

A Comprehensive Lectionary for Daily Praise and Prayer: The Book of Common Prayer

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The Reformers of the sixteenth century believed that church and society should pay special attention to St. Paul's teaching on the Scriptures:

But as for you, continue in what you have learned and firmly believed, knowing from whom you have learned it, and how from childhood you have known the sacred writings that are able to instruct you for salvation through faith in Jesus Christ. All scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, so that everyone who belongs to God may be proficient, equipped for every good work (2 Tim. 3:14-17).

Indeed, when Martin Luther challenged Rome to a theological debate, he insisted that the disputation proceed according to the canons of scripture and reason. In his famous message posted at Wittenberg, Luther wrote, "The true treasure of the church is the most holy Gospel of the glory and grace of God."¹ The English Reformers made the same assertion in less flamboyant fashion, yet they were no less committed to biblical fidelity. Article VI of the Church of England (Methodist Article V) states the following:

Holy Scripture containeth all things necessary to salvation: so that whatsoever is not read therein, nor may be proved thereby, is not to be required of any man, that it should be believed as an article of the Faith, or be thought requisite or necessary to salvation.

In keeping with this tradition, heirs of the Reformation have sought to be formed by a continuous and systematic reading of the Bible.² Such a commitment is clearly demonstrated in the Daily Office Lectionary of *The Book of Common Prayer* (1979), itself a direct descendent of the sixteenth century editions of the BCP (*The Book of Common Prayer*).

This introductory article begins with a discussion of the contents and usage of this 1979 BCP Daily Office Lectionary. To help us understand its contemporary use over against the theological and philosophical context of the English Reformers, we will then continue the historical discussion begun in the opening paragraph. Finally, I will consider ways one might use this *BCP* lectionary in United Methodist contexts, and also within the Order of Saint Luke's *Daily Office*.

CONTENTS AND USAGE

The breadth and length of its coverage of the Bible is the most striking feature of the BCP Daily Office Lectionary. Adherents will read large portions of Scripture, indeed

much more than one covers in the Revised Common Lectionary, which is primarily a lectionary for Sunday eucharistic worship. During its two year cycle, the Daily Office Lectionary covers the New Testament twice as well as major portions of the Old Testament. The Psalter is completed once every seven weeks, although that pattern is set aside from the fourth week of Advent through the week after the Epiphany and during the period from Passion/Palm Sunday through the first week of Easter. With the exception of the above mentioned periods surrounding Christmas and Easter, weekday lessons are read "in course." Further exceptions to the "in course" rule are made for feasts and special observances,³ although the rubrics suggest that the missed readings be covered on the following days.

Due to the continuous nature of its readings, this daily office lectionary is but minimally seasonal. Even many of the weekdays during Advent, Lent, and Easter will convey the feeling of what the Revised Common Lectionary calls "ordinary time." The main task from day to day is the orderly reading of the biblical narrative, and of course, the Bible is not arranged according to seasons or themes. As we shall see, this task of continuous reading was highly valued by the English Reformers. While the lack of seasonal emphasis may be troubling to those whose liturgical piety is firmly rooted in the Christian Year, one should remember that the daily office presents the mystery of salvation according to a different internal logic. In the daily office, the mystery of Christ's death and resurrection unfolds across *the day* rather than *the year*. Both the annual cycle and the daily cycle provide important vehicles for living into the unique vision of the one Gospel, yet each should be evaluated according to its own logic.

How does one actually use this BCP Daily Office Lectionary? As with Revised Common Lectionary, the year begins with Advent. Persons used to the A-B-C rhythm of RCL may find themselves confused by the Year One/Year Two pattern used here, but the rubric offers the guidance that we need. "Year One begins on the First Sunday of Advent preceding the odd-numbered years, and Year Two begins on the First Sunday of Advent preceding even-numbered years. Thus, Year One begins on the first Sunday of Advent 2010, and Year Two begins on the first Sunday of Advent 2011, and so on."⁴

What follows are some other key rubrics as they are presented in *The Book of Common Prayer*:

Three readings are provided for each Sunday and weekday in each of the two years. Two of the Readings may "be used in morning and one in the evening; or, if the Office is read only once in the day, all three Readings may be used. When the office is read twice in the day, it is suggested that the Gospel Reading be used in the evening in Year One, and in the morning in Year Two. If two Readings are desired at both Offices, the Old Testament Reading for the alternate year is used as the First Reading at Evening Prayer,

When more than one Reading is used at an Office, the first is always from the Old Testament (or the Apocrypha).

Any Reading may be lengthened at discretion. Suggested lengthenings are shown in parentheses.

In the citation of the Psalms, those for the morning are given first, and then those for the evening. At the discretion of the officiant, however, any of the Psalms appointed for a given day may be used in the morning or in the evening. Likewise, Psalms appointed for any day may be used on any other day in the same week, except on major Holy Days.⁵

Again, the purpose of this system is to offer a broad devotional exposure to the length and breadth of Holy Scripture, especially the Psalter.

COMPREHENSIVE LECTIONARY IN HISTORICAL CONTEXT

As noted earlier, the Daily Office Lectionary set forth in the 1979 prayerbook follows the tradition set forth in the 1559 BCP.⁶ The sixteenth century version, however, is even more comprehensive than its twentieth century descendent. Readings for morning and evening prayer were arranged on a one year cycle, with a full chapter each from the Old and New Testaments appointed for each service. The Psalter was arranged on a thirty day cycle, with all 150 Psalms read each month.⁷ Most of the Old Testament was covered every year, "except certain books and chapters which be least edifying and might best be spared and therefore be left unread."⁸ The New Testament was read three times annually, with the exception of Revelation, most of which was omitted.

With but few exceptions, these chapters were read in course and the seasons of the liturgical year were ignored. Exceptions to the in course rule were made for the Circumcision of the Lord (January 1), The Conversion of Paul (January 25), and Christmas (December 25), as well as St. Barnabas (June 11), John the Baptist (June 24), St. Peter (June 29), St. Stephen (December 26), St. John (December 27), and the Holy Innocents (December 28).

Thomas Cranmer, the primary architect of the sixteenth century version, expected that the largest part of the morning and evening services would be taken up in the reading and hearing of the Scriptures.⁹ Cranmer sought to reverse a perceived degeneration of the daily office. Appealing to "the ancient fathers," and their desire "for a great advancement of godliness," he wrote,

"... For they so ordered the matter that all the whole Bible, or the greatest part thereof, should be read over once in the year, intending thereby that the clergy, and especially such as were ministers of the congregation, should, by often reading and meditating on God's Word, be stirred up to godliness themselves, and be more able to exhort others by wholesome doctrine, and to confute them that were adversaries of the truth ... But these many years past this godly and decent order of the ancient fathers hath been so altered, broken, and neglected by planting in uncertain stories, legends, responds, verses, vain repetitions, commemorations, and synodals that commonly when any book of the Bible was begun, before three or four chapters were read out, all the rest were unread. . . ."¹⁰

Thus, he set aside the alleged alteration of the ancient order in favor of the consistent and orderly reading of the Bible appointed in his lectionary.

Of course, appeals to the "ancient order" often reflect concerns, trends, and practices that are less "ancient" and more contemporary than one might like to admit. Indeed, Cranmer was following the lead of the sixteenth century Spanish Cardinal Francisco de Quiñones, who in 1535 had published his own revision of the Roman breviary and its lectionary. As J.D. Crichton notes, "To all intents and purposes, Quiñones had reduced the office to the recitation of the Psalter and the reading of Holy Scripture."¹¹

Such an emphasis on Scripture places the *BCP* version of the daily office in the "monastic" family. Scholars recognize two basic types for the daily office — the "cathedral office" and the "monastic office," although one rarely finds either in a pure form. What are their characteristics? In the ancient church, the cathedral office was the liturgical prayer of the whole church. Generally limited to morning and evening prayer as well as vigils, it was "(an office) of praise and intercession, not a Liturgy of the Word."¹² Emphasis was on symbol and ceremony, as with the lamp lighting and incense offering at evening prayer. In many places, there were no Scripture Lessons read, although biblical canticles found regular use. Psalms were not read in course, but they "were chosen for their suitability to the hour or service."¹³ The United Methodist services of Daily Prayer and Praise, with their emphasis on praise and optional lesson(s), provide a good example of the cathedral usage.¹⁴ On the other hand, the monastic office was developed not for the whole church but for the private and semi-private meditation of monks and other religious. The monastic regimen developed into a daily course that included as many as eight services: matins or lauds (i.e., morning prayer), prime, terce, sext, none, vespers (i.e., evening prayer), compline, and nocturns. These could be prayed in choir (that is, with the assembled group of monks or nuns) or by oneself. They were characterized by ceremonial austerity and extended, continuous reading, especially of the Psalms. For instance, in the Benedictine community, the entire Psalter was read weekly.¹⁵

Clearly, the sixteenth century *BCP* reflects the monastic usage; yet, that should not surprise us. While both historical patterns — cathedral and monastic — are described here, the only viable models available to the Reformers were monastic. As James White has demonstrated in his book *Roman Catholic Worship*, at the time of the Reformation monastic usage was dominant and the cathedral office was virtually nonexistent.¹⁶ The recovery of the cathedral office is yet another contribution of the modern liturgical movement.

Noting Cranmer's ignorance of "better" models, one can argue that the *BCP* Daily Office Lectionary (both sixteenth and late twentieth century models) should be regarded as historical models only; or, they should be relegated to the monasteries where they belong. Such a dismissal, however, ignores important facts and emphases. Similar limitations in available models did not keep Cranmer from making quite radical changes in the structure and theology of the eucharistic prayer. According to his prayer of oblation, which he placed *after* communion, the eucharist is not a sacrifice of Christ, but

"this our sacrifice of praise and thanksgiving."¹⁷ Indeed, the English Reformers were conservative when it suited their theological and philosophical purposes, otherwise they could be deeply radical.

One can argue, then, that Cranmer and others followed the monastic models because their biblical emphasis supported important Reformed commitments. Indeed, the English Reformers believed that one could build a holy commonwealth on the foundation of a biblically literate laity.¹⁸ Erasmus expressed that vision in "The Paraclesis." He wrote,

I would that even the lowliest women read the Gospels and the Pauline Epistles. And I would that they were translated into all languages so that they could be read and understood not only by Scots and Irish but also by Turks and Saracens ... Would that, as a result, the farmer sing some portion of them at the plow, the weaver hum some parts of them to the movement of his shuttle, the traveler lighten the weariness of the journey with stories of this kind.¹⁹

Again, the Reformers believed that such a holy conversation would lead them into a widespread practice of the virtuous life. The nation would become

... (A) genuine race of Christians ... a people who would restore the philosophy of Christ not in ceremonies alone and in syllogistic propositions but in the heart itself and in the whole life.²⁰

Used in concert with the new vernacular translations of the Bible, *The Book of Common Prayer* daily office lectionary was a practical means toward attaining such a goal. As Cranmer wrote, the office and its lectionary were designed

. . . that the clergy, and specially such as were ministers of the congregation, should, by often reading and meditation of God's Word, be stirred up to godliness themselves . . . And further, that the people by daily hearing of Holy Scripture read in the Church should continually profit more and more in the knowledge of God and be the more inflamed with the love of his true religion.²¹

Thus, this lectionary was a vehicle for sanctification. It institutionalized the basic commitment of the Reformers, that all should have opportunity to hear and understand the Holy Scriptures.

Granted, Erasmus' optimism about the Holy Commonwealth seems hopelessly naïve to post modern ears now increasingly suspicious of the Enlightenment and its presuppositions. Certainly, sanctification requires something more than a hearing of the Bible. Even vernacular translations fall on hardened hearts and ears that will not yield to God's call. Nevertheless, the church continues to dream about the power of a biblically literate church, and ecclesial leaders continue looking for ways to teach the whole Bible to all the people. Indeed, Methodists resonate to such an emphasis, since we follow John Wesley's teaching that "searching the scriptures" is a means of grace,²²

WESLEY AND CONTINUOUS READING

Where, then, does Wesley fit in this discussion of Anglican lectionaries and the practice of continuous reading? The Journal provides occasional references to his use of the daily office and its lectionary, as well as references to other devotional and homiletical uses of the Bible. Of a November 11, 1738 meeting "with a little company at Oxford," he wrote,

I was grieved to find *prudence* had made them leave off singing Psalms. I fear it will not stop here. God deliver me, and all that seek him in sincerity, from what the world calls 'Christian prudence.'²³

Had these persons grown tired of the monthly recitation of the Psalms, or was Wesley referring to some other usage? That cannot be established. In any event, Wesley disapproved of their "prudence," and endorsed a disciplined singing (!) of the Psalter. On December 5, 1738, he mentioned "reading prayers and preaching,"²⁴ presumably on the office readings. In the entry for April 17, 1739, he noted, "... I went to Baldwin Street and expounded, as it came in course, the fourth chapter of Acts," which was that day's second lesson for Morning Prayer.²⁵ Thus, he made some public use of the daily office lectionary.

Nevertheless, he did not include that lectionary in his revision of the prayerbook, *The Sunday Service of the Methodists in North America* (1784). Readings for Morning and Evening Prayer readings are provided only for Sundays and a few selected holy days. Wesley kept a thirty day cycle for reading the Psalter, but he excised those parts considered "highly improper for the mouths of a Christian Congregation."²⁶ Understandably, he excluded imprecatory psalms such as the infamous Psalm 137 and its dashing of Babylon's "little ones against stones" (vs. 5) In a move which reflected his Puritan sensibilities, however, he also excised references to harps and other instruments! For instance, of the twenty-two verses of Psalm 33, only the following (vs. 2) is omitted:

Praise the Lord with the harp: sing unto him with the psaltery and an instrument of ten strings.

Psalm 150 is gutted almost beyond recognition, with the following phrases missing (verses 3-5):

Praise him with the sound of the trumpet: praise him with the psaltery and harp.
Praise him with the timbrel and dance: praise him with stringed instruments and organs.
Praise him with the loud cymbals: praise him upon the loud clashing cymbals.²⁷

He kept the commandment to praise the Lord (vs. 1), but he excised references to the instrumental *means* for doing so. Thus, Wesley affirmed continuous reading of the Psalter, albeit an *edited* version of it.

Other references from *the Journal* evince commitment to in course reading and teaching. Much of his public preaching was directed at groups that would be together on one occasion only. Quite logically, in those cases he often chose preaching texts to fit the occasion.²⁸ In society and with other established groups, however, he taught in course. The entry for April 5, 1739 provides an excellent example:

At five in the evening I began at a society in Castle Street expounding the Epistle to the Romans; and the next evening, at a society in Gloucester Lane, the First Epistle of St. John. On Saturday evening at Weavers' Hall also I begun expounding the Epistle to the Romans and declared that gospel to all which is 'the power of God unto salvation to everyone that believeth.'²⁹

On May 13, 1739, he "began expounding in the morning the thirteenth chapter of the First Epistle to the Corinthians."³⁰ Three weeks later, he concluded his exposition of that chapter.³¹ On May 16, 1739, he wrote, "The Scripture which came in turn at Newgate today was the seventh of St. John."³² According to Ward and Heitzenrater, in this case he was not referring to the *BCP* lectionary. It does, however, reveal his commitment to the principle of in course reading and study. This survey of Wesley's *Journal* for the first half of 1739 indicates that he was following concurrent courses of reading and exposition with various groups. Of course, such a methodology was entirely appropriate to his itinerate ministry.

Wesley did not always use the readings from the BCP Daily Office Lectionary, nor did he include that lectionary intact in his own prayerbook revision. Nevertheless, Wesley's practice was rooted in the basic principle of the sixteenth century lectionary. That is, he affirmed that commitment to in course reading and teaching which was the basic methodology of the Reformation. In that light, the 1979 BCP Daily Office Lectionary is consistent with both Reformed and Wesleyan praxis.

THE COMPREHENSIVE LECTIONARY IN UNITED METHODIST CONTEXTS

How would this comprehensive daily office lectionary be used in United Methodist contexts and especially within the Daily Office of the Order of Saint Luke? The Rite III offices for Evening and Morning Prayer printed since 1988 in The Order's *The Book of Offices and Services* assume use of the BCP Daily Office Lectionary or something like it.³³ The O.S.L. Rite III offices follow the pattern of the "Bible Office" established by Cranmer. The continuous reading of the Psalms would be accommodated under "Invitatory and Psalter" and one or more lessons would be read before the *nunc dimittis* in the evening and the *Te Deum* in the morning.³⁴

The "Orders of Daily "Praise and Prayer" printed in The *United Methodist Hymnal* (pp. 876-879)³⁵ are designed on a "Cathedral" model, with all reading of Scripture optional. These suggested lessons in the hymnal office are thematic readings appropriate to the time and day, and thus do not follow a *lectio continua*³⁶ pattern. None

the less, full use of the BCP readings could be accommodated under the heading "Scripture." First one would read the Psalms appointed and then the readings. To do all of that reading, however, one would give up all thought of keeping a shorter office, thus relinquishing one of the primary attractions of the cathedral order. A service using all of the Psalms and readings appointed might last half an hour and would not work well for devotions at the start of a meeting.³⁷

One can find both time and setting for using the comprehensive scheme of the BCP Daily Office Lectionary if one is willing to do so; but why make such a choice? Indeed, with a deepening understanding of the daily office as the prayer of the whole church and not simply the preserve of the clergy and the otherwise specially pious, many argue that office patterns with such a long schedule of readings are not viable for the church, nor are they helpful. Conversely, those who take seriously the primary issues of the Reformation will hardly feel comfortable making their daily offering of praise and prayer without *some* reading from the Scriptures, even though the United Methodist "Orders for Daily Praise and Prayer" allow one to do just that. Moreover, some will want to use a more involved schedule of readings for the same reasons Cranmer and the English Reformers urged it on their people. In other words, they will choose a comprehensive, even demanding, schedule of readings because they are convinced that an extended immersion in the Holy Scriptures is part of the formation they need in order to fulfill their Christian vocation. As the growing pursuit of disciplined Bible study programs like *Disciple* and *Bethel* seems to indicate, God is calling many different people to fulfill such a project. The BCP Daily Office Lectionary is one of many vehicles available for pursuing this worthy goal of immersion in the scriptures. It becomes a superior vehicle when one hears the readings in their intended context of praise and prayer.

While many busy pastors will resonate with Br. Hoyt Hickman's argument in favor of a daily office lectionary based on the Revised Common Lectionary, one can make the opposite argument in favor of using a daily office lectionary *not* based on it. Indeed, one might choose one system and then the other, depending on the seasons and circumstances of one's life. Using a schedule of readings not based on the Sunday lectionary would protect preachers from confusing prayer and meditation time with sermon preparation time. Rather than reading the Scriptures with an eye toward deciding what to say on Sunday, one reads with an eye toward one's own formation. Surely, those who immerse themselves in the Holy Scriptures every day of the week will learn enough of what to say — or not to say — when they prepare their Sunday homilies.

ENDNOTES

1. Martin Luther, "Ninety-Five Theses or Disputation on the Power and Efficacy of Indulgences," theses 8 and 63, 1517. *Martin Luther's Basic Theological Writings*, edited by Timothy F. Lull. Foreword by Jaroslav Pelikan (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1989), 23, 27.

2. With the reforms of Vatican II, commitment to a more systematic biblical formation is also affirmed by the Roman Catholic Church. In discussing the Holy Eucharist, the *Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy* says, "The treasures of the bible are to be opened up more lavishly, so that richer fare may be provided for the faithful at the table of God's word. In this way a more representative portion of the holy scriptures will be read to the people in the course of a prescribed number of years." Paulist Press Study edition (New York, 1964), 11.51, p. 48.
3. *The Book of Common Prayer* (New York: The Church Hymnal Corporation, 1979), 934.
4. Ibid.
5. Ibid.
6. The first *Book of Common Prayer* was published in 1549 and the second, much more Protestant in outlook, was published in 1552. The 1559 *Book of Common Prayer*, published shortly after Elizabeth I's accession to the throne, is a consensus document. Although the Daily Office Lectionary follows virtually the same pattern in each of the sixteenth century books, reference in this article will be made to the 1559 book.
7. See "The Table for the Order of the Psalms to be Said at Morning and Evening Prayer." *The Book of Common Prayer, 1559, the Elizabethan Prayerbook*, edited by John Booty (Washington, D.C: Folger Books, 1976), 24. See also the explanatory rubrics on pages 22-23. February borrowed a day each from January and March, allowing all three months to follow the thirty day cycle. May, July, August, October, and December repeated day thirty on the thirty-first day of the month.
8. BCP 1559, 25. For instance, the Genesis 10 genealogical passage was skipped as were most of the passages relating to the design and construction of the Tabernacle (Exodus 25-31, 36-39). Discussion of the offerings in Leviticus 1-17 were skipped, including that on the Day of Atonement, The census report in Numbers 1-9 were skipped. Conversely, the conquest narratives of Joshua and Judges were appointed in full. Readings from Leviticus began with the chapter 18 discussions of forbidden sexual relations.
9. Ibid., 14-15.
10. *The Book of Common Prayer, 1559*, 14-15.
11. J.D. Crichton, "The Office in the West: The Roman Rite from the Sixteenth Century," *The Study of Liturgy*, editors Cheslyn Jones, Geoffrey Wainwright, Edward Yarnold (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978), 383.
12. Robert Taft, S. J., *The Liturgy of the Hours in East and West, The Origins of the Divine Office and Its Meaning for Today* (Collegeville, Minnesota: The Liturgical Press, 1986), 32
13. Ibid.
14. See *The United Methodist Book of Worship*, (Nashville, Tennessee: The United Methodist Publishing House, 1992), 568-79. See also *The Worship Resources of the United Methodist Hymnal*, Hoyt Hickman, volume editor (Nashville, Tennessee: The United Methodist Publishing House, 1989), 180.

15. Taft, 136.
16. James F. White, *Roman Catholic Worship, From Trent to Today* (Mahwah, New Jersey: Paulist Press, 1995), 25.
17. *BCP 1559*, 264.
18. For an excellent development of this thesis, see the series of essays edited by John Booty, *The Godly Kingdom of Tudor England: Great Books of the English Reformation* (Wilton, Connecticut: Morehouse-Barlow Company, 1981).
19. Desiderius Erasmus, "The Paraclesis," 1516, *Christian Humanism and the Reformation, Selected Writings*, edited by John C. Olin (New York: Harper and Row, 1965), 97. "The Paraclesis" was the preface to Erasmus' edition of the Greek and Latin New Testament. See Olin volume, p. 92.
20. *Ibid.*, 99.
21. *BCP 1559*, 14.
22. John Wesley, "The Means of Grace," 1746, *The Works of John Wesley* Vol. 1, edited by Albert Outler (Nashville, Tennessee: Abingdon Press, 1984), 381.
23. John Wesley, *Journal*, November 11, 1739, *The Works of John Wesley*, Volume 19, *Journals and Diaries II (1738-1743)*, edited by W. Reginald Ward and Richard P. Heitzenrater (Nashville, Tennessee: Abingdon Press, 1994).
24. *Ibid.*, December 5, 1738.
25. *Ibid.*, April 17, 1739. See also footnote, p. 49 of *Journals and Diaries*.
26. *John Wesley's Prayerbook: The Sunday Service of the Methodists in North America*, with introduction, notes and commentary by James F. White (Akron, Ohio: OSL Publications, 1991, 1995), A1. In a sense, Wesley followed Cranmer's logic that the reading of Scripture was done to pursue edification, yet he arrived at a different conclusion as to how such edification should be embodied.
27. For a full outline of Wesley's revision of the Psalter, see *John Wesley's Prayerbook*, 162-279.
28. See *Journal*, May 26, 1739 and June 24, 1739. 29. *Ibid.*, April 5, 1739. 30. *Ibid.*, May 13, 1739.
31. *Ibid.*, June 3, 1739.
32. *Ibid.*, May 16, 1739. See footnote 87, p. 58 of *Journals and Diaries*.
33. For an example of a similar lectionary, see the Presbyterian *Book of Common Worship* (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1993), 1049-95.

34. *The Book of Offices and Services After the Usage of the Order of Saint Luke*, Timothy J. Crouch, editor and compiler (Akron, Ohio: Order of Saint Luke Publications, 1988, 1994), 19, 27.
35. See also *The United Methodist Book of Worship*, 568-79. The orders of "Daily Praise and Prayer" are published as the "Rite I" offices in *The Book of Offices and Services*. See pp. 3-9.
36. *Lectio continua* means "continuous reading." That is, the lessons for a particular day begin where the previous day's readings ended.
37. The rubrics in *The United Methodist Book of Worship* suggest that one use these orders at times when the church is already gathered. See p. 568.