

Let Me Tell You About the Revised Common Lectionary

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Greetings to you all. I am honored and delighted to be here with you to discuss lectionary use in the contemporary church. Thank you for being willing to listen to me speaking in English. I trust that the printed text I have provided will assist you in following along with my speech.

Your planning committee has asked me to talk to you about the Revised Common Lectionary, and I am glad to do so. Many church bodies have adopted the Revised Common Lectionary, and its close similarity to the Roman Catholic lectionary means that this basic pattern is the single lectionary plan most used by Christians around the world. For that reason alone it is a good idea for you all to know about it.

I am a dedicated advocate of what is usually called the RCL. I have a childhood memory of finding in my Missouri Synod's *The Lutheran Hymnal* a set of propers for Mary Magdalene's Day on July 22, and although my congregation did not observe this festival, the lectionary showed me that other Lutherans did. That lectionary opened a door for me into a deeper and fuller Christian ritual. For me as an adult, the RCL is a wondrously open door to Scripture and the faith. I have lectured to many groups about its logic and depth, and I have written many resources that explore the lectionary's readings. Although I am a laywoman and never preach in worship – I support the principle in the Augsburg Confession that preaching is normally exercised only by the ordained clergy – I know that the lectionary is mine as well as it is the preachers', and I have found over the last twenty years studying it, indeed, living within it, a growth in biblical knowledge and Christian faith for which I am deeply grateful to God.

This morning I will first summarize for you the formation of the RCL. Secondly I will outline the ways that the RCL is similar to the Nordic lectionaries, and lastly I will list several substantive ways that the RCL is very different from the lectionaries that most of you use.

The history of the Revised Common Lectionary

Martin Luther approved the continued use of the one-year Western lectionary of his day. Just preach it better, he said. The lectionary under which I was raised was similar to Luther's and to year A of the Nordic lectionaries. Thus that lectionary had been in annual use in the Western church for about a millennium. However, by the mid twentieth century, some Lutherans were proposing to amend that lectionary, at least by adding a weekly reading from the Old Testament.

At the Second Vatican Council, the Roman Catholic Church, which had its own version of the medieval one-year lectionary, decreed that a new lectionary ought to be formulated, hoping that "richer fare may be provided for the faithful at the table of God's word" (*Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy*, II 51). When that new lectionary was promulgated in 1969 and mandated for Roman Catholic use in 1971, many Protestants saw that it did indeed open up the riches of Scripture more fully than did the old lectionary. In the 1970s, several Protestant church bodies recommended for use their own adaptations of the Roman lectionary. These adaptations made substitutions that accorded with their denominational hermeneutics, for example, by reducing

texts about the Israelite priesthood and by lengthening the readings from Paul. By the 1980s, an English-language ecumenical collaboration called the Consultation on Common Texts suggested that theologians and liturgical scholars from each church concur together to agree on a single ecumenical lectionary for Protestant use called the Common Lectionary; this was released for use in 1983.

After several cycles of the three-year Common Lectionary, the Consultation on Common Texts sponsored a revision of that lectionary, and the **Revised Common Lectionary was released in 1992**. I served on that revision committee. The Evangelical Lutheran Church in America is one denomination that has recognized both the importance of this ecumenical collaboration and the richness of the RCL, and in *The Use of the Means of Grace*, principle 7, application 7A, our church-wide document on the sacraments recommends use of this lectionary. Many world churches appoint or recommend the RCL, including most recently the Church of England.

In the last few decades, Protestant church publishing houses have provided an immense library of **lectionary resources** in support of the RCL, from graphic images for weekly bulletins to annual Bible study guides to lectionary-based Sunday school curriculums. I have been one of the authors of an extensive resource provided by Augsburg Fortress, which includes for each week biblical notes that situate the readings in the church year and that assist with connections between the readings, as well as information about the appointed psalm, a hymn of the day, the prayer of the day, the images in the biblical readings, an idea for children, ecological ideas, downloadable art, and an appropriate quote from the church fathers, mothers, or theologians. Thus the RCL has birthed a worldwide industry that is intent on deepening the proclamation of the word of God at Sunday worship.

How the RCL is similar to the Nordic lectionaries

We all know that even Christians may read their sacred scriptures for a variety of reasons. For example, a church study group may want to know about women in the Bible or about ancient Near Eastern religion, or individuals may be searching for comfort in the face of personal pain. The primary foundational principle of the Roman Lectionary, the Revised Common Lectionary, and the Nordic lectionaries is their **focus on Christ**. All these lectionaries understand Sunday to be the weekly celebration of Christ's resurrection, and their lectionaries appoint texts from throughout the Bible that most clearly proclaim the paschal mystery, that call the baptized into more enduring faith in Christ and that lead them to the triune table of mercy. To demonstrate this Christological centering, the final and primary reading each Sunday is taken from one of the **four gospels**. I rejoice that your lectionaries share with mine their centering in Christ.

A second foundational principle of the RCL and the Nordic lectionaries is that **Scripture interprets Scripture**. To model this biblical hermeneutic, three readings are appointed for each week. In the Lutheran use of the RCL, **the first reading**, usually from the Old Testament, always complement in some way the gospel reading. These selections are called the complementary set. For the festival times of the year, **the second reading** also connects with the gospel. In the non-festival half of the year, that is, the Sundays after Epiphany and the Sundays after Pentecost, the second reading provides more-or-less semicontinuous proclamation from a selected epistle. I rejoice that also your lectionaries appoint three related readings each Sunday.

If you are ready to hear about a complicating option: the Consultation on Common Texts included not only Episcopalians and Lutherans, but also Methodists and members of the Reformed churches, such as Presbyterians. These committee members represented churches that did not celebrate eucharist weekly and whose historic hermeneutic stressed knowledge of Bible history, rather than Christology. This half of the committee selected an alternate set of Old Testament readings, now called **the semicontinuous set**. According to this usage, selections from the Old Testament are read during the non-festival half of the year sequentially week by week: the Pentateuch is read during the year of Matthew, the monarchial histories during the year of Mark, and the prophets during the year of Luke.

The RCL is similar to your lectionaries in that it maintains the core of the **historic liturgical year**. Four weeks of Advent, Christmas, Epiphany, forty days of Lent, and fifty days of Easter provide the skeleton on which the flesh of each of these lectionaries is attached. However, like the Roman Catholics, the RCL has made some changes in the medieval pattern. For example, Transfiguration is celebrated on the Sunday before Ash Wednesday, which by the way was one of Martin Luther's suggestions. The Latin Sunday designations for a pre-Lenten season and for the Sundays of Easter have been dropped, since these titles did not serve the new lectionary and were judged to be neither theologically or spiritually useful in our time. As well, it is Pentecost, not Trinity, that provides the anchor for the Sundays of the non-festival half of the year. Please note: Since some Christians desire to maintain the old calendar largely to be able to continue correlation with Johanna Sebastian Bach's church music, your bibliography lists one resource that has recalibrated Bach's liturgical music to fit the new RCL calendar.

Several **distinguishing features of the RCL**

One distinguishing feature of the RCL is the recovery of the **Lenten focus on baptism**. Many people agree that the twenty-first century will resemble the early centuries of the church more than, say, the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, in that baptismal identity will be the key to the Christian life. The hope is that the churches will recover the Great Vigil of Easter as the church's primary baptismal festival. Thus the season of Lent is now focused on the baptismal life that issues from the cross of Christ. One way that this is achieved is that in the RCL, the gospels during the first year of Lent are the great Johannine narratives that the early church connected with baptism. John 3 and Nicodemus, John 4 and the Samaritan woman, John 9 and the man born blind, and John 11 and the raising of Lazarus are appointed to accompany not only the adult catechumens, but all the faithful, as we (remember Luther?) creep back to baptism at the paschal feast.

A second treasure of the RCL is the **restoration of the Triduum**, what we English-speaking Lutherans in the States call The Three Days. The Triduum carries the mystery of Christ by refusing to separate out his passion, his death, and his resurrection, as if you could have one or two of the three without the whole. In the RCL, the gospel for all three years on Maundy Thursday is John's footwashing; the gospel for Good Friday is John 18-19; and the gospel for the Easter Vigil is John 20. To demonstrate the richness of the biblical witnesses to Christ's passion, the gospel on the Sunday that opens Holy Week is Matthew 26-27 in year A, Mark 14-15 in year B, and Luke 22-23 in year C. Thus each year we hear both the synoptic and the Johannine

accounts of Christ's passion and death. I am told that seminarians are now reporting to their professors that the highlight of their worship life is each year's celebration of the Three Days.

A third treasure is the weekly **singing of the Psalter**. For each Sunday and festival, a psalm is appointed that is a response to the first reading. It is not a fourth reading, but rather like the Lutheran tradition of the hymn of the day, it is a text that is sung by the congregation, choir, or cantor. It has been a wonderful gift to have the psalms included each week in our worship.

How the RCL is fundamentally different from the Nordic lectionaries

I judge that the two most significant differences between the RCL and the Nordic lectionaries are how the lectionary relates to biblical studies and how ecumenical the lectionary is. I will first discuss **the relationship of the gospel choices to the last three centuries of biblical studies**.

Scholars do not know the details behind the formation of the one-year medieval lectionary. As we study that lectionary, we see no clear logic as to why its specific gospel passages were chosen and their order throughout the year. The current Nordic lectionaries, whether two year or three year, have selected from all four gospels passages that in some way offer a parallel to the gospels in the one-year lectionary. Thus your primary allegiance is to the medieval lectionary. In your first year, its pattern for preaching is retained, and in subsequent years, it is repeated. I ask you to consider: what are your reasons for maintaining allegiance to the medieval system?

In stark contrast is the hermeneutic of the RCL. The biblical studies undertaken since the eighteenth century has once again listened to Irenaeus in the second century, who argued for the continual use of **four gospels**, because each gospel has its own distinctive Christology, its own ways to describe God and to understand the Christian life. Mark is not Matthew is not Luke is not John, and each has something distinctive to offer us. In the post-modern world in which a narrow path for a single truth is questioned, the four gospels offer us the diversity of truths in Christ, and thus it is appropriate for the lectionary to honor the differing voices of these witnesses to Christ.

The Revised Common Lectionary receives each gospel, one at a time, to benefit from its distinctive proclamation. In the RCL, the primary festivals of each year proclaim John, as befits the late first-century Christology of the fourth gospel. Around John dance Matthew, Mark, and Luke, Matthew in year A, Mark in year B, and Luke in year C, each offering its own depiction of Christ and its own emphasis for the church. As a Lutheran, I like to think that Luther, a professor of Bible, would applaud the way that the RCL can apply serious biblical studies to Sunday morning worship. I ask you to consider: are you who are preachers of the Nordic lectionaries able to benefit from the four voices of the evangelists?

The RCL use of gospels has led to a richer ownership of the lectionary by lay people. I may have missed worship for several weeks, but I know that, for example this year, we are proceeding through the Gospel according to Mark, in which Christ is the hidden messiah, the disciples often misunderstand God's mercy, and the outsider is often praised as being surprisingly close to the kingdom. Many lectionary resources, some designed for preachers, others for lay worshipers, surround and support the Sunday readings. I ask you to consider: how does your method of

selecting gospels help educate your worshipers about the breadth and depth of the biblical witness? Who is the Christ that lay people receive?

The second essential difference between the RCL and the Nordic lectionaries is the degree to which they are **ecumenical**. Many of our churches pray each week for the unity of the church to be recognized and celebrated, and many of us see that the use of a single lectionary, common to many Protestant churches and similar to the Roman Catholic Church, is a miraculous gift of the ecumenical movement and a sign of continuing ecumenical collaboration. Clergy who participate in interdenominational lectionary study groups report how much they learn from the conversations when Episcopalians, Methodists, Presbyterians, and Lutherans meet together to discuss the up-coming readings or study the lectionary resources produced by one another's publishing houses. I ask you to consider: Why are not at least your five Nordic churches collaborating on a single Nordic lectionary as a sign of your unity in Christ?

In conclusion

Let me conclude by telling you about a recent experience: Two months ago, the Sunday of September 6 saw the beginnings of the current massive refugee immigration. The second reading on that Sunday in both the RCL and Roman lectionary was from James 2, about the Christian obligation to care for the poor, to offer them the best seats, not to show partiality. It was with a feeling of profound amazement that I thought of the countless Protestant and Catholic parishes around the world listening to that reading from James as the refugee crisis unfolded before them, a world community of Christians unified by both the lectionary and the television.

I also recently heard from a Lutheran friend who was visiting in Sicily. She attended mass at the local Roman Catholic cathedral, and was delighted that the readings were the same as those in her home parish. Our shared lectionaries are a gift to world Christianity, a bond across so many barriers.

I leave you to consider the issues I have raised. As you continue to use your lectionaries, I hope that together you probe them for the riches they offer and that together you share that wealth with all the worshipers on Sunday. I am glad to answer some of the many questions I am sure that you have about the Revised Common Lectionary.

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