

# *Reading<sup>1</sup> the Bible Day by Day: Toward a Faithful Use of Scripture in the Daily Office*

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The Order of Saint Luke has not designated an official daily office lectionary for use by its members. This essay, updated from a version which appeared originally in *The Daily Lectionary, A Guide for Using the Scriptures within the Daily Office* (The Daily Office, Volume 6), describes some of my thinking on this topic, especially as it relates to the original Daily Office project, which began in 1988 and culminated with the aforementioned Volume 6, published in 2001.

## BASIC QUESTIONS

We begin with a basic question. How should the church choose its Scripture readings when it gathers for Sunday morning worship? Most likely, readers of this essay settled that question quite some time ago, opting to follow Revised Common Lectionary (RCL) or a similar system. Indeed, widespread usage of RCL in the United Methodist Church and other mainline bodies demonstrates commitment to a deeper biblical attentiveness in Lord's Day worship. Its continuing use increases such a focus on the Bible. Many observers would agree that RCL has encouraged biblically based preaching in the mainline churches, and few would urge a return to topical preaching with all of its clergy centered idiosyncrasies.<sup>1</sup> Some of those preachers who do not follow RCL feel compelled to apologize for their alleged intransigence. Why? Perhaps they really do understand the essential biblical agenda of the Reformation and its practical implications. Assuming that key doctrines must find corresponding institutional and liturgical forms, then it follows that one who affirms the Reformed doctrine of *sola scriptura* must either use a lectionary or the "in course" reading of Scripture as the basis for preaching and worship. Objections and pockets of resistance notwithstanding, there is a growing biblical consciousness in the churches and it is reflected in the use of RCL. This development is one of the most significant achievements of the liturgical movement.<sup>2</sup> Growing commitment to the Scriptures manifests itself in other ways as well, as in the proliferating use of high commitment Bible study programs like *Bethel*, *Kerygma*, and *Disciple*.

Rarely has Methodism done a better job of supporting its fundamental commitment to biblical formation than it has done in the past three decades. This movement toward a deeper biblical attentiveness reflects classic Methodist theology and practice. Methodism's third "General Rule" insists that those who wish to "flee the wrath to come" should do so "By attending upon the ordinances of God (including)... the ministry of the Word, either read or expounded . . . (and) searching the Scriptures."<sup>3</sup> In like manner, Methodist Articles of Religion V and VI embody the same commitment to the biblical canon that was expressed by the Church of England at the time of the English

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Reformation. Methodist Article V insists that "Holy Scripture containeth all things necessary for salvation," then it proceeds to name the sixty-six books of the canon. Article VI asserts that "The Old Testament is not contrary to the New."<sup>4</sup> Of course, both of these articles are taken from the thirty-nine Articles of the Church of England.<sup>5</sup> The current emphasis in biblical formation rests on a solid historical foundation.

This discussion about Sunday lectionaries and biblical commitments serves as prelude to the basic question addressed here. That is, how should Bible readings be chosen on a daily basis within the context of the Daily Office? We must come to this question with a good measure of humility. Indeed, we realize that Methodists began practicing disciplines of daily Bible reading long ago, even when most did not use the terms "daily office" and "lectionary." For instance, in his *Autobiography*, nineteenth century circuit rider Peter Cartwright described the daily devotional pattern which he called "family prayer." He said, "I took the books, read, sung, and prayed."<sup>6</sup> To borrow and adapt a familiar line from William Shakespeare, the daily office by any other name is still the daily office. One would assume that when Cartwright said that he "read," that meant readings from Scripture.<sup>7</sup> During sixty plus years that members of the Order have been praying our forms of the Daily Office, they have followed various methods for determining the readings for the day, yet readings have always been used.

Formal questions about an "official" daily lectionary for the Order of Saint Luke did not occur until three volumes of the Daily Office Project had been published. Until that time, persons within the Order simply made their own decisions about how to choose their readings, a perfectly natural and logical practice given the fact that most members of the Order pray the office in private. Specifically, the matter of a daily office lectionary came up during the spring 1994 Executive Council meeting held at Asbury Theological Seminary in Wilmore, Kentucky. In discussions about the *Daily Office* project and its connections to Brother Hoyt Hickman's "A Trial Daily Lectionary," it became evident that we had no consensus as to what lectionary system should be used. That fact was not perceived as a crisis, but rather as a further opportunity to pursue the Order's vocation of liturgical scholarship.

Volume 6 was not an attempt to force a consensus, nor is such consensus necessary for an Order that exists primarily in diaspora. If the day comes when permanent residential communities exist within the Order of Saint Luke and/or in relation to it, their reflections on the question of the daily lectionary and their subsequent decisions will make an important contribution to a wider discussion within the Order. Nevertheless, we might expect that different residential communities would come to different conclusions. At the end of the day, it seems that the only *necessary* conclusion is that the daily office contain readings from Scripture.

In *The Daily Office* (volume 6), we provided two options for a daily lectionary along with related articles which addressed historical, theological and practical issues. Beyond the provision of these two options and the introductory material, we sought to raise questions and frame thinking about the general practice of daily Bible reading.

## THE TWO PRIMARY OPTIONS

In the first section we offered Hoyt Hickman's "Daily Lectionary Based on The Revised Common Lectionary," which first appeared in *Sacramental Life* as "A Trial Daily Lectionary."<sup>8</sup> It was significant that his work appeared first, because when we began work on the daily lectionary volume, we asked a sampling of our members to tell us what lectionary they were actually using on a daily basis. Many informed us that they were using RCL or a derivative of it.

To say that no one person has understood the intersection of American Methodism with the ecumenical liturgical movement better than Hoyt Hickman does not overstate the case; nor has anyone worked longer or more effectively at that intersection than he. Therefore, we were honored to receive his contribution. We had come to expect soundly theological and eminently practical work from Brother Hoyt, and his lectionary follows in that tradition. It offers a reading schedule that can be handled by busy pastors and laypersons. Further commending it is its relationship to the readings heard in the Sunday assembly, as well as its organization according to the three year cycle long familiar to United Methodists and members of other mainline denominations (i.e., Years A-B-C).

In the second section, we offered another lectionary that found wide usage among the membership of the Order, the Daily Office Lectionary from *The Book of Common Prayer* (1979). This *BCP* (*Book of Common Prayer*) lectionary is the most current recension of the daily office system developed in the sixteenth century by Thomas Cranmer and the English Reformers. In providing it, we noted that the eucharistic (i.e. Sunday) lectionary included in the sixteenth century versions of the BCP provided only a one-year schedule of Epistle and Gospel readings. These lessons for the Eucharist (or the antecomunion) were chosen to fit seasonal themes, so there was nothing of the "in course" principle contemporary lectionary users have come to expect. This one year thematic pattern continued even through the 1928 *BCP*, which had no comprehensive lectionary apart from the daily office system. Therefore, when one considers the matter of a comprehensive lectionary offering coverage of the whole Bible, Cranmer's daily office lectionary is the direct forbear of the Revised Common Lectionary now enjoying widespread use in our churches on Sunday mornings. For that reason, I argued that the historical significance of the BCP daily office lectionary should be understood even if one decides not to use it.

## ENDNOTES

1. We are aware that some of the megachurches and their offspring are using dramas of "life situations" as a springboard for teaching and preaching, moving from the dramas to a discussion and application of various randomly chosen biblical texts. This phenomenon seems like a revival of topical preaching. Facing the inevitable pressures to imitate such "successful" churches, some mainline clergy are tempted to experiment with similar topical forms.

When one considers the megachurches and the church growth movement as a whole, it is ironic that these persons who claim to represent the best evangelical traditions would (perhaps unwittingly) challenge evangelicalism's most basic tenet — that the Bible sets the agenda for the church. For a full examination of this dilemma written from an evangelical perspective, see two books by Gordon-Conwell professor David Wells: *No Place for Truth, Or Whatever Happened to Evangelical Theology?* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Company, 1993) and *God in the Wasteland, The Reality of Truth in a World of Fading Dreams* (William B. Eerdmans, 1994).

2. There is still a long way to go, however. Some pastors will claim to be using the lectionary when they are reading only one or two of the lessons every week. Properly understood, a Lord's Day lectionary should be received as a whole piece and used accordingly. When all three readings and the Psalm are not used, then one loses the holistic message of Scripture and one interrupts "in course" sequences.

3. *The Book of Discipline of the United Methodist Church* 1992 (Nashville, Tennessee: The United Methodist Publishing House, 1992), para. 67, p. 73.

4. *Ibid.*, para 67, pp. 60-61.

5. In the Church of England, they are numbered Articles VI and VII.

6. *Autobiography of Peter Cartwright*, introduction by Charles L. Wallis (Nashville, Tennessee: The Abingdon Press, 1984. Original edition, 1856), 99.

7. Concerning *Sunday* worship, the Methodist rubric from the mid-nineteenth century said, "Let the morning service consist of singing, prayer, the reading of a lesson from the Old Testament, and another from the New, and preaching." The afternoon, or evening, service was to include "one or two Scripture lessons, and preaching." See *Discipline of the Methodist Episcopal Church, 1868*, chpt. iii, para 1, p. 43. One can assume that individual persons and families followed a similar pattern of reading for their daily worship.

8. The first installment appeared in the December 1992/January 1993 issue of *Sacramental Life* (Volume V, number 5). Installments continued appearing through the Ordinary Time 1998 issue (Volume XI, number 3).

9. See *Autobiography of Peter Cartwright, 99*.