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Q&A#39 Should We Be Using the Lectionary?

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Today's question: "Do you commend the use of a lectionary for preaching? If so, what advantages does this approach have over preaching through whole books of the Bible? How should we think about preaching in churches where we can no longer take basic biblical literacy for granted and even face a bit of skepticism towards the Bible?"

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<https://itunes.apple.com/gb/podcast/alastairs-adversaria/id1416351035?mt=2>.

Transcript

Welcome back. I had planned to do a book review today, but I've decided instead to do another question and answer video. Today's question, do you commend the use of a lectionary for preaching? If so, what advantages does this approach have over preaching through whole books of the Bible? How should we think about preaching in churches where we can no longer take basic biblical literacy for granted and even face a bit of skepticism towards the Bible? At the outset, we should discuss what a lectionary is.

As some may not know, a lectionary is a set of prescribed readings for the various Sundays of a year, usually in a three-year pattern. And over the period of that time, you'll be going through five different passages, often every single week. You'll be going through maybe two Psalms, an Old Testament reading, a New Testament gospel reading, and an Epistle reading.

And through these readings, you'll be encountering a wide range of different scripture. Every single week, you'll be encountering different parts of scripture, and these things

will be related to each other often in certain ways. So there's often themes that unite the texts of the lectionary.

Now, what are some of the benefits of this? First of all, that the pastor does not get to choose all the time what he preaches upon. Many pastors will gravitate to those passages that feel safe and familiar, those passages that are the ones they're most accustomed to, the ones that provide the greatest, most effective springboard for what they want to say. And the lectionary challenges this.

It prevents pastors from doing that so easily. Rather, you're given a set text, and you actually have to work with the text that you have in front of you and say something about those, rather than just choosing what you want to talk about. And as you see many evangelical churches with topical preaching, one of the dangers that you see within those churches again and again is that you just have the theology of the pastor, however weak or effective that might be, whatever it is, you get that.

And you get very little exposure to those things that would push the pastor or the preacher or the priest to deal with aspects that maybe might unsettle their viewpoints, that maybe might push them a bit further out of their comfort zone and into areas of scripture that are more challenging, that are more illuminating. As well. And so there's that benefit to it.

A further benefit is that it's connected with the church calendar. As you go through the year, the readings are connected to those seasons of the year that you're celebrating, whether that's Epiphany, whether it's Advent, whether it's Pentecost, whatever it is, these events are events in history, and the texts are connected to that. So if you're going through the event of Pentecost, you'll maybe have a reading from Acts 2. You'll have a reading from the story of Babel.

You'll have a reading maybe from the story of from the prophecy of Joel 2 or something from Numbers 11. Whatever it is, you have these different texts and they're brought together in illuminating ways. And you think about the connections between them.

Now, this gives us a different way of approaching scripture than those who are just preaching through texts sequentially. There's a great benefit to expository preaching as you get into depth within a particular book and work out over a period of many weeks what the message of the book of Romans or the gospel of John is. But you miss certain things as well.

And one of the things you miss is the fact that the Bible is a deeply intertextual book. And the relationship between these different parts of scripture is something that the lectionary brings out by bringing these texts into correspondence with each other. So you need to think about how do we relate this text that we've read from the Old Testament with this text that we've read from the Gospels and with this text that we've

read from the Epistles.

That can be a helpful challenge. It's also something that grounds people within the Psalms, that they're singing the Psalms or reading the Psalms on a weekly basis. And that's a very good thing to have.

The further thing that it does is it connects the events of redemptive history, the events of the story of scripture with the yearly pattern of the calendar. And so it shows the way that the story of scripture sets patterns and that those patterns are patterns that we inhabit and that the text of scripture is related within itself. And so the lectionary is something that lends itself, particularly as it's related to the church calendar, to a very typological way, a figural way or transfigural way in some respects of approaching the text of scripture that sees the text of scripture as something that is inherently interrelated and then also related to our particular moment of worship.

So we can inhabit that text within that particular point of the year and we can understand something of its movements of anticipation, of hope, of memory, whatever it is. So it can be very helpful in that respect. And in that respect, it also pushes back against the ways that certainly in many reformed contexts, salvation can be seen very much as an abstract thing, something detached from history, something that happened in history.

But that's very much the making of something that functionally works for individuals in a way that's fairly indifferent to their moment in history, fairly indifferent to redemptive history and the particular way that the *Historia Salutis* works out. And what the church calendar and the associated lectionary does is place the calendar, place the events of history and the significance of these things as events in time and space. The story of Israel, the story of Christ coming into that story and fulfilling that story.

It places these front and centre. And so that's a great advantage to it. Now, the further thing that that does is it creates the text as a realm to inhabit.

Now, all of this requires that it's taught well. And for the most part, churches that have an emphasis upon the lectionary do not make the most of those connections, do not make the most of the symbolic world that scripture opens up, do not make the most of the intertextuality of scripture. Of the echoes and the parallels and the figures and the types.

And as a result, a lot of the potential of the lectionary is missed. Furthermore, the lectionary can often, as it misses out certain sections that are troubling, it can be a means of avoiding these things that are unsettling to us. And so there are certain sections that you can predict will be left out of the lectionary for that given week because they are the bits that involve unsettling divine judgment.

They are the events that are politically incorrect, that present a view of God that isn't safe, that isn't really pleasant. And for those reasons, the lectionary can often be in its prescription of texts. It can leave certain parts of scripture unknown by the congregation.

So. Although the pastor in a church who's going through sequential preaching of expository preaching through books, they may have a sense of the need to give a balanced diet over a long period of time to their congregation. The church that's going through the lectionary may never actually encounter certain passages from Leviticus, may never actually read certain parts of the book of Joshua, may never read some of the hard parts of scripture, may never really get into the book of Revelation.

And in all of these ways, they're missing out. But at its best, the lectionary can be a very good way of connecting these threads together. And there are ways to work around some of the exclusions of things from the lectionary.

If you're aware of it, if you're alert to it, you can just mention what has been missed out and connect it with what is the subject of the lection for that for that day. There are also other ways that you can bring other texts into correspondence with the texts that you're preaching upon. And so there's no reason why there aren't, where you can't work around these problems within certain lectionaries.

This isn't a problem for every lectionary. For certain lectionaries, it is an issue. But there is an issue in expecting our approach to preaching to solve all the problems of biblical literacy.

It is just not going to do that. If you do not have a strong tradition of Christian education in some form or other, whether that's in the family, whether that's in a broader context of teaching within the church, if you gather together midweek Bible study, whatever it is, if you do not teach people to read, if you do not teach people to do all these different things and to provide a broader range of biblical teaching far beyond what is provided on a Sunday morning, you will have people who are biblically illiterate. No matter how good the lectionary is, the lectionary cannot do this task alone.

It's not intended to do this task alone. And so developing a deeper sense of biblical literacy requires an extension of the Christian education beyond the confines of a Sunday morning. You do need to teach people to read their Bibles during the week.

Daily Bible study, having a weekly Bible study for people within the church, having Sunday schools that are attached to the Sunday morning worship or having a Sunday evening meeting where you go into depth in certain passages. All of these are ways of working around some of the problems of the limitation of biblical teaching to a Sunday morning. But in many churches today, the lack of biblical literacy is not going to be addressed by improving the lectionary.

The lectionary can be a great assistance in building up people's biblical literacy, but it won't do it by itself. And so we need to get people reading their own Bibles on a daily basis. We need to get people reading about scripture, reading popular level commentaries.

We need to get people listening to the Bible on audio. There are many different ways you can do this throughout the week. And so I would, if you're going to address the problem of biblical literacy, I would actually start there.

There are many ways in which you can improve the lectionary and the preaching in churches. But the greatest gains, I think, lie in that broader realm of teaching within the life of the church and within the life of individual Christians. I hope that this helps.

If you have any further questions, please leave them in my Curious Cat account. If you'd like to support these videos and my making them in the future, please do so using my Patreon account. I hope you've found this helpful.

And if you have, please tell your friends. I hope to be back tomorrow and possibly with a book review video. Thank you and God bless.