



Christian Worship Lectionary

By Jonathan E. Schroeder

When the Church gathers around Word and sacrament, it does so in the freedom of the Gospel. A congregation can choose worship forms from anywhere on the continuum that lies between what is commanded and what is forbidden in worship.

The commanded elements are: “that the Word be proclaimed; that the Sacraments be administered rightly; that the gatherings be done in Jesus’ name.”¹ At the same time any word or action that is inconsistent with the Gospel must be barred from worship. Simple enough, right? “The peculiar problem in the formation of the worship service is posed by the wide area that remains between the two boundary lines of the absolutely forbidden and the absolutely commanded.”²

So while we enjoy great freedom in our worship, we also seek to be wise in our use of that freedom. How can we order our services to provide the best culture of the means of grace? How can we plan our public worship so that the congregation is fed by God, encourages fellow believers, and witnesses to the world in the best way we can?

For many centuries the Church exercised such wisdom by ordering its public worship around a tool we inherited from millions of other Christians across time, culture, and geography: the lectionary. These readings, prayers, and psalms appointed for Sundays and seasons are called the Propers. While the ordinary of the service remains stable, the lectionary provides the moving parts. Along with the Christian calendar, the lectionary provides the basis for the Church’s proclamation and the foundation on which its services, seasons, and songs are built.

When the development work on the new *Christian Worship* hymnal began, our church body was provided the opportunity to review and revise the lectionary from CW93. While many Christian denominations make use of a three-year lectionary, and while they share many common elements, there is no single three-year lectionary that is shared by a majority of Christians. The three-year lectionaries in use across Christendom often share the same Gospel reading, but after that they have become increasingly divergent.

So without a standard three-year lectionary to follow, the Scripture Committee set out to propose a revision. The goals for the CW lectionary were to be:

- Historical. We wanted to respect the wisdom of the Church that has gone before us.
- Ecumenical. Where we could share readings and seasons with the wider church, we would. If we had to choose between faith traditions, we would choose confessional Lutheran traditions.
- Gospel centered. The Gospel for each day would set the theme for worship.
- Thematic. All the proper appointments would thematically match the Gospel.

The results that CW offers to the Church are a revised calendar, a historic one-year lectionary, a three-year lectionary, a lectionary for minor festivals and occasions, and three volumes of *Commentary on the Propers*.

Three-year lectionary

The vast majority of WELS congregations use a three-year lectionary. This provides a set of readings for each liturgical year (A, B, C). Each year presents the Gospel in the voice of a different evangelist. Year A features Matthew; Year B, Mark; Year C, Luke. John’s voice is heard in Year B and in the Time of Easter in all three years. *Christian Worship’s* publication date means that the first liturgical year of its use will be Year C.

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Calendar years divisible by 3 are always the beginning of Year A. So Advent of 2019 was the beginning of Year A; Advent 2020, Year B; and in November of 2021 Advent begins Year C.

Thematic Sundays are a chief feature of the new lectionary. In CW93 continual readings in the epistles meant that often there was no connection between the Second Reading and the theme for the Sunday. In the new lectionary, the second reading was selected to fit the theme for each Sunday. But what about all the other appointments? In the CW93 lectionary, especially in the Season after Pentecost, the Prayer of the Day, the Verse of the Day, and the Psalm of the Day often lacked connections to each other or the appointed readings. In the new lectionary all the following appointments will match theme of the day:

- Readings 1, 2, Gospel
- Prayer of the Day
- Psalm of the Day
- Gospel Acclamation
- Hymn of the Day

The new lectionary largely retains the Gospels as they exist in the CW93 lectionary for historical and ecumenical reasons. The readings from the Gospels have the most correspondence to other lectionaries in use in wider Christianity. For example, on the Fourth Sunday of Easter in Year A, the same Good Shepherd Gospel (John 10:1-10) will be read in WELS, LCMS, ELS, Roman Catholic, Presbyterian, Anglican, Episcopalian, and other liturgical churches. Such commonality is a good reminder that while there are proper reasons for denominations to be divided now, all who call on Christ as Lord are united in the Holy Christian Church and will one day worship undivided before the throne.

The Gospel sets the theme for the Sunday, and every other appointment seeks to undergird that theme. The result is a lectionary that uses both the old and the new: While the Gospels didn't change much, the rest of the appointments did. Of the over 400+ appointments in Year A, 45% differ from CW93.

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Compared to the current lectionary, the First Reading in CW will offer more narrative in balance with prophecy. Many of the important Old Testament stories provide great preaching texts, and they will be found on Sundays where they support the theme of the Gospel. The First Reading will continue to feature readings from Acts during the Easter Season.

The Second Reading will no longer feature continual readings but will present the important content in a thematic context. While having a set of readings from a single book across several weeks provides an opportunity for preaching sermon series, this lectionary has gone away from that. Instead it seeks to provide a

tightly coordinated set of propers for every Sunday. The central point of the Gospel will be reinforced by every appointment, lending a cohesiveness to the appointments that was often lacking in CW93. Of course, the Church is free to continue to use a *lectio continua* but this effort seeks to have series preaching based on the lectionary's patterns (see *Commentary on the Propers* below).

The Prayer of the Day has a long history, and some of those prayers have been used by the Church for fifteen centuries. The new lectionary sought to preserve all the historic prayers, but to arrange them to ensure a thematic agreement with the Sunday. This is most noticeable in the Season after Pentecost. In the CW93 lectionary, the same prayer was appointed for each Sunday in years A, B, and C. Even though the readings were all different, the prayer was the same over all three years. This meant that if there was a connection between the Prayer of the Day and the readings it was serendipitous. The new lectionary features historic prayers, some newly translated ancient prayers, some newly written, but all in line with each Sunday's theme.

The same is true of the Gospel Acclamation, which we used to call the Verse of the Day. This thematic statement from Scripture is meant to prepare the congregation to hear the reading of the Gospel. It is to be sung with alleluias, except during Lent. The hymnal provides easy to use congregational responses so you can sing a thematic, proper Gospel acclamation on any Sunday.

New items to note

While much of the new lectionary will feel familiar and comfortable, some changes to terminology, practice, and purpose did occur.

Some terminology changes are minor:

- Readings instead of Lessons
- Gospel Acclamation instead of Verse of the Day
- Holy Thursday instead of Maundy Thursday
- Season after Pentecost instead of Pentecost Season

More significant changes follow.

Palm Sunday/Sunday of the Passion

The lectionary retains traditional Palm Sunday readings. However, it reintroduces the 500-year-old practice of appointing the Triumphal Entry as a choice for the Gospel on Advent 1. This corresponds to historic practice, restores the Palm Sunday connection to many Advent hymns, and allows for a new practice called the Sunday of the Passion.

The idea comes from the fact that some of the most significant portions of the Gospels—the parts that tell the sufferings and death of our Lord—are not appointed to be read on Sundays. Certainly, they are read during Lenten midweek and Holy Week services. But what percentage of your congregation attends those? Could it be that for a majority of your worshipers, their Holy Week worship takes them from waving palm branches on Palm Sunday to shouting "Christ is risen," on Easter without hearing a word about the sufferings and death of Jesus?

Proper 4 Sunday on May 29–June 4

Year A

Deuteronomy 11:18-21,26-28
2 Peter 1:19–2:3
Matthew 7:15-29

Year B

Deuteronomy 5:12-15
Colossians 2:13-17
Mark 2:23–3:6

Proper 5 Sunday on June 5–11

Year A

Exodus 3:1-15
1 Timothy 1:12-17
Matthew 9:9-13

Year B

Genesis 3:8-15
Revelation 20:1-6
Mark 3:20-35

The Sunday of the Passion places the entire Passion History in front of God’s people on Palm Sunday. For example, the reading appointed for Year A is Matthew 26:1-27:66. Some congregations preach a sermon; others use a responsive reading of the Gospel in place of the sermon. In our congregation, the service begins with the procession of palms, then the reading of the Palm Sunday Gospel, and then the service continues with a responsive reading of the Passion History as appointed. This means that every Sunday worshiper hears the whole account of Holy Week annually in the voice of the evangelist for that year.

Pentecost and the Season after Pentecost

The Christian Church year has three divisions: the Time of Christmas (Advent to Transfiguration), the Time of Easter (Ash Wednesday to Pentecost), and the Time of the Church (Trinity to Last Sunday). The 1993 lectionary ended the Time of Easter with Easter 7 and began the Time of Pentecost with the festival of Pentecost. The new lectionary moves more in line with wider Christianity and puts Pentecost as the end and culmination of the seven weeks of Easter, as the last festival of the festival half of the Church Year.

The Time of the Church begins with the festival of the Holy Trinity on the first Sunday after Pentecost. So the name of the season changes. It’s not called the Pentecost Season, but instead the Season after Pentecost. In the Season after Pentecost there are 27 Sundays and the Last Sunday of the Church Year.

Proper system

The lectionary makes a major change by using the proper system to determine readings for the Sundays after Pentecost. The benefits of using this system include ties to wider Christianity, and the ease of determining the propers for the Sundays after Pentecost simply by their calendar date.

Here’s how it works. After the First Sunday after Pentecost (Holy Trinity), the assigned readings are determined not by a Sunday’s distance from Pentecost but by the calendar date on which it falls. The set of Sunday propers run from Proper 3 to Proper 28. (Propers 1 and 2 are used on weekdays, and so are not appointed in this lectionary.) If there are any propers that are not used because of the date of Easter, they come at the beginning of the

season rather than at the end. Often, Propers 3-4 will not be used unless Easter is very early.

Each proper is assigned a range of dates by which it is paired with the Sunday on which it is used. For example, in the year 2021, the date of Pentecost is May 23, the date of Holy Trinity is May 30, so the next Sunday after Pentecost happens on June 6. This date falls in the range for “Proper 5— Sundays on June 5-11.” You would use Proper 5 readings on June 6, and then the Proper 6 readings on June 13, and so on.

Please note: Don’t call the Sunday “Proper 5” in the service folder. That’s just a reference to the set of readings. Definitely save or file your service folders and resources according to their Proper reference. It’s just not the name of the Sunday. In my congregation our service folder simply refers to them by their date in the Season after Pentecost. So next year the Sixth Sunday after Pentecost is July 17, 2022. We’ll list it in the service folder as “Sunday, July 17, in the Season after Pentecost.” But when we save a copy of the service folder it will be named “C-Proper11-2022-07-17”.

If this seems confusing, take heart. We will produce annual lectionary calendars that do all this work for you. It will look like the example shown here.

Holy Trinity	Jun 12	John 16:12-15	Numbers 6
Proper 7	Jun 19	Luke 8:26-39	Isaiah 43:8
Proper 8	Jun 26	Luke 9:51-62	1 Kings 19:1
Proper 8	Jul 3	Luke 10:1-12, 16-20	Ezekiel 2:9
Proper 10	Jul 10	Luke 10:25-37	Ruth 1:1-19
Proper 11	Jul 17	Luke 10:38-42	Genesis 18:
Proper 12	Jul 24	Luke 11:1-13	Genesis 18:

End times without End Time

The End Time Season was unique to WELS. Introduced in the 1993 hymnal, it was meant to create a fitting end to the Church Year with an eschatological focus. The new lectionary’s goals of historicity and ecumenicity led us to drop that uniquely WELS season. We want our church year to be ecumenical in the best sense of the word.

There is no End Time Season in the new lectionary. We definitely still remember the end times, just in ways that correspond to the wider church. The trajectory of each set of Gospel readings inevitably leads the Church to a focus on the coming judgment during the closing weeks of the Church Year. We recommend observing Reformation on the last Sunday in October and the Festival of All Saints on the first Sunday in November. The last Sunday of the Church year has two options: Last Sunday or Christ the King. The worship planner’s choice on the Last Sunday will dictate the choice of options for the following week on Advent 1. So on Last Sunday if the primary proper is used (Christ’s second coming), the primary proper is also used for Advent 1 (Christ’s triumphal entry). If the alternate proper is used (Christ the King), the alternate proper is also used for Advent 1 (Christ’s second coming).



Historic, Minors, and Occasions

The historic one-year lectionary in *Christian Worship* restores features that had been removed in our last hymnal. The pre-Lent *-gesimas* are back. So, too, the Latin Sundays of Easter. *Quasimodo Geniti* lives again. The Trinity season ends with Trinity 26 and Last Sunday.

Newly appointed occasions include Sanctity of Life, Military Service, Witness, Marriage and Family.

The minor festivals and occasions are fully resourced. The occasions that are frequently celebrated are given three sets of readings (Reformation, All Saints, Christian Education, Confirmation, Father's Day, Missions, Mother's Day, New Year's Eve, Stewardship, Thanksgiving) to provide ample variety. Newly appointed occasions include Sanctity of Life, Military Service, Witness, Marriage and Family.

Commentary on the Propers

Worship planners performing long range, seasonal, or weekly planning benefit from having an understanding of the whole lectionary, the liturgical seasons, the direction of upcoming readings, and special features of each of the appointments. The *Commentary on the Propers* provides the tools needed.

This set of three books provides commentary on the propers assigned to each Sunday or festival. Designed to be the first resource pulled off the shelf when planning worship, each season, Sunday, and festival is treated in terms of its connection to the theme of the day and its place within the Church Year. This resource helps the worship planner know where they are, where they're going, and what it all means.

Many pastors like to preach sermon series. These commentary volumes show that you don't need to abandon the lectionary to do it. Special attention is given to the natural series that occur in the lectionary. In fact, there are sermon series provided for the entire Church year.

Logos Bible Software

The new lectionary will be available natively on Logos Bible Software. Simply search for Christian Worship and you will see two new options: *Christian Worship One-Year Lectionary* and *Christian Worship Three-Year Lectionary*.

¹ Peter Brunner, *Worship in the Name of Jesus*, 221.

² Brunner, 225.

See also FIC

See another article by Jon Schroeder in the August *Forward in Christ*. The FIC article focuses on the benefits of the new lectionary; this WTL article focuses also on understanding the design of the new lectionary and other propers.

Planning Advent through Epiphany

To assist those who do long range planning in summer, the Hymnal Introduction Committee has posted a planning tool for Advent through Epiphany. This tool includes far more than the new lectionary. It also contains:

- Series themes and themes of the day (with explanations)
- Hymn suggestions
- Notes on new hymns that might benefit from advance planning
- Two plans for introducing new musical settings of various canticles, one "conservative," the other "ambitious"

Please note that no new canticle settings are suggested until Epiphany, giving musicians ample time to learn new settings.

Find this planning tool, *Year C Advent through Epiphany*, in the Look Inside section under the Resources tab at christianworship.com. At this location see also comments from Jon Hein about forthcoming resources from WELS Congregational Services that capitalize on this planning tool and new hymnal resources.

Supporting musical arrangements

At NPH (online.nph.net) search on 'cw21choral' to find arrangements of new hymns. Future information will assist with finding piano and organ service music settings.