

Questions about the Lectionary

I want to thank Arlo D. Duba for his guest viewpoint, “‘Righteous Judgment’ and Biblical Preaching” (Mar. 22). It is good to continue the conversation about the ministry of reading and preaching the word of God in the Christian church. I am concerned, however, that he overstates the benign influence of the Revised Common Lectionary relative to the Reformed confessional heritage of the Presbyterian Church and that he fails to appreciate some of the problems inherent in the lectionary.

The practice of reading and preaching from selected and disconnected portions of the books of the Bible necessarily omits parts of the story, parts of the argument, parts of the gospel, and parts of the word that the authors and the Holy Spirit apparently thought were important to include. Would English teachers tolerate anyone treating Shakespeare that way? Likewise, why would using a lectionary that chops up the Bible into bits and pieces be a good way to study, preach, or teach the scriptures? Why would a “new and improved” order of the texts be better than what we have received?

Moreover, students of church history and theology know that motives are never pure. Given that the compilers of the lectionary include only some texts, what drives their decisions to include some texts and to exclude others? The whole process gives the appearance of a church bureaucracy attempting to manage and control the preaching of the Word of God.

For instance, Duba exults that most of Romans is included in the lectionary. But Romans 1:18–2:29 is excluded. Is there perhaps a word from the Lord that the compilers of the lectionary do not want people to hear? The same question might be raised about the omission of the entire book of Jude and especially verses 3–4.

Sometimes the lectionary omits verses not only from between the selections but even from within the selections. For instance, the gospel reading for Ash Wednesday is Matthew 6:1–6, 16–21, teachings about prayer and fasting. But verses 7–15, which include the Lord’s Prayer, are omitted! Is that not worthy of being read?

The chief problem with the lectionary, however, is its association with the liturgical calendar. The honoring of such annual cycles obscures the historic priority, which the Reformed tradition has sought to recover, of the weekly observance of the Lord’s Day. The Reformers recognized the five evangelical feast days of Christmas, Good Friday, Easter, Ascension Day, and Pentecost, and they did so without detracting from the Lord’s Day. They observed these days precisely because they have to do with events recorded in the scriptures.

But the liturgical seasons of the annual calendar, particularly advent and lent, have no basis in scripture. Moreover, they weaken the Reformed understanding of the grace of God. Advent and lent suggest that we have to “prepare” ourselves for receiving the grace of God in the incarnation and resurrection. But if we were good enough to prepare ourselves for the grace of God, we would not need the grace of God! Our confessions teach, instead, that the grace of God is always

prevenient, coming before any effort or preparation on our part. It is theologically inappropriate to celebrate advent or lent in a Reformed church.

The problems of biased selection and the liturgical calendar combine forces for especially infelicitous results. Consider what is done to the account of the passion in the Gospel according to Mark. In the lectionary, the readings for Mark 14-15 are relegated to Passion/Palm Sunday, as an optional reading. That is one Sunday out of fifty-two.

But if the Gospel according to Mark is preached *lectio continua* over the course of a year, about four months worth of Sundays are dedicated to the reading and preaching of the events of the last week of Christ's earthly life, including at least six weeks on the passion of Christ as depicted in Mark 14-15. The cumulative weight of these readings is tremendous. Their significance cannot be recognized in a day or a week. But over a period of weeks and even months, the seriousness of his sacrifice can be made plain. The contrast with the lectionary could not be more startling.

The same sort of thing happens with the other gospels. All of Matthew 26-27 (the passion and crucifixion) is relegated to one Sunday for the year, as an optional reading. When I spent twenty months preaching through Matthew, I spent ten weeks on those two chapters. With one exception, all of Luke 22-23 (the passion and crucifixion) is relegated to one Sunday for the year, as an optional reading. When I preached through Luke in eighteen months, I read and preached from those two chapters for five weeks. Again, with one exception, John 18-19 (the passion and crucifixion) is relegated not even to one Sunday for the year but to Good Friday and "Holy Saturday"! When I preached through John in nine or so months, three of those Sundays were given to reading and preaching those two chapters.

The influence of the Revised Common Lectionary on the Presbyterian Church is not as benign as Duba suggests. Our Reformed confessional tradition and the people to whom we preach deserve better.

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