

Limning the Lectionary

by

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A recent session of a class on liturgical rubrics brought up the issue of the historic lectionary vs. the three-year lectionary. It was a fascinating and illuminating session, one I found incredibly stimulating. And so, while my memories of that session are still fresh and my mind is still abuzz, I thought it wise to put pen to paper.

The rubrics are liturgical instructions for a priest or minister. Since non-liturgical worship is largely free-form, and since non-liturgical churches have a largely congregational church polity and therefore have little to no church hierarchy, the term rubrics is generally applicable only to liturgical churches. However, many Lutheran church bodies in the United States have a congregational church polity embedded within their constitutions. It would seem then that the idea of rubrics is derived from the idea of a church hierarchy: that someone, somewhere, has the authority to provide such instructions to the priest or minister. There is a sense, then, that any discussion of rubrics among American Lutherans is oxymoronic, since all major (and most minor) Lutheran bodies in North America profess a congregational church polity.¹

A lectionary is a list of scripture readings appointed for worship on a specific day or occasion. This makes the lectionary a special sort of rubric. Originally the rubrics for the priest or minister were printed in red², differentiating them from the sections printed in black which were designed to be spoken. But the liturgy changes throughout the church year, as do the lectionary readings. Thus the liturgical and lectionary changes throughout the year are derived from and support the church year. The lectionary is derived from the church year, and the pericopes and the propers are designed to cohere. One could then ask a number of important questions, such as who decided upon the church calendar? And having decided upon the church year, who then decided upon the lectionary and liturgical changes designed to follow the seasons of the church year? Where does the authority to decide upon such things come from? But in asking these questions, we American Lutherans will be confronted with the conflict between our congregational polity and the need for a hierarchy to determine such things for the church.

¹ This of course brings up the question of the historic episcopate and its corollary, the three-fold ministry (sometimes referred to as one ministry, three commissions). These questions fall outside the bounds of this current essay. It should be mentioned that only in North America do we find Lutheran church bodies lacking an Episcopal church polity; everywhere else Lutheran church bodies are headed by a bishop with the support of some form of a consistory. This is the historic practice of the Christian church, and is practiced throughout Christendom with the primary exception of North America.

² The term rubric comes from the Latin word *rubrica*, which meant either red ochre or red chalk. In illuminated manuscripts, rubrification referred to highlighting initial capitals, section headings, and important names by writing them in red ink.

There are different types of lectionaries that have been used throughout church history. In apostolic times the nascent church used the same lectionary readings used in the Jewish synagogues (which readings followed a three-year cycle.) That the emerging church used a lectionary is clear from 1 Timothy 4:13, which the Rev. Alexander Ring translates as "Until I come, give attention to the selected reading of the day".³ However the apostle Paul also seems to have supported some sort of *lectio continua*, or continuous readings from a specific book for the remainder of the church year: in 1 Thessalonians 5:27 and Colossians 4:16 the apostle asks that his epistles be read in the churches.⁴ A distinctive Christian lectionary gradually developed as the New Testament scriptures were completed and as the idea of the church year developed. In their earliest form they consisted of specific readings for the festival seasons of the church year, along with some form of *lectio continua*, which has some resemblance to what is called *expository preaching* among those of the Reformed tradition.

As the remainder of the church year was fleshed out, the lectionary changed with it, and became a one-year cycle of readings to correspond to the church year. The lectionary in the western church was standardized in a document entitled *Comes Hieronymi*, which is attributed (perhaps falsely) to Jerome and possibly dated as late as 417 A.D.⁵ Then in the 8th century Alcuin, Charlemagne's religious advisor, revised the lectionary to make the services shorter; he removed the Old Testament readings shortened many of the epistle and gospel readings. The last major change to the church year came with the addition of Trinity Sunday in the 13th century, after which the church year and the historic lectionary has remained relatively unchanged.⁶ However, the Lutheran reformers did make minor changes to the historic lectionary, adding propers for Trinity 25 and 26, and moving the date of the Transfiguration from August 6th to the last Sunday after Epiphany.

The historic lectionary passed down to us from the reformation consists entirely of Gospel and Epistle readings designed to be read for each day of the church year, except for Old Testament readings on certain festivals and weekdays. (The basic pattern of the lectionary is also followed in the eastern churches.) This lectionary was completed in the 13th century, a couple centuries before the Lutheran reformation. The inclusion of Old Testament readings is in itself a recent addition, although as previously noted the earliest church lectionary consisted entirely of Old Testament scriptures (and as previously noted, followed a three-year cycle.)

³ Ring, A. *The Path of Understanding: The Development of Lectionaries and their use in the Lutheran Church*. Presented to the Evangelical Lutheran Synod General Pastoral Conference, Bloomington, MN, January 6-8, 1998. Retrieved on May 2, 2008 from <http://www.blc.edu/comm/gargy/gargy1/AlexRing.gpc.html>

⁴ 1 Thessalonians 5:27 and Colossians 4:16 have important implications for our understanding of the inspiration of the scriptures. The apostle Paul understood that he was writing scripture, else he would not have asked that his epistles be read in place of the appointed readings for the day.

⁵ Ring, A. *op cit*

⁶ Each church body seems to alter the church calendar somewhat, adding days to celebrate this or that saint or even, in some cases, certain social reformers. These revised church year calendars maintain a connection with the historic church year and its major festivals, but in a sectarian way seizes its own authority to alter what the church catholic labored to create. I suppose that shows my bias for tradition, one with fortunately is shared by the scriptures: "meddle not with them that are given to change: For their calamity shall rise suddenly" (Pr 24:21b-22a).

What we now call the historic lectionary is actually quite new. It took as its start the historic lectionary passed down from the time of the reformation, but added Old Testament readings. While this was a significant alteration of the historic lectionary, one could argue that this was actually a restoration of sorts. As previously noted, the earliest church lectionary consisted entirely of Old Testament scriptures (and followed a three-year cycle.) Furthermore, the Old Testament readings were excised from the lectionary sometime in the 8th century. Therefore, when Vatican II devised its three-year lectionary and included Old Testament readings, it was a restoration of sorts: a restoration of the ancient three-year *lectio continua* cycle used in the synagogues for reading the Torah,⁷ and a restoration of the Old Testament readings used in the churches from the time lectionaries were created until the 8th century.

Following Vatican II, many of the western churches began exploring the three year lectionary. They began with the model used by the Roman Catholic churches, but made modifications that reflected their different theological emphasis. Some have noted a Romish taint to all three year lectionaries,⁸ but it should be noted that the same complaint was made by Luther concerning the historic lectionary.⁹ It should also be noted that despite the initial effort at obtaining some degree of liturgical conformity throughout western Christendom, only eight church bodies in the United States have formally adopted the Revised Common Lectionary (RCL), and only one Lutheran denomination.¹⁰ Within the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod (which did not adopt the RCL), the three-year lectionary has changed in the new hymnal, so that even within that one church body, there are two different versions of the three-year lectionary and the historic (one-year) lectionary.

There are many online resources that provide the good, the bad, and the ugly regarding the one-year and three-year lectionaries. I do not intend to flesh out all the arguments here, as I need to end this paper sometime. But here is a short list of the arguments for the one year lectionary and against the three year lectionary. I grant you that it is a biased list, but is there any other kind?

Arguments for the historic (one-year) lectionary

- Historicity
- Catholicity
- Confessional (see Ap Article XXIV)
- Coherency (The liturgical propers and the pericopes cohere.)
- Repetitive (Repeats key catechetical and creedal themes)
- Pastoral and musical resources abound

⁷*About the Revised Common Lectionary (RCL)*. Adapted from an interview given by Dr. Horace T. Allen Jr. , and was prepared for the August 1997 meeting of Societas Liturgica in held in Turku, Finland. Retrieved on 2 May 2008 from <http://www.commontexts.org/rcl/faq.html>.

⁸ Under the heading "What are some issues with the three-year lectionary?" see the subheading "It's Catholic". Retrieved on 2 May 2008 from <http://www.geocities.com/mrpipeorgan/historic.html>.

⁹ Luther, Martin. *Luther's Works: Liturgy and Hymns*. American Edition. Helmut T. Lehmann, ed. Philadelphia: Fortress Press. 1965. vol. 53. p. 23f.

¹⁰ *Worldwide Usage of the Revised Common Lectionary*. Retrieved on 2 May 2008 from <http://www.commontexts.org/rcl/usage.html>.

Arguments against the three-year lectionary

- A-historical (
- Catholic (as in Roman Catholic
- Disjointed (propers and pericopes don't match thematically
- Divisive
- Confusing
- Scriptural quantity instead of thematic coherence
- Lack of pastoral and music resources

I recently heard an argument for the three-year lectionary I'd never heard before: that it went through the texts as the Holy Spirit intended. The example given was that a particular year will concentrate on one of the Synoptic gospels. Just as the Holy Spirit had inspired the author to write his Gospel, so too the church read selected passages of that Gospel through for that entire year. This argument seems virtually unassailable—after all, who would dare go against the Holy Spirit? But on closer examination the argument falls apart. First, the purpose of a lectionary is to be thematic, to be both creedal and catechetical. The lectionary replaced the *lectio continua*, and returning to it is ahistorical. Second, the three-year lectionary does not in fact read through the texts as Holy Spirit intended. The pericopes do not begin at chapter 1:1 and run clear through to the end. The three-year lectionary is not really a *lectio continua*, so it is not the text exactly as the Holy Spirit intended. Unless the lectionary is itself inspired, which no one claims to be the case. Third, given the thematic nature of the lectionary, we should be reminded that the scriptures are not a handbook of systematic theology. As the prophet Isaiah declared, the scriptures are precept upon precept, line upon line, here a little and there a little (Isa 28:9-13). While expository study of the scriptures is valuable, the scriptures seem to place a premium upon thematic study.

I must confess my personal preference for the (revised) historic lectionary. Until recently my only experience was with the three-year lectionary. In fact, I had been attending my current church for some time before I discovered, completely by accident, that my pastor was using the historic lectionary. And this highlights an important point – the choice of lectionary is driven more by the pastor than by the congregation. The choice of the three-year lectionary will make life more difficult for the pastor and the church musician, due to the relative paucity of resources available. In a congregation that has basically abandoned the historic liturgy in favor of contemporary worship, this may not be a problem. But for a liturgical congregation, the choice of choral and hymnic materials to match the three-year lectionary is more difficult.

The liturgy in all its parts is the result of a 2000 year experiment in what works for Christian worship. It is a succinct, efficient, and beautiful instrument with which we glorify God and within which we receive His good and gracious gifts. The historic lectionary is part of that 2000 year old experiment in what works. When I was young, I saw the value in change. Now that I am getting older, I see the value in tradition. I've come 'round to the point of view expressed in Proverbs: "meddle not with them that are given to change" (Pr 24:21b).

Don't fool with what works. Despite all the arguments for the three-year lectionary, I see no compelling reason for making the change. The arguments I've heard can be reduced down to two reasons: boredom with the historic lectionary on the part of the pastor, and a misunderstanding of the thematic unity of the historic lectionary. We've covered the second reason pretty well, so let me discuss pastoral boredom. Some years ago when I was a fundamentalist, I had a pastor who preached from John 15:5-8 each year on the same date. He had been there many years, and I expect me may still be there. One time I remember asking him about it. He told me that each year he expected to have to repeat himself, and each year he saw something in the passage he'd never seen before. My suspicion with pastors who are bored with the historic lectionary is that the problem is neither with the lectionary, nor with the scripture passages, but with that pastor. I'd suggest what is needed is not more texts, but more time spent with the appointed text.

The choice of lectionary is not a test of orthodoxy. There is no perfect lectionary this side of heaven, just as there is no perfect liturgy (and certainly no perfect liturgist). All these matters belong to what is called the *bene esse* of the church, or its right ordering. They are not exactly adiaphora (things neither commanded nor forbidden), but neither are they doctrinal. They occupy some middle ground: that ground where the church has authority to set in order the things that are wanting (Tit 1:5). And so we come back around to one of the weaknesses of the Lutheran church in North America—the fact that it has rejected church hierarchy, and thus cannot settle upon the proper ordering of the church. The result of this Babel has been liturgical chaos.