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Lectionaries in the Community of Protestant Churches in Europe

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The use of lectionaries for worship services in the protestant churches in Europe has developed through history. Many churches still hold fast to the early medieval, so-called “early church” pericope order, but in various revised or expanded forms. Alongside them stand churches which since the Reformation have done without a unified lectionary.

In the last decades movement has come into the European lectionary landscape. Churches have extensively reworked their old lectionaries or developed entirely new ones. Developments in the Roman Catholic Church and in the protestant churches in North America have had an impact in Europe. Even churches which traditionally had no lectionaries have begun to develop them.

The following contribution offers a survey of the lectionaries in use today in the member churches of the Community of Protestant Churches in Europe (CPCE),¹ and gives a brief introduction to the various orders.

Churches with a revised “early church” lectionary

The “early church” lectionary

The so-called “early church” lectionary consists of a series of pericopes which were made binding in the realm of the Franks under Carolingian rule and shaped the Western liturgy for centuries. For each Sunday and feast day (and for a range of working days) they contain an Epistle and Gospel reading which are repeated every year. In individual cases an Old Testament reading takes the place of the Epistle. It is not established whether one or both of the texts was preached on, or if so, which.²

The emergence of this lectionary in the pre-Carolingian period can no longer be reconstructed with certainty. The assumption is widely accepted that the Gospel and Epistle series developed independently of each other. The Gospel series derives from the Roman urban liturgy and “is fairly solidly established by 645”.³ Its beginnings lay much further back, probably as early as the 5th century: “The Roman urban Gospel lectionary seems to have been

¹ On the suggestion of Dr. Peter Bukowski the council of CPCE at its meeting in October 2009 in Geneva commissioned the preparation of an overview of this kind.

² Early medieval sermons on both Gospels and Epistles are preserved; cf. Ranke (1847), 181ff., 247ff.

³ Kunze (1955), 150

brought into the Franconian-Carolingian liturgical reform in the shape of the 'Roman lectionary', very likely the original *Liber Comitis* (of Jerome?).⁴ The Epistle series probably comes from the area of the Gallican liturgy and was completed around the 8th century.⁵

The combination of Gospels and Epistles was carried through under Charlemagne by Alcuin. The Carolingian system of lections became the forerunner of the medieval lectionary, and its Sunday and feast day readings were preserved by the Lutheran Reformation⁶ and live on in the contemporary revisions of the order. Because of their different origins the Epistles and Gospels in the medieval lectionary are not consonant, i.e. not thematically coordinated.

In spite of all criticisms of substance, the Lutheran Reformation held firmly to the existing lectionary. This was above all enabled by the fact that the existing readings were understood as sermon texts, i.e. they were generally accompanied by an exegesis.⁷ Following the Council of Trent the *Missale Romanum* similarly retained the established "early church" readings with minor adjustments (for example the displacement of the Epistles by a week and the Gospels by one to two weeks on the Sundays after Trinity).⁸

The German Pericope Order

In the course of the 19th century in the established German protestant churches variants and alternatives to the old lectionary were developed and tested along with additional series of sermon texts.⁹ At the end of the century the churches' conference in Eisenach undertook a survey of these new lists and presented in 1896 a conservative revision of the old lectionary with three additional sermon series,¹⁰ which relatively soon became accepted.

The revisions after the Second World War and in the seventies ("Ordnung der Predigttexte" [OPT], 1958 and 1978) offer along with the "old" Epistles and Gospels four further sermon series as well as so-called "marginal texts" (that is, alternative sermon texts that may also be used). In addition a Psalm is given for each week; as a rule this is not used as a sermon text but as an introit. OPT 1978 in particular attempted – by making major alterations above all to the old Epistle series – to assemble coherent Propers. A minor reworking was brought by the introduction of the "Evangelische Gottesdienstbuch" (EGb) in 1999.¹¹

A feature of the German pericope order is the distinction between readings and sermon texts. The two "early church" texts together with an Old Testament text from one of the other series make up the so-called main readings which are repeated as lessons each year. By contrast, each sermon pericope comes round only every six years.¹²

⁴ Von Schade/Schulz (1977), 18.

⁵ Cf. Kunze (1955), 150.

⁶ Cf. von Schade/Schulz (1977), 19.

⁷ Cf. Kunze (1955), 161f.; Bloth (1999), 529f.

⁸ Cf. Kunze (1955), 156.

⁹ Cf. Caspari (1904), 154 f.

¹⁰ AKED (1896), 478-500.

¹¹ Since OPT 1978 and EGb 1999 only differ at a few points and the older books are still to hand in many places, both orders are *de facto* in use side by side. In what follows they are referred to without distinction as the "German" order.

¹² This poses the problem of combining reading and sermon texts in a single service. In principle the rule is clear that one of the main readings should be replaced by the sermon text. In practice the sermon text often stands alongside the main readings, so that for example two Gospel lessons can be used, one as a reading and the other as the sermon text.

Corresponding to OPT 1978 there is a series of weekday readings according to the church year, worked out by the protestant Michaelsbruderschaft.¹³ It is suitable above all for the liturgy of the hours, less so for the workday Eucharistic celebration.

Today most member churches of the German Evangelical Church use the pericope order of EGb 1999. The churches of Württemberg and Kurhessen-Waldeck supplement this lectionary with their own sermon series.

The German lectionary is also used in German-speaking churches outside Germany: in the Evangelical Church of the Augsburg Confession in Austria, the Evangelical Church in Alsace and Lothringen, in the Protestant Church of Luxembourg and the Evangelical Church in the principality of Liechtenstein, in the Lutheran congregations in Switzerland (Evangelical Lutheran Church in Berne/Freiburg/Neuenburg; Evangelical Lutheran Church in Zürich), in the German Lutheran churches in Italy, Great Britain and in Ireland. It is also in use in the Moravian Brotherhood and thus found its way into the Herrnhut Daily Watchwords.

Outside the German language area the German lectionary is used in the Lutheran Churches in Lithuania and Slovakia. It also found its way via the Herrnhuter Watchwords into the Reformed Church in Poland and the Waldensian Church in Italy. The German-speaking Evangelical Church of the Augsburg Confession in Romania uses a slightly modified version of OPT 1978; the Hungarian-speaking Evangelical Lutheran Church in Romania the EGb order.

The Evangelical Lutheran Church in Russia and other States (ELKRAS) largely holds to the German order, but in some congregations other lectionaries are in use – these are either from North America or (in Brethren congregations) still date from the 19th century.

The Hungarian Pericope Order

In the Lutheran Church in Hungary there exist alongside the so-called early church lectionary (traditional Gospels and Epistles with an appropriate Old Testament reading) three additional series (A to C), which also consist of Gospel, Epistle and Old Testament readings.

Differently from the Scandinavian lectionaries (see below), however, the series A to C are not drawn on for readings but solely for sermon texts. This means that the three lessons in such a series are never read together. Each year a liturgical committee drafts a plan of sermon texts which is published by the bishops; Old Testament, Gospel and Epistle readings from a given series serve in rotation as the basis for the sermon.¹⁴ The early church readings come round roughly every tenth year as sermon texts. The sermon text is supplemented by one or two readings which are always taken from the early church lectionary. The readings in the Hungarian lectionary are frequently short (often only two or three verses); deuterocanonical texts appear seldom, but are given equal value.

For every Sunday there is a liturgical Psalm; there are also Psalms among the readings and sermon texts.

Lectionaries in Scandinavia

In the last decades the Lutheran Churches in Scandinavia have developed lectionaries which build on the “early church” readings. The old series of readings is used in a two or three year

¹³ Brandhorst/Völker (1997).

¹⁴ According to information from the Hungarian Lutheran Church the sermon plan follows a ten-year cycle. That would mean that not all of the twelve texts find a place in a cycle as sermon texts.

rotation with new lectionaries. These churches have thus departed from the principle that the old readings are heard every year.

The current order in the Lutheran Church in Denmark dates from 1992. Here the early church Gospels and Epistles were supplemented by a suitable Old Testament reading (Series A) and this alternates annually with a Series B, consisting of new combinations of Gospel, Epistle and Old Testament readings.

The Evangelical Lutheran Church in Finland (not a member of CPCE) possesses since 2000 a three-year lectionary which is also based on the “early church” pericope series.¹⁵ This, supplemented by appropriate Old Testament texts, constitutes the first series; the second and third yearly series are made up of newly selected texts thematically corresponding to the readings in Series 1. It was originally intended always to use the Gospel as the sermon text, but this proved impossible to follow through. The Finnish lectionary has also been used since 2009 (with minor modifications) in the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Estonia – instead of the German lectionary previously used there. In a twelve-year cycle all nine texts (OT, Epistle, Gospel in Years I, II and III) are used as sermon texts, the Gospels being preached upon every second year.

The Church of Norway is at the moment in the middle of a revision of the pericopes. From 1977 two series were in use here, similarly to Denmark. The suggestion now on the table includes three yearly series which are fundamentally based on the Finnish (and Swedish) lectionary, i.e. they adopt the “early church” pericopes and have consonant propers throughout. However, the order has been extensively restructured. The “early church” lessons are now distributed among all three series. The calendar has also been modified. To keep as few as possible of the Propers from falling out because of the date of Easter, the propers omitted in the Epiphany season are now inserted from the 24th Sunday after Trinity.¹⁶ Some formularies were deleted (5th in Lent – now always Annunciation; 8th Sunday in Trinity – now always Transfiguration; the final Sundays in the church year). The numbering of the Sundays was altered (no longer “after Epiphany/Trinity” but “in Epiphany/Trinity”) in order to profile the name-giving feast day more clearly as the opening of the corresponding period.¹⁷ It is important that by comparison with the Finnish lectionary some of the Propers in the Trinity period were moved in order to create blocks with connecting overarching themes.¹⁸

In Finland and Norway a Psalm is given for each Sunday and used as the introit; there are also Psalms among the readings.

Revised Common Lectionary and related Lectionaries

Ordo Lectionum Missae (OLM)

In the Roman Catholic Church (following the instruction of the 2nd Vatican Council “that richer fare may be provided for the faithful at the table of God’s word” with a cycle over several years: SC 51) the post-conciliar liturgical reform led in the years 1964-1969 to the creation of

¹⁵ A lectionary on the basis of the “early church” pericopes with three series of lessons and consonant propers was first introduced in the 1980s in the Church of Sweden. The Swedish lectionary currently used dates from 2002. It is not discussed here because it is not used by any CPCE church.

¹⁶ Cf. Norske Kirke, Reform, 8. The system is comparable with that of the *Missale Tridentinum*.

¹⁷ Cf. Norske Kirke, Reform, 12f.

¹⁸ Cf. Norske Kirke, Reform, 13.

a completely new lectionary¹⁹ and to a restructuring of the calendar of the church year. The times after Epiphany and Pentecost are now integrated by numbering Sundays concurrently *per annum* (in ordinary time). The 6th to 9th Sundays in ordinary time can fall out or be relocated during Trinity.²⁰

OLM gives three lessons for each Sunday and feast day; these are repeated in a three-year cycle; for the great feasts there is a one-year cycle.²¹ Each year's readings are determined by one of the Synoptics (as semicontinuous reading²² on Sundays *per annum*); John is read each year in the major seasons. The OT lesson is chosen to fit the Gospel; the Epistle follows an independent cycle and so interrupts the consonance of OT and Gospel. That is one of the main points of criticism of OLM; many congregations exercise their choice to omit one lesson – usually the OT reading.²³ During the major seasons the Gospels are chosen as the *lectio selecta* with Epistles corresponding to them.

With the liturgical reform the introit Psalm was dropped and the gradual transformed into a responsive Psalm after the first lesson. In each annual cycle this is chosen to fit with the respective OT text.

Independently of the Sunday and feast day lectionaries there is for weekdays a two-year cycle with two readings (Gospel and OT/Epistle alternating weekly) as well as the lessons for the liturgy of the hours.

The OLM is also in use in some protestant churches, namely in the Protestant Church in France (except for Alsace and Lothringen) and in the Iglesia Evangélica Española. The French churches publish the OLM lessons within a plan for daily Bible readings.

The evangelical Church of Rio de la Plata has prepared its own revision of the Roman OLM. Here alternative texts drawing on the “German” lectionary are used on feast days for which the OLM provides readings from deuterocanonical scriptures or with “Marian” content. The Iglesias Reformadas en Argentina, which are in the process of uniting with the Church of Rio de la Plata, also (optionally) use this lectionary.

Revised Common Lectionary (RCL)

Soon after its appearance the OLM was adapted by the North American *Consultation on Common Texts* as the *Common Lectionary* (CL).²⁴ This gave in place of the consonant OT reading a similarly independent semicontinuous reading of the Old Testament, so that the OT texts could be more readily chosen according to criteria taken from the OT itself. CL was once again reworked as the *Revised Common Lectionary* (1992). This now offers a choice between a semicontinuous reading of the Old Testament (taken over from CL) and an OT

¹⁹ On the history of its origins: Bugnini (1997), 403-422.

²⁰ It should be remarked that unfortunately the lessons from the Sermon on the Mount (Year A) or the Lucan field sermon (Year C) fall on just these Sundays : cf. Franz (2002), 90f. Consequently central texts are not heard regularly. This effect is further intensified in RCL when the last Sunday after Epiphany (before Ash Wednesday) is celebrated as *Transfiguration Sunday*.

²¹ Cf. Franz (2002), 73.

²² “Semicontinuous reading” or “Course reading”, German “Bahnlesung”, Latin *lectio currens* or *semicontinua*. This method employs over a period a sequence of texts from a Biblical book in order to highlight their context and connexions, but also (unlike *lectio continua*) allows for omissions between the selected passages.

²³ Cf. Franz (2002), 91f.

²⁴ Cf. Franz (2002), 99-106.

lection consonant with the Gospel (reworked from OLM). Correspondingly there is given for each alternative an appropriate responsive Psalm.

RCL thus substantially follows OLM but differs from it in some points. The scope of the pericopes is frequently extended, particularly with the Epistles, which in OLM often include only a few verses. Occasionally this produces a combination of Epistles (so that two Sunday Epistles in OLM become one in RCL), resulting in a displacement of individual lections by a week. In rare cases this procedure was also used with the Gospels. The consonant OT readings were more often replaced and other responsive Psalms chosen; for deuterocanonical texts alternatives are noted throughout.

The North American *Revised Common Lectionary* has also been in use in European churches since the 1990s. To these belong above all the English language churches: the Church of England (not a member of CPCE), the United Reformed Church, the Presbyterian Church of Wales and the Church of Scotland. In addition, most Methodist churches have adopted this lectionary: the Methodist Church in Great Britain (which also uses the *Lectionary for a Second Service* from the Anglican *Common Worship*), the Methodist Church in Ireland, the United Methodist Church in Central Europe and the United Methodist Church in Eurasia (but there with the Eastern date for Easter). The Iglesia Evangélica Metodista Argentina uses RCL (partly with its own delimitations of verses and without the continual OT series in ordinary time). It is also used in the Czechoslovakian Hussite Church. With the exception of the Church of England and the Hussites, all these churches regard the lectionary as a guideline, but not as strictly binding.

In the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Latvia RCL has taken place alongside the German lectionary, which however is still predominantly used (though this may change with the revision of the hymn-book). Both lectionaries stand side by side in the Reformed Church in Lithuania (here the German order was spread via the Herrnhut Watchwords) and among the Waldensians and Methodists in Italy (introduced there in the framework of daily Bible readings).

Since 1977 there has been the *Oecumenisch Leesroster*, a Netherlands adaptation, which is oriented on CL but gives as an alternative alongside it larger Biblical blocks of semicontinuous readings which are newly compiled for each three-year cycle.

The Methodist and Presbyterian Churches in Portugal have produced as their common lectionary a mixture of OLM and RCL. Where these diverge it follows now the one, now the other. Additionally from 2009/2010 it does not count the Sundays "in ordinary time", but "after Epiphany" and "after Pentecost".²⁵

It holds equally for OLM and RCL that the richer opening-up of Holy Scripture for which they aim can only follow through regular church attendance;²⁶ even weekly churchgoers will only be able with difficulty to follow the connexion of the independent course readings.²⁷

Churches without Lectionaries

The Reformed churches and congregations in Germany do not traditionally use a lectionary. That also applies to the Evangelical Church of the Helvetic Confession in Austria, the Re-

²⁵ I could not establish whether account was taken here of the fact that the Propers after Pentecost are moved according to the date of Easter.

²⁶ Cf. Jörns/Bieritz (1989), 590.

²⁷ Cf. Franz (2002), 93.298-301.

formed churches in Switzerland, the Reformed Church in Luxembourg and the United Evangelical Church in Belgium. Admittedly in the German language-area the sermon preparation materials following the lectionary of the Liturgical Conference have an impact within these congregations too. The “Reformierte Liturgie” prints this lectionary in an appendix.

As in the past, the Reformed Christian Church in Slovakia, the United Free Church of Scotland, the Presbyterian Church in Ireland and the Reformed Church in Denmark largely work without a Lectionary.

The Evangelical Methodist Church in Germany also has no lectionary. The United Methodist Church in Northern Europe gives its congregations no directions; while some work without a pericope order, others use RCL or the lectionaries of the country’s Lutheran Church.

In the Reformed Church in Hungary there is no binding lectionary for the Sunday service. However there is a Bible reading plan (*Bibliaolvasó Kalauz*) published each year on the model of the Herrnhut Readings, which gives an OT and an NT text for each day and on Sunday a Psalm as well. The reading is strictly continuous. Some ministers orient themselves for services on the Sunday readings from this plan so that in the service (rather accidental) excerpts from the daily *lectio continua* are heard. The same plan of readings is also used by Hungarian Reformed Churches in other countries, such as Croatia and Serbia.

Summary

Two lectionaries dominate the European landscape. On the one side stands the German “Order of Sermon Texts” which supplements the yearly “early church” lections with further sermon texts. This is mainly but not exclusively widespread in the German language-area. Through the Herrnhut Readings and materials to assist sermon preparation it also has an influence in churches outside the German area and in Reformed churches without their own lectionary. On the other side stands the Roman Catholic *Ordo Lectionum Missae* and, derived from it, the *Revised Common Lectionary* with its variations; in these the early church lections are given up and replaced by three reading series rotating each year. These are current above all in English and Romance language-areas and are mostly not regarded as strictly binding. Alongside these two groups stand churches with their own lectionaries in Scandinavia and Hungary, which integrate the early church lections in a multi-series system, and a range of churches which as before work entirely without a lectionary.

All the lectionaries described are faced with the task of balancing diverse requirements:

On the one side stands the justified desire to make the whole fullness of Scripture audible in worship. All the lectionaries in use today therefore follow in one way or another a cycle of several years for the lections or sermon texts. However, this fullness only opens itself through regular church attendance. The annual repetition of the “old” readings fits better with today’s often sporadic practice of church attendance, but does not necessarily offer a concentration on the most important parts of Scripture. In all the lectionaries the OT readings are in the minority; this has led to a range of recommendations for reform.²⁸

A great advantage of the semicontinuous readings in OLM and RCL is that they attend seriously to the Biblical contexts of the readings and take their criteria for the selection of readings from Scripture itself and not from other sources. Admittedly it is difficult to follow the

²⁸ Cf. Franz (2002), 249-264, and most recently: Die ganze Bibel zu Wort kommen lassen (2009).

parallel series of semicontinuous readings. Listener-friendliness and orientation to the church year as it has grown up are concerns favouring consonant formularies.

Some churches do not lightly give up the more than thousand-year-old tradition of the “early church” lections. Yet these old readings are no longer such a unifying bond as they used to be; even where they are still used, the series has been revised or is now only one of several.

Apparently no lectionary is in a position to meet all demands equally well. That can be seen in the frequency of lectionary reforms in recent decades. It remains to be wished that further work on lectionaries will take place with an eye open to our European and ecumenical neighbours.

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