregation can also be the primary factor in selecting texts. Harry Emerson Fosdick best exemplifies the life-situation approach to preaching. In the introduction to a multivolume

¹² Jasper and Bradshaw, *Companion*, 50.

¹³ Steel, *Preaching*, 28.

¹⁴ Jasper and Bradshaw, *Companion*, 51.

anthology of Christian preaching, Clyde Fant and William Pinson write that over the centuries those preachers who exercised the greatest impact upon the world were those who spoke to the needs and issues of their day.¹⁵

Each congregation is different. The audience comes with differing needs, problems, doubts, fears, and hopes. An effective preacher is also a sensitive pastor who will know his flock. Only the local preacher can make text choices for these people and their concerns. Sermons will be designed to satisfy and solve their problems and not just make points. Long-term planning for other concerns can also meet particular needs. These other concerns include (1) the need of the people to hear doctrinal sermons and series that treat topics in great depth, (2) the need of the people for continuity that only *lectio continua* provides, and (3) the need to set the agenda for specific congregations as they grow to meet their distinctive mission in their community. Combining the weekly concerns of the congregation with careful planning for the complete nutritional diet places the responsibility of text selection with either one person or a small select group. Choosing texts due to pastorally perceived need makes preaching immediate and powerful.

Preachers far too often choose texts to serve their agendas. Although one must allow for the guiding of the Spirit, often too much is blamed on the third person of the trinity. These preachers may be merely preaching sermons that promote their causes or promote themselves. They may be doing more self-therapy than proclamation. The canon is usually reduced to a few favorite texts or themes and the gospel to one person's individual encounter with it.

From a more biblical perspective, texts are chosen for edification of the people in their knowledge of God and self. Such preaching will lead to a greater understanding of the congregation's duty and obligations as believers. In short, preaching has a theological function for which the Scriptures provide the only resource.

Finally, from a liturgical motive, a lectionary can be used for selecting texts for preaching. The Revised Common Lectionary is sensitive to the fact that many denominations observe the seasons of the Church's Year. A lectionary is a systematic and comprehensive approach to the use of Scripture. "Any compilation of an orderly sequence of selections from

¹⁵ Clyde E. Fant and William M. Pinson, Jr., *Twenty Centuries of Great Preaching, vol. 1, Biblical Sermons to Savanarola* (Waco: Word Books, 1971) v.

Scripture for use within a congregation may be classified as a lectionary."¹⁶ In our fellowship, I have seen three methods used for the purpose of selecting texts for daily Bible readings: (1) *Power for Today*, (2) *The One Year Bible*, and (3) several versions of a daily Bible reading schedule. I have seen *The One Year Bible* used as a means of selecting texts for preaching.

The purpose for a lectionary is "to set forth an orderly succession of passages which reflect the calendar and fit the public worship pattern of the group and which can be repeated periodically so as to cover scriptural content which is important to the community's life."¹⁷ Lectionaries can be arranged in various ways. *Lectio continua* or "continuous reading" of biblical books section by section is common. More often, however, some passages are omitted, giving a "semi-continuous reading."¹⁸ Finally, there is the "eclogadic" type, whereby isolated excerpts are chosen for specific occasions and dates. The Common Lectionary is a combination of these methods. The texts are chosen by the arrangers of the Common Lectionary to correspond with the occasion. When the sermon process routinely follows the lectionary year after year and understands the text with respect to the occasion, then patterns of faith are set up for the community.

Westerhoff and Willimon, who both favor lectionary preaching discussed below, offer these occasions that require attention by the preacher when selecting texts: (1) Baptism, (2) Eucharist, (3) Marriage, (4) Recognition of divorce, (5) Thanksgiving for the birth or adoption of a child, (6) Moving and new homes, (7) Ordination and the celebration of a new ministry, (8) Retirement, (9) Reconciliation of a penitent, (10) Ministry to the sick, and (12) Burial of the dead.¹⁹ The next logical step is to contend that pastoral concerns can be met while using the lectionary.

Preachers who choose their own readings and assign them to a day are, in effect, building their own sequence of biblical selections—a self-chosen lectionary-under-construction. Thus whether or not to use the lectionary is not the question, because everyone uses a lectionary of one form or another. The question is, Which kind of lectionary will we use?

¹⁶ Peter C. Bower, *Handbook for the Common Lectionary* (Philadelphia: The Geneva Press, 1987) 15.

¹⁷ John Reumann, "A History of Lectionaries: From the Synagogue at Nazareth to Post-Vatican II," *Interpretation* 31 (April 1977) 117.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ John H. Westerhoff III and William Willimon, *The Liturgy and Learning through the Life Cycle* (Minneapolis, MN: Seabury, 1980) 5.

Or, more to the point, Who will select the texts, and on what basis will they be selected?²⁰

Arguments against Using a Lectionary

Most objections to the use of a lectionary relate to the issue of text selection: “criteria for selection, who selects, the process by which texts are chosen, what is selected, when a text is selected, and so forth.”²¹ The limitations the lectionary places upon the preacher contribute to its nonuse. The preacher is limited to what he deems necessary for study and proclamation. The preacher is limited in selecting texts for immediate world or pastoral concerns. The text itself is limited when an outside force places seemingly artificial boundaries upon it. Texts have been assigned to specific days without any possible foreknowledge of the needs or the setting of the people. This is especially true of the OT. Is the liturgical occasion incompatible with the present concerns of the people? The challenge for preaching the lectionary is to overcome this obstacle.

The preacher should examine closely why some verses are omitted in the OT readings. The Gospel overshadows the OT, calling for a Christological interpretation, thus diminishing a theological interpretation. The OT should stand on its own with its own voice and not as a veneer. In our fellowship, many would embrace the argument “Time does not order Scripture; Scripture orders time.” Exposition cannot be the servant of occasion. The Bible must set the agenda. The lectionary tends to create a canon within the canon.²² In my observation, most individual preachers also reduce canon by preaching from only a select number of books or themes and avoiding difficult texts.

Few advocate that preachers give up their judgment in choosing texts from a lectionary. The lectionary is just a guide. Lectionary advocates recognize the need for possible deviations to meet pressing concerns at the local level. All the above criticisms are rightly alleged against those who use the lectionary uncritically. Although it can become a crutch for the lazy preacher by giving a false sense of security, this is not the intent.

²⁰ Bower, *Handbook*, 16.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 21.

²² Bailey, “Lectionary,” 144–51, offers six critiques of the lectionary. Bower, *Handbook*, 31, summarizes nine objections given by Lewis A. Briner in “A Look at the New Proposals for the Lectionary.”

Arguments for Using a Lectionary

Lectionary proponents are quite verbal in defending its use.²³ Even those who were leery of its use in the past have been won.²⁴ There is an argument from tradition. The use of a lectionary is rooted in the earliest practices of Christians springing from the Jewish tradition.²⁵ Correctly observed, however, the lectionary will not create a smaller canon but will expose the congregation to a wide range of biblical material and push the preacher to examine unfamiliar or difficult texts. The lectionary will provide a wider scriptural base for preaching. The lectionary provides a guide to help the preacher and the people to make sure that the story is clearly and consistently told across the year and the years.²⁶ Lectionaries also enhance coordinated planning of public worship and bring integration between the sermon and the liturgy. The time of worship is a time to celebrate God, who is present and active in people's lives. Readings centered on the person of Christ and organized around the Christian Year accomplish the intent of worship.

Finally, lectionaries can also be used by the sensitive preacher to meet the needs of the congregation. No lection should be prayerfully considered without keeping in mind the congregational setting. Therefore, the preacher must stand in a pastoral relationship with the people. When the text is read week in and week out, it will be read by a person who knows and loves the people.

If we are to believe that the lectionary and the liturgy can be a source of preaching that not only comforts but also challenges the faithful, it means, of course, that we begin with the conviction that the Scriptures and the liturgy are not, in themselves, at odds with or out of touch with

²³ Bailey, "Lectionary," 139–44, gives ten positive reasons. Dieter T. Hessel, *Social Themes of the Christian Year: A Commentary on the Lectionary* (Philadelphia: Geneva Press, 1983) 21, offers six reasons. Bower, *Handbook*, 26–28, offers twelve. Although some of these overlap, they represent differing perspectives.

²⁴ Eugene L. Lowry, *Living with the Lectionary: Preaching through the Revised Common Lectionary* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1992). Lowry reviews both the assets and liabilities of using the common lectionary in preaching. As one who originally disliked the lectionary, he offers a different perspective as to how to use this preaching aid.

²⁵ Gerard S. Sloyan, "Is Church Teaching Neglected When the Lectionary Is Preached?" *Worship* 61 (March 1987) 126–40.

²⁶ Gilbert E. Doan, Jr., *The Worship of the Church* (Greenwich, CN: Seabury, 1952) 105.

what is human. In fact, it means that we see in the Scriptures a continual attempt to wrestle with the very meaning of human existence and that we accept the NT's presentation of Jesus as the one in whom the deepest meaning of human existence is revealed. And finally it means that we regard the liturgy as the ongoing reappropriation of this meaning through contact with Jesus by means of word and ritual action. This understanding of Scripture and liturgy indicates, I believe, that preaching which flows from the Scriptures and is rooted in the liturgy is the preeminent means for dealing not just with the symptoms and external manifestations of human misery, but with its root causes.²⁷

Bailey concludes, "The positive values of preaching lectionary texts are many and substantial, perhaps exceeding those of any other form of preaching. Yet the limitations are serious enough to caution against an unflinching or uncritical usage."²⁸ Lawrence Stookey would agree: "While lectionary framers must look carefully at the potential abuses of every pericope considered for inclusion, they can neither prevent all possible abuses [nor] be held accountable for it."²⁹ Likewise, adherence to any lectionary does not guarantee that preaching will be biblical or relevant, nor does it reduce the exegetical task. It only provides a guide to help the preacher.³⁰ Most of what is said for or against the lectionary can be said about any of the methods for selecting texts. The advantages and abuses can both be manifested in any plan.³¹

²⁷ William Skudlarek, *The Word in Worship*, Abingdon Preacher's Library (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1981) 47–48.

²⁸ Bailey, "Lectionary," 152.

²⁹ Lawrence Hull Stookey, "Marcion, Typology, and Lectionary Preaching," *Worship* 66 (May 1992) 261.

³⁰ Doan, *Worship*, 104.

³¹ The material available to assist lectionary preaching is abundant. Some of these sources are Fred B. Craddock, John H. Hayes, Carl R. Holladay, and Gene M. Tucker, *Preaching through the Christian Year: A Comprehensive Commentary on the Lectionary, Year A* (Philadelphia: Trinity, 1992). Presently there are two volumes. The authors intend to cut through the tedious exegetical discipline and give current information readily usable by the busy preacher. D. Newsome, *Texts for Preaching: A Lectionary Commentary Based on the NRSV, Year B* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox, 1993). See also John K. Bergland, *Abingdon Preacher's Annual 1993* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1992). For each lection, the annual offers interpretation of the text, imagination starters, example sermons, and suggestions for worship. Marion J. Hatchett, *Commentary on the American Prayer Book* (New York: Seabury, 1980). Reginald H. Fuller, *Preaching the Lectionary: The Word of God for the Church Today* (Collegeville,

Introduction to the Revised Common Lectionary

“Until I arrive, give attention to the public reading of Scripture, to exhorting, to teaching” (1 Tim 4:13). The custom of reading a series of biblical lessons in worship is an ancient tradition and has always played a prominent role in the church. John also states, “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). Luke 4:16–30 offers one of the earliest traditions of a possible lectionary use in the synagogue. Jesus opened the scroll and *found the place*. The text in Isaiah 61:1–2, it has been argued, was a “prescribed passage” previously marked.³²

The origin of lectionaries is hidden and obscure. “Jewish tradition traces the practice back to Moses (Deut 31:10–12; 2 Kgs 22:8–13; 23:1–3) and Ezra (Neh 8).³³ Unfortunately, the evidence is from latter Judaism (tenth to twelfth century A.D.). All that can be said for certain is that the origin of lectionaries and the original pericope selections by the Early Church is an ancient one.³⁴

Many lectionaries developed over the centuries. The Roman Church has been concerned with lectionary reform throughout its history. Most “Free Churches” rejected lectionary use. The Reformed tradition varied and usually developed independent traditions. The Anglicans have always used a lectionary and did not join the present liturgical reform noted below.³⁵

In Advent 1969, the Roman calendars and lectionaries for mass (*Ordo Lectionum Missae*) were adopted by the Roman Catholic Church. No one could have predicted their widespread ecumenical appeal and adoption with necessary denominational revisions by various Protestant denominations including the Episcopal Church (1970), Presbyterians (1970), and Lutherans (1973). In 1974 contributing denominations (excluding Episcopalians and Lutherans) adopted both the Consultation on Common Texts (C.O.C.U.) Lectionary and a common liturgical year. This

MN: Liturgical, 1984). Adrian Nocent, *The Liturgical Year: The Easter Season*. Translated by Matthew J. O’Connell (Collegetown, MN: Liturgical, 1977).

³² Reumann, “History,” 117.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ See Reumann, “History,” and Jasper and Bradshaw, *Companion*, 298–302, for possible scenarios of the development of the lectionary in early Christianity.

³⁵ The Anglican lectionary first began under Rome and has been under the BCP since the 16th century (English Reformation).

successfully brought together fifty-nine lectionary systems. This three-year lectionary included readings from thirty-three books of the OT and twenty-four books of the NT. Next, they adopted the Common Lectionary in 1983. Finally, in 1992, the Revised Common Lectionary was accepted. Each revision has made its attempts to improve the original Roman Lectionary that remains unchanged.³⁶

The Common Lectionary follows a three-year cycle which concentrates on Matthew in Year A, Mark in Year B, and Luke in Year C. John is used in all three years. Each of the three years has its character determined by the emphasis of the individual Evangelists. *Redaktionsgeschichte* is the primary methodology for the arrangement of the Gospel lessons. Each of the Gospels sets forth a particular theological emphasis. Preaching from only one Gospel will bring theological and thematic unity to the entire year.

The OT lesson is chosen to reinforce, give background, or provide contrast to the Gospel lesson.³⁷ During Eastertide, Acts is substituted for the OT lesson. "For much of the year, the Gospel selections are semi-continuous from a book; OT selections exhibit no sequence with each other. The Epistles are read semi-continuously in certain seasons, in blocks of three to sixteen weeks."³⁸ This provides an opportunity for the preacher to do in-depth expository and doctrinal preaching from a single book.³⁹ The framers of the lectionary primarily intended the Psalms be used as a responsive reading in the worship service.⁴⁰

³⁶ Paul Scott Wilson, in Review of Eugene L. Lowry, *Living with the Lectionary: Preaching through the Revised Common Lectionary*. Nashville: Abingdon, 1992. In *Homiletic* 18 (1993) 14.

³⁷ The use of the OT is severely criticized. See Lowry, *Living*; Bailey, "Lectionary"; and James A. Sanders, "Canon and Calendar: An Alternative Lectionary Proposal," in *Social Themes of the Christian Year: A Commentary on the Lectionary* (ed. Dieter T. Hessel; Philadelphia: Geneva Press, 1983) 257-63. I am severely critical of this reduction of the OT to christological concerns.

³⁸ Reumann, "History," 129.

³⁹ Achtemeier, "Aids," 155.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 156.

Analysis of the Text Selection for Tim Sensing in the 1993 Calendar Year⁴¹

Each December for the past ten years, I have sat down with a calendar to plan my preaching for the coming year.⁴² I have used a variety of approaches in making this schedule. Although this schedule is usually fixed by January 1, I have always maintained the attitude of adjustment if a pressing need should arise. In December of 1992, I first began by brainstorming what I deemed to be the pastoral needs of the congregation. Secondly, I examined books of the Bible that I would like to preach *semi-lectio continua*.⁴³ Finally, I examined the calendar to note religious holidays, congregational special events, secular holidays, and my own personal schedule.

When I examined the pastoral needs of the congregation, I selected the following themes: faithfulness, stewardship, leadership, mental health, family concerns, fellowship, and fundamentals of the gospel. The themes of leadership, mental health, and family concerns developed into unified series of lessons to be presented as a unit. Although some of the other lessons could have been presented as parts of a series, most were not.⁴⁴ Some texts were connected to certain dates due either to thematic or textual relationships with the texts that surrounded that Sunday. Other sermons were selected arbitrarily to fill in the gaps. In order to determine which texts to use, I examined different books for preaching and decided

⁴¹ This analysis is an examination of my own text selection in 1993 or what might be called "a lectionary in retrospect."

⁴² This practice began because of the advice of Dr. Philip Slate, who was my first teacher of preaching. Every congregation I have worked with has fondly embraced this methodology.

⁴³ The exegesis for these books is done a year in advance.

⁴⁴ Some sermons on the fundamentals of faith were preached consecutively. Other lessons on the fundamentals were preached as isolated units logically unconnected with the Sundays that either preceded or followed. The same could be said for other pastoral concerns mentioned previously.

upon 1 Thessalonians, Song of Songs, and Luke.⁴⁵ I included a series on the Ten Commandments as part of my textual preaching.

Finally, I began to place sermons on the calendar. I first set aside my personal vacations.⁴⁶ Secondly, I blocked out the dates that corresponded with previously determined congregational events. These included Sunday evenings, January 24, Church Growth Seminar; May 23, Friendship Evangelism Seminar; and July 18 and 25, guest speakers.⁴⁷ Prayer and song devotionals were planned throughout the year on Sunday evenings either corresponding to my absences or to upcoming special events.

Next, I chose some special dates that coincided with the following events: New Year's Day; Easter; Fourth of July; Thanksgiving; and Christmas.⁴⁸ This year I spent more time with the Easter and Christmas season than ever before by planning several Sundays around those dates (March 14–April 11, Easter; the series in Luke beginning November 28). This extra time given to these seasons corresponds to a lesser degree to how the seasons first developed in the Christian Year (i.e., Advent and Lent).

The next step in my scheduling involved sermons that I was requested to preach preceding and following the Church Growth Seminar. I chose sermons on evangelism on the following dates: January 3 and 10 and February 7. Upon examining the calendar, I located large blocks of

⁴⁵ The exegesis for the Gospel of Luke began in 1993. The series began in the fall of 1993 so that the birth narratives would correspond with the Christmas season. This would be the first time that I considered any part of the Christian Year in text selection. However, the plan was to divide the text throughout the year as my personal exegesis deemed appropriate without further consideration of the seasons. At this time, had I been paying attention to the Common Lectionary cycle, I might have chosen the Gospel of Mark (Year B) instead.

⁴⁶ I selected a floating date in June or July to correspond to a summer vacation yet to be determined (later it was determined to be June 6). Secondly, I chose the closest Sunday to Christmas, December 26, to correspond with my family gatherings out-of-state.

⁴⁷ Guest speakers were planned for while I was away speaking at a Gospel Meeting and working as Educational Director at Carolina Bible Camp.

⁴⁸ I have chosen other events in the past such as Father's Day, Mother's Day, graduations, and Valentine's Day. I chose to acknowledge Mother's Day and graduations through other means in 1993 and to ignore all other days.

dates that would allow easy insertion of the longer series of sermons.⁴⁹ After matching up texts and sermon ideas with the pastoral concerns mentioned above, I filled in the gaps in the rest of the calendar. This was an arbitrary process.⁵⁰ The final calendar differed from this original one only on two Sundays. I substituted two sermons because of pressing pastoral concerns.

Upon completion of this process, I always evaluate the final schedule. I look for variety and balance. I want to see variety in use of the OT and the NT. I try to balance between the Gospels and the Epistles. I want to achieve variety in genre forms and sermonic forms. I desire to evaluate the balance of topics to assure myself that I am not riding any hobbies or neglecting parts of the gospel. This evaluation is then compared to previous years, for it is the total diet of the congregation over time that concerns me most. For this type of evaluation to be most helpful, it would require an independent party who could objectively recognize imbalances due to my own blind spots and presuppositions.

Comparative Analysis

In comparing the Lectionary, Year A, to my schedule, I could have addressed many of the same pastoral concerns within that context. Many of the passages dealt with faithfulness, stewardship, leadership, mental health, family concerns, fellowship, and fundamentals of the gospel. Even my Fall series in 1 Thessalonians coincidentally corresponded with the Epistle reading for the same time. My desire to preach through the Gospel of Luke could have been postponed easily to Year C. Since I desire to

⁴⁹ These included Sunday evenings, January 31–March 14, a series on Mental Health and the Bible; Sunday evenings, April 4–May 2, a series from the Song of Songs; Sunday mornings, August 22–September 19, a series on leadership in preparation for the installation of elders; Sunday evenings, August 22–September 12, a series on the family; Sunday evenings, September 19–November 21, a series on the Ten Commandments; Sunday mornings, October 3–November 7, a series from 1 Thessalonians; and finally on Sunday evenings, November 28–December 26, 1994, a series from the Gospel of Luke. Normally I try to avoid overlapping a morning series with an evening series.

⁵⁰ Often these sermons were selected for personal reasons. One may claim I was following the guiding of the Spirit. However, I think the process went more like, “Here is a neat text. I think that will preach. What Sunday is open next?” These serendipitous sermon starters come from a variety of sources, namely, text, personal experiences, or exposure to other media such as art, literature, and music. Sometimes an idea or illustration went looking for a text.

preach through all four Gospels, the lectionary provides that possibility. Although I would still lean toward *semi-lectio selecta*, the lectionary would be a helpful guide in connecting text to occasion and text to other texts that I would have otherwise overlooked.

A complete analysis of my methodology by using the lectionary is difficult due to the fundamental philosophical differences I brought to long-term planning. Since I chose a different method of selecting texts, a critique of methodology would be more in order than a critique of the individual texts selected. To analyze the texts selected in 1993 for the Mebane Street Church of Christ, I would have to employ other criteria.

The first philosophical difference revolves around my understanding of the function of time. Our fellowship understands time as anamnesis (remembering the past as a continual sign to the present reality of our lives in him) in the communion service and baptism. For us, symbol does represent reality. However, very few would understand the Christian Year as a symbol of time in the same way.⁵¹ When I first planned these sermons in December of 1992, I was only casually aware of Easter and Christmas. The preparatory Sundays before these events were coincidental pragmatic accidents with only slight insights into the function of the season. My choices were made for evangelistic reasons. My thought process was thus: "We have the possibility of many visitors on that Sunday. They will be thinking about these holidays. Let me use their interests to teach something about the Gospel." Many critics of my plan would rightly state, "You have a glaring disregard for occasion." Although I still do not have a concept of time (for I believe it must be experienced through many years of living with the Church Year), I have been convinced there is validity to this symbol theologically. Evaluation of my sermon selections cannot be criticized on this basis. Did I match text to occasion? Only twice. Did I match text to pastoral concern? The *Revised Common Lectionary* cannot answer that question.

Looking merely at my sermon plan, one cannot determine logical connections between liturgy and text or occasion and text since neither the sermon nor the worship context is presented here. However, I am aware that there was no attempt on my part on most Sundays to make such a logical connection. Some themes were preplanned so that the entire

⁵¹ For those who use a lectionary, time is a symbol also. It represents reality. Why there has been neglect on this truth by our fellowship is a question that needs further investigation. The synagogue, as well as early Christian writings (e.g., Didache), recognizes this truth.

service would be unified. This intentional planning was rare. Except for the several series that were preached throughout the year, most Sundays did not logically connect with what preceded or followed the other Sundays. How I incorporate my new appreciation for time as symbol will remain a challenge for me to grapple with in the future.

A second presupposition that limits the possibility of comparison is related to the first. The Restoration Movement is committed to restoring NT practice. There is no precedent for a Christian Year found in the pages of the NT. Because Restoration preaching, worship, and practice are still rooted in a “pattern theology” and a commitment to “approved” examples, my nonawareness of occasion is not only easily excused but appreciated by most in our fellowship. This has been our rationale for eliminating the use of any practice that evolved from the NT even if that practice evolved as early as second century.⁵² In 1992 I was critical of following the Christian Year. However, since I have recently made shifts away from “pattern theology,” I am more open to the theological reasoning of such practices when they do not contradict clear apostolic teaching.

Lectionary use would have provided an outside control of accountability that is absent from my methodology. When the lectionary is used, the text becomes the church’s text rather than mine. An agenda is set for preaching that supersedes local and often short-sighted objectives. This was especially evident when I fell into a trap of arbitrarily choosing texts to fill in gaps. Many sensitive issues that may naturally arise during the course of preaching the lectionary can also protect the preacher. No longer can the criticism of why you chose that text to attack “such and such” be made. No longer can the preacher avoid dealing with sensitive issues or problematic texts he would otherwise avoid. Analysis of my text selection over a three-year period also might show missing themes and texts.

This analysis exposed a fundamental assumption that flaws my methodology. I have assumed that my perceived ability to select a text because it addresses a particular problem is good. However, it is presumptuous. Preachers who use this methodology, or one like it, act as though they know in advance what the Word of God is going to be. Exegesis and prayer may later demonstrate that this text does not address the need at all. Yet the temptation is great to study and pray in such a way that the selection is confirmed.

⁵² Exceptions were made when they fell into the category of “necessary inference.”

The needs approach to preaching can easily reduce the Bible to an answer book of life's problems. Often these answers are to questions the Bible did not ask. The Bible does give answers, but it gives answers to the questions it asks. When the Bible is allowed to speak for itself, the answers will reach deeper into our core about the ultimate meaning of existence.

Much of this debate centers on the different methods of selecting texts. This debate is much older than I. I remain unconvinced fully to abandon my freedom to plan sermons for the local congregation in favor of a lectionary. Although this comparison has given me a greater appreciation for the use of the lectionary, my choice to select texts for pastoral concerns and congregational mission will still remain my primary method.

Recommendations

Our fellowship would be greatly served by becoming familiar with the lectionary and its relationship with the Christian Year. This newfound acquaintance of an old practice has caused renewal in both the Catholic and Protestant assemblies. These renewals are still short of what we believe and practice, yet they are in a positive direction. As our fellowship struggles with worship renewal, the lectionary may provide unity and stability. At the least, it can serve as another tool that may guide long-term planning, especially for the Gospels.

Since our tradition calls for us to preach twice on Sunday, an opportunity to allow the lectionary to guide one of those services is available. Although it may be argued by pro-lectionary advocates to use the other lections for Sunday nights and Wednesday nights, a good compromise would be to place the teaching series on themes and from books of the Bible in the evening time slot. This would transform the didactic function of my morning sermons to a more liturgically sensitive function. My preaching would become more of an act of worship and a proclamation of good news rather than an exegetical discourse.⁵³

This study has motivated me to investigate further the use of time as symbol. I encourage the Restoration Movement as a whole to give this area another look. Many within our congregations have no connecting story with one another or with Christ. Introduction of the Christian Year into practice may bring greater insight and relationship to the advent,

⁵³ Skudlarek, *Word*, in his chapter "Preaching and Sacrament," 65–77, argues for understanding preaching as worship and interconnected to liturgy.

epiphany, suffering, resurrection, and ascension of our Lord. Also a greater awareness of the place of the sermon in the larger liturgy may occur. Too often sermons are written as isolated gems that could be preached regardless of time or locale.

Arguments to change to the lectionary are, for me, still not convincing. Yet every preacher needs to think through the process of how he will select texts for preaching. Preaching week to week without any logical connections between sermons and with little evidence of long-term planning can easily lead to malnutrition in any congregation. Although I am unconvinced to make a total shift of practice, I do plan to be more sensitive to time, liturgy, and occasion.

Whatever we may decide as a fellowship about the Christian Year, our commitment to long-term planning of sermons is necessary. The congregations we serve deserve it. They should hold us accountable to what preaching diet we offer them weekly. We need to be held accountable in our text selection as it relates to different occasions, world events, and pastoral concerns. Saturday Night Specials should no longer be blamed on the Spirit but attributed to sloth.



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