

**The Ebb & Flow of *Lectio Continua* Bible Reading  
In the English-Speaking  
Reformed Churches  
1539-2000**

Sometime in the school year of 1977-78 I attended a Sunday evening service at St. Mary's Redcliffe, in Bristol, England. The church has had a long and varied history, including some notoriety for having once refused to allow George Whitefield to preach within its walls, though later, they reconsidered and received him with great effect.<sup>1</sup> The church was built before Columbus sailed and was a beautiful, spacious place in which to conduct a worship service.

At the time I was none too pleased with the *Prayer Book* service that was used. I was unaccustomed to reading prayers and responses, regularly got lost, and was typically confused. But one part of the service made a powerful impression. At the appropriate time a reader stood to read the Old Testament lesson, and later another to read the New Testament lesson. The readers read slowly, deliberately, and beautifully. The Old Testament text was from Isaiah. I recall being surprisingly moved by the power of the word skillfully read. I also recall thinking that the experience of hearing an extended reading of Scripture was new. I couldn't recall in 22 years of church-going at evangelical churches (whether Brethren, Baptist, Congregational, Independent Bible, or Presbyterian) of ever hearing a text of Scripture being read other than the few verses before the sermon. Obviously it made an impression. I can still speak of it over a quarter of a century later. Isn't it "funny," I thought, that these liturgical Anglicans read the

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<sup>1</sup> Arnold Dallimore, *George Whitefield*, Vol. I (Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1970), pp. 253, 257.

Bible, and my “gospel-preaching” churches don’t. With all their high-church regalia, with all the various postures and gestures of the priests, which my low-church self referred to as “bobbing and weaving” (thank you, Cassius Clay), they packed more Bible into their services than we did.

The disappearance of the public reading of Scripture in evangelical churches has been a gradual and disappointing development in Evangelical Protestantism since the time of the Reformation. Liturgist James F. White, addressing Protestantism more generally, calls the current situation of selective reading or minimal reading of the Bible “apostasy.”<sup>2</sup> Aside from the couple of verses upon which the sermon is based, the Bible remains an unread book in the public gatherings of what we ironically call the “Bible-believing” churches. I can cite no empirical study upon which to base this claim, but personal experience and anecdotal evidence from the “Bible” churches, the seeker-friendly churches, the charismatic churches, the old revival-format churches, and the contemporary churches is overwhelming. The Bible simply is not being read, and has not been for a very long time.

This is surprising because the Reformers were unanimous regarding the value of public Bible-reading, and Reformed Protestants were unanimous even with respect to the method by which texts were to be selected. Evangelical Christians, presumed theological heirs of the Reformation, have dropped a major plank in the Reformer’s program of “church revitalization” (as we might call it today), without, one imagines, calculating the spiritual cost of omitting this public discipline.

## Historical & Biblical Background

The medieval practice, with which the Reformers were interacting, was to follow a program of selected Bible readings according to a pattern codified by Gregory the Great (c. 540–604) in the sixth century. The program, called a lectionary, was selective (determined mainly by the themes of the church calendar), not continuous, *lectio selecta* not *lectio continua*.<sup>3</sup>

The Reformers looked behind this medieval pattern of Bible reading to the practice of the Patristic church, the Apostolic Church, and the synagogue before it. They found Moses reading Scripture to the people at Sinai (Exodus 24:7). They found Ezra setting the pattern of reading and explaining Scripture (Nehemiah 8:5-8ff). They found Jesus in the synagogue participating in the reading and explaining of Scripture. Luke describes the process:

*He entered the synagogue on the Sabbath, and stood up to read. And the book of the prophet Isaiah was handed to Him. And He opened the book (Luke 4:16b-17a)*

The Reformers found the Apostle Paul at Pisidian Antioch doing the same.

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<sup>2</sup> James F. White, "Our Apostasy in Worship," *Christian Century*, September 28, 1977, p. 842.

<sup>3</sup> R. H. Fuller, "Lectionary," in J. G. Davies (ed.) *The New Westminster Dictionary of Liturgy & Worship* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1986), p. 297-99.

*And after the reading of the Law and the Prophets the synagogue officials sent to them, saying, “Brethren, if you have any word of exhortation for the people, say it.” (Acts 13:15)*

Luke records that “after the reading of the Law and the Prophets”—note that both the books of Moses and the prophetic books were normally read—an exposition/explanation was expected. The synagogue officials say, “if you have any word of exhortation for the people, say it.” Customary practice was to read from the “Law” and the “Prophets” and to offer an explanation or exhortation. Similarly, James asserted,

*“For Moses from ancient generations has in every city those who preach him, since he is read in the synagogues every Sabbath.” (Acts 15:21; cf Acts 17:2-4, 11; 18:4; 18:19; 19:8)*

James argues as a matter of accepted fact that in the synagogues of the first century, Moses is “read” and “preach(ed).” This has been done, James says, “from ancient generations.” Hughes Old maintains that the primary method of reading in the synagogue was *lectio continua*, or consecutive readings of Old Testament texts (giving way to *lectio selecta* for feast days). “The older approach,” he says, “was to read a passage of appropriate length each Sabbath, beginning

with Genesis, continuing each Sabbath where one left off the Sabbath before until one reached the end of Deuteronomy.”<sup>4</sup> Later, readings from the prophets were added.

The early church, the Reformers argued, adopted from the synagogue the practice of sequential reading of Scripture with explanation, adding the Gospels and the Epistles to the Scripture to be read. It was this pattern of the “ministry of the word” to which they were devoted (Acts 6:2,4; 2:42; 17:11; 20:7,27). The Reformers found further support for *lectio continua* Scripture reading and preaching in the writings of the Church Fathers, whom they valued as witnesses to the practice of the apostles. The sermons of Origen (c.185-c.254), Augustine (354-430), Chrysostom (c.347-407), Gregory of Nyssa (c.330-c.395), and Gregory the Great (c.540-604) provided confirming evidence of *lectio continua* rather than *lectio selecta* readings.<sup>5</sup> In pre-Nicene times, “For ordinary Sundays the principle of *lectio continua* was used,” writes R. H. Fuller, confirming the findings of the Reformers, “a book being selected apparently at local discretion and read in successive pericopes until it was finished.”<sup>6</sup>

Convinced that this was the *pattern* that they found the Scripture and the Patristic church, the Reformers were also convinced for *prudential* reasons that the Bible should be read publicly in sequence, verse-by-verse, book-by-book. Their basic concern was that the Bible should be read consecutively so that it might be understood in context, and so that no section or genre of

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<sup>4</sup>Hughes O. Old, *The Reading & Preaching of the Scriptures in the Worship of the Christian Church, Vol. 1: The Biblical Period* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), p. 99ff. See also “Lectionary” by R. H. Fuller: synagogue pericopes were “chosen on the principle of *lectio continua* for ordinary Sabbaths” (p. 297).

<sup>5</sup> Hughes O. Old, *The Patristic Roots of Reformed Worship* (Zurich: Theologischer Verlag, 1970), pp.

Scripture might be omitted. *Comprehension* and *comprehensiveness* were the two goals. Martin Bucer's *Strassburg Liturgy* (1539) explained in its rubrics the reasons for *lectio continua* reading and preaching.

“And the Minister goes to the pulpit and reads out of the Gospels as much as he proposes to expound in a single sermon, treating the book in succession . . . and they should be dealt with in their order, not as heretofore by picking out several pieces, often without particular skill, so that all the other things given in the Gospels have been withheld from the congregation. In the afternoon and other hours, the other biblical books are also expounded.”<sup>7</sup>

Bucer and the Strasbourg Reformers were concerned that “all the other things given in the Gospels” not be “withheld from the congregation.” They were eager that Christian congregations be exposed to the whole Counsel of God.

The Scots in their first *Book of Discipline* (1560), reasoned along similar lines:

“We think it most expedient that the Scriptures be read in order, that is, that some one book of the Old and the New Testament be begun, and orderly read to the end. In the same we judge of preaching . . . for this skipping and divagation (i.e. wandering about)

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194-95.

<sup>6</sup> R. H. Fuller, “Lectionary,” p. 298.

<sup>7</sup> Bard Thompson, *Liturgies of the Western Church* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1961), pp. 170-71.

from place to place of the Scripture, be it in reading or be it in preaching, we judge not so profitable to edify the church as the continual following of one text.”<sup>8</sup>

Selective readings from Scripture are not so much sinful or unlawful as unwise, say the Scots. Skipping about is “not so profitable to edify the church as the continual following of one text.”

Thompson summarizes the Scottish Reformers’ concerns:

“Scarcely anything was less appropriate of a minister than he presume to control or obscure God’s way among men by parceling out the Scriptures in bits and snatches. On the contrary, the Scriptures should be expounded book by book, chapter by chapter, in a continuous and orderly fashion. This procedure also implied that the sermon was not precisely the preacher’s device to warm hearts, win souls, inculcate piety for the oncoming week. It was the Word of God, made real, alive, and effective in the hearts of men through the action of the Holy Spirit.”<sup>9</sup>

*The First Book of Common Order*, containing what is sometimes called the “John Knox Liturgy,” codified Knox’s *Form of Prayers*<sup>10</sup> in 1564, and according to D. B. Forrester, “provided the norm for Reformed worship in Scotland until well into the seventeenth century.”<sup>11</sup> Thomas M’Crie, 19th century Scottish church historian, described worship in Scotland from 1564-1638 as

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<sup>8</sup>Ibid, p. 291, English modernized

<sup>9</sup>Ibid, p. 291.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid, pp. 295-307.

<sup>11</sup> D.B. Forrester, “Worship,” in Nigel M. de Cameron (ed) *Dictionary of Scottish Church History and Theology* (Downers Grove, Ill: Inter-Varsity Press, 1993), p. 896.

beginning with the “reader” (a provision permitted by the *Book of Discipline* because of the prevalence of untrained ministers), “whose office it was to read the prayers from Knox’s liturgy, and portions of Scripture, before the minister entered the pulpit.” M’Crie outlines the service as follows:

prayer  
Psalm sung  
Scripture reading  
prayer  
Lord’s prayer  
doxology  
Psalm sung  
prayer of illumination  
sermon  
prayer  
Psalm sung  
benediction<sup>12</sup>

The “portions of Scripture” read by the reader would no doubt be the *lectio continua* readings mandated by the first *Book of Discipline*.<sup>13</sup>

On the basis of several contemporary sources, William D. Maxwell in *A History of Worship in the Church of Scotland* describes the worship of Scotland roughly 1600-1640 in similar terms.<sup>14</sup> The reader would lead the congregation in the confession of sin from Knox’s liturgy, then lead the people in singing a psalm or psalms with doxologies, and reading “a chapter or chapters in course

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<sup>12</sup> Thomas M’Crie, *The Story of the Scottish Church* (Glasgow: Free Presbyterian Publications, 1874, 1988), p. 166, 167; cf. Charles Greig M’Crie, *The Public Worship of Presbyterian Scotland* (Edinburgh: William Blackwood & Sons, 1892), pp. 162ff.

<sup>13</sup> “There is no mention of the public reading of Scripture” in the *Book of Common Order* (1564), concedes Forrester, but he agrees, “this seems to have been included in a preliminary service by a reader,” “Worship,” p. 85.

<sup>14</sup> He mentions William Cowper, *Seven-days Conference between a Catholic Christian and a Roman Catholic*; Sir William Brereton in Hugh Brown, *Early Travelers in Scotland*, and Alexander Henderson, *The*

out of both the Old and New Testaments, possibly with further psalms or canticles sung between them.”<sup>15</sup> The minister, once he arrived, “read a text of Holy Scripture, and preached his sermon upon it.”<sup>16</sup>

The English Puritans’ *Middleburg Liturgy* (1586) directed that “some chapters of the canonical books of Scripture” be read, and that they be read “in order as the books and chapters follow, that so from time to time the Holy Scriptures may be read throughout.”<sup>17</sup> Exposure to the whole word of God was deemed important.

Similarly the Westminster Assembly’s *Directory* (1645), the classic expression of Puritan views of worship, required *lectio continua* readings.

“Reading of the word in the congregation, being part of the publick worship of God, . . . and one means sanctified by him for the edifying of his people, is to be performed by the pastors and teachers.

“All the canonical books of the Old and New Testament . . . shall be publickly read in the vulgar tongue, out of the best allowed translation, distinctly, that all may hear and understand.

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*Government of the Church of Scotland.*

<sup>15</sup> William D. Maxwell, *A History of Worship in the Church of Scotland*, (London: Oxford University Press, 1955), p. 95.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid*, p. 96.

<sup>17</sup> Thompson, p. 322.

“How large a portion shall be read at once, is left to the wisdom of the minister; but it is convenient, that ordinarily one chapter of each Testament be read at every meeting; and sometimes more, where the chapters be short, or the coherence of matter requireth it.

“It is requisite that all the canonical books be read over in order, that the people may be better acquainted with the whole body of the scriptures; and ordinarily, where the reading in either Testament ended on one Lord’s day, it is to begin the next.”<sup>18</sup>

Note the Reformers’ and Puritans’ concern that the whole Bible be read, including the Old Testament, which, according to Hughes Old, “had for all practical purposes been lost from the regular worship of the Western Church” in the Middle Ages.<sup>19</sup> With the exception of the chanting of the Psalms and bits and pieces of the Old Testament here and there in selected services, the Old Testament was not opened. “Normally,” says Old, “the faithful did not hear the Old Testament read in worship.”<sup>20</sup> The Reformation restored this balance. Why? “That the people may be better acquainted with the whole body of the Scriptures,” said the Westminster divines.

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<sup>18</sup>Ibid, p. 358.

<sup>19</sup>Old, *Patristic Roots*, p. 203.

<sup>20</sup>Ibid, p. 203.

Baxter's *Reformed Liturgy* (1661) and Cranmer's *Book of Common Prayer* (1549,1662) may be added to our list of witnesses, as each envisioned a chapter being read from each Testament in the regular worship of the church, though not necessarily *lectio continua*.<sup>21</sup> Old summarizes in saying that the practice of reading a chapter from each Testament in each service was "a major feature of English Protestant worship from the beginning of the Reformation" until well into the 17th century.<sup>22</sup>

## **Development**

*Lectio continua* Scripture reading from both testaments was practiced in the continental Reformed churches, and among the Scots and Puritans from the 16<sup>th</sup> to the 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, though with significant adaptations. Over time the Scripture reading developed into a reading with commentary, an "expository reading," as we will call it, of a chapter from the Bible. This approach was recommended by Martin Bucer in his *Grund und Ursach* as early as 1524. His order of service for the Lord's Supper included the reading of "some sections of the writings of the Apostles," for which the minister "gives a very brief explanation of the same." This "expository reading" would precede the reading of the gospel and what he called the "sermon proper."<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> See Thompson, pp. 391,392; Maxwell, *Outline*, p. 138. Cranmer addressed the weaknesses of a *lectio selecta* approach through a weekday lectionary which took readers through the Bible in a year (see Old, *Reading & Preaching*, Vol. 4, pp. 151-155).

<sup>22</sup> Old, *Reading and Preaching*, Vol. 5, p. 219.

<sup>23</sup> Ottomar Cypris, *Basic Principles: Translation and Commentary of Martin Bucer's Grund Und Ursach, 1524* (Ann Arbor, Michigan: University Microfilms, 1971), pp 149-150.

The Westminster *Directory* further paved the way for expository readings by providing guidelines for a phenomenon no doubt already developing among the Scots, to whose practice the *Directory* is responding:

“When the minister who readeth shall judge it necessary to expound any part of what is read, let it not be done until the whole chapter or psalm be ended; and regard is always to be had unto the time, that neither preaching, nor other ordinances be straitened, or rendered tedious. Which rule is to be observed in all other publick performances.”<sup>24</sup>

Notice the distinction between the exposition of what is read and the preaching, which is not to be adversely affected by the amount of time given to the reading. Among English-speaking Reformed churches in 17th and 18th centuries, close to a half hour would come to be given to an expository reading of a chapter or so, that is, a reading with commentary, prior to the sermon proper, which in turn might last for an hour or more. Sometimes called the “double sermon,” this phenomenon can be found among the Puritans in England, New England, and the Presbyterians in Scotland.<sup>25</sup>

Regarding the English Puritans and Dissenters, Hughes Old finds evidence for the expository reading, or double sermon, in the writings of Matthew Henry. He argues that Matthew Henry’s

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<sup>24</sup>Thompson, p. 358.

<sup>25</sup>Old, *The Reading & Preaching*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2002), Vol. 5, p. 29.

*Commentary on the Whole Bible* is essentially his Bible reading notes.<sup>26</sup> Similarly at Isaac Watt's Bury Street Independent Meeting House, London, in the early 18th century, the order of service, according to contemporary accounts, was as follows:

Psalm singing  
Invocatory prayer  
Expository reading of Scripture  
Psalm or hymn  
Long prayer  
Sermon  
Concluding prayer

Notice the “double sermon,” both the expository reading and the sermon. Eighteenth century English dissenters still included “about a half hour in the exposition of some portion of Scripture,” according to contemporary observers in the early 18th century, in addition to the sermon proper. This was true of the morning service but not of the evening.<sup>27</sup> The same would appear to be true of Baptists of the same era.<sup>28</sup>

John Cotton's writings make explicit reference to the “double sermon” in the New England churches of the first generation. Horton Davies, working from the same sources as Hughes Old (John Cotton's *The New England Way*, pp. 60-70, and *The True Constitution*, pp. 5-8), outlines the following order of service in Boston and throughout New England:

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<sup>26</sup> Hughes O. Old, “Henry, Matthew (1662-1714)”, in D. K. McKim (ed) *Historical Handbook of Major Biblical Interpreters* (Downers Grove: Illinois: InterVarsity Press (1998), p. 197.

<sup>27</sup> Horton Davies, *Worship & Theology in England: From Watts & Wesley to Maurice, 1690-1850* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1961), pp 101-102.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid*, p. 133.

Prayer  
Reading & exposition of a chapter of the Bible  
Psalm singing  
Sermon  
Psalm singing  
Prayer  
Blessing<sup>29</sup>

Note the distinction between the “reading and exposition” and the sermon proper.

Among the Scots similar developments took place as well. Patrick Fairburn, writing in 1874, dates the “double sermon” to Commonwealth times (the 1650’s), referring to the expository reading as a “lecture” or “expository discourse” prior to the sermon proper. This practice, he said, consisting of “expounding in order a few verses out of some book of Scripture” is one which he says “has long prevailed,” and was “a recognized and established part of the ordinary worship service.”<sup>30</sup> Forrester characterized 18th and 19th century worship in Scotland as marked by “long sermons being supplemented by almost equally lengthy ‘lectures’ or biblical expositions,” that is, our “expository reading.”<sup>31</sup> Hughes Old, citing the support of Philip Ryken’s studies, points to the evidence of the “double sermon” in the ministry of Thomas Boston (1676-1732). “The regular (Sunday) Scripture lessons . . . followed the *lectio continua* and were accompanied by a

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<sup>29</sup> Horton Davis, *The Worship of the American Puritans, 1629-1730* (Morgan, PA: Soli Deo Gloria Publications, 1990, 1999), p. 8.

<sup>30</sup> Patrick Fairburn, *Pastoral Theology: A Treatise on the Office & Duties of the Christian Pastor*, 1875 (Audubon, NJ: Old Paths Publications, 1992), p. 239,240. His verb tenses are interesting. Did he mean that the double sermon was still practiced in his day?

<sup>31</sup> Forrester, “Worship,” p. 896.

detailed exposition,” says Old.<sup>32</sup> Further support can be found in the General Assembly of 1694 urging the recovery (after the persecutions of the Covenanting era) of the *Directory’s* program of *lectio continua* reading and “opening up” (by exposition) of, “large and considerable portion(s) of the word of God.”<sup>33</sup> This clearly is the “expository reading,” not the sermon, to which the General Assembly was referring. Old summarizes the situation in Reformation and post-Reformation Scotland in saying that “The serious business of preaching in Scotland was to take a book of the Bible and to preach through it.” This, he says, was true in the days of John Knox (c.1514-1572), when Thomas Chalmers (1780-1847) began his exposition of Romans in his new church in Glasgow, and when Alexander Whyte (1836-1921) began his exposition of the Psalms at the beginning of the 20th century. For the Scots, “It was because the Word was holy that their expository preaching had to preach the Word through in an orderly and complete manner. With the *lectio continua* one respected the order of the sacred book.”<sup>34</sup> At times this conviction was maintained through the *lectio continua* expository sermon, and at other times through the *lectio continua* expository reading. Old advances his view of the old “double sermon” as a “hypothesis,” but as we have seen it has more than substantial support among English Puritans and Dissenters, New England Puritans, and Scottish Presbyterians.<sup>35</sup>

## Decline

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<sup>32</sup>Old, *Reading and Preaching*, Vol. 5, p. 448.

<sup>33</sup>Cited in Maxwell, *A History of Worship in the Church of the Scotland* (London: Oxford University Press, 1955), p. 128.

<sup>34</sup>Old, *Reading & Preaching*, Vol. 5, p. 539.

<sup>35</sup>Ibid, Vol. 5, p. 629.

Despite the various authorized liturgies and directories of English-speaking Reformed Protestantism, over time the *lectio continua* was dropped in favor of thematic preaching, based upon a few verses which alone were read. What happened? It is difficult, frankly, to determine. There is no evidence of a denominational body ever issuing an official directive to reduce Bible reading. This is not the kind of issue about which public complaints were likely to be received. But we can say that Scripture reading did diminish, and nearly completely drop out, in American Protestant churches. Charles Baird, writing in 1855 in his ground-breaking book *Eutaxia* (later renamed *Presbyterian Liturgies*) lamented the current lack of Bible reading among Presbyterians called for a return to the principles of the *Directory for Worship*, “the regular and continuous reading of Holy Scripture, at every religious service, and in sufficient portions.”<sup>36</sup> He called regular, sequential reading of Scripture “rare,” a fact “deeply to be deplored,” and a development for which “there can be no justification.”<sup>37</sup> Yet this is what had happened among Presbyterians by the mid-19th century. John Wesley’s liturgy (1784), with its Psalm, Old Testament and New Testament readings, was similarly ignored by Methodists for a hundred and fifty years.<sup>38</sup> The format of Methodist worship until the middle of the twentieth century was that of revivalism. The same was true of the Baptists and the Congregationalists.

According to Maxwell, decline in the public reading of Scripture in Scotland began early, within seven years of the adoption of the *Directory*. Yet, the Church of Scotland remained committed to the *lectio continua* readings required by the *Directory*, the General Assembly reaffirming the

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<sup>36</sup>Charles Baird, *Presbyterian Liturgies*, 1855 (Grand Rapids:Baker Book House; 1957).

<sup>37</sup>Ibid, p. 264.

<sup>38</sup>Thompson, p. 263.

necessity of reading a chapter from each testament in each service in 1652, 1694, and as late as 1856. Maxwell prefers to interpret these reaffirmations as signs of decline. They might better be seen as signs of continued commitment. Still, by the latter date, significant decline had occurred.<sup>39</sup> Likewise in New England, public Scripture reading had sharply declined by the second and third generations (see below).

There are other indications of the decline of Scripture reading. For example, one will find no mentioning of Scripture reading, or even the mechanics of reading Scripture in the 19th century pastoral theology texts by John Brown (1826), Charles Bridges (1830), W.G.T. Shedd (1867), Patrick Fairburn (1874), or Thomas Murphy (1877),<sup>40</sup> or the preaching manuals written by Ebenezer Porter (1834), J. W. Alexander (1864), R. L. Dabney (1870), Henry Ward Beecher, (1872), R. W. Dale (1877), Phillips Brooks (1877), or C. H. Spurgeon (1881-1894).<sup>41</sup>

In the 20<sup>th</sup> century some authors did give attention to the need to restore Scripture reading to regular public worship and to the art of reading. For example, by 1912 J. H. Jowett, in his Yale

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<sup>39</sup> W. D. Maxwell, *An Outline of Christian Worship* (London: Oxford University Press, 1936), p. 132.

<sup>40</sup> John Brown, *The Christian Pastor's Manual* (1826, Ligonier, Pennsylvania: Soli Deo Gloria, 1991); Charles Bridges, *The Christian Ministry; With an Inquiry into the Causes of Its Inefficiency; With an Especial Reference to the Ministry of the Establishment* (London: Seeley, 1849); William G. T. Shedd, *Homiletics and Pastoral Theology* (1867, Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1965); Patrick Fairbairn, *Pastoral Theology: A Treatise on the Office and Duties of the Christian Pastor* (1875, Audubon, New Jersey: Old Paths Publications, 1992); Thomas Murphy, *Pastoral Theology: The Pastor in the Various Duties of His Office* (1877, Audubon, New Jersey: Old Paths Publications, 1996).

<sup>41</sup> Ebenezer Porter, *Lectures on Homiletics and Preaching, and on Public Prayer; Together with Sermons and Letters* (New York: Flag, Gould and Newman, 1834); James W. Alexander, *Thoughts on Preaching: Being Contributions to Homiletics* (1864, Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1975); Robert L. Dabney, *Sacred Rhetoric or A Course of Lectures on Preaching* (1870, Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1979); Henry Ward Beecher, *Yale Lectures on Preaching* (New York: Fords, Howard, and Hulbert, 1893); R. W. Dale, *Nine Lectures on Preaching* (London: Hodder and Stoughton [nd]); Phillips Brooks, *Lectures on Preaching Delivered before the Divinity School of Yale College In January and February, 1877* (New York: E. P. Dutton and Company, 1907); C. H. Spurgeon, *Lectures to My Students* (1881-1894, Fearn, Rosshire: Christian Focus Publications, 2000).

lectures entitled *The Preacher: His Life & Work*,<sup>42</sup> was calling for renewed attention to be given to the reading of Scripture. Let it be “lifted into primary significance,” he said. “What we need . . . is to exalt the ministry of the lesson in public worship . . . Let us magnify the reading of the Word.”<sup>43</sup> No mention, however, was made of *lectio continua*. His concern was with the mechanics of good reading, not the method of text selection. John A. Broadus’ *On the Preparation & Delivery of Sermons*,<sup>44</sup> at least in its Revised, 1944 edition, reflects the renewed interest in the public reading of Scripture, devoting five pages to its consideration. Yet his priorities are those of Pietism, not the Reformation. He too is largely concerned with the mechanics of reading. Insofar as he provides a criteria for text selection, it is a passage’s devotional usefulness not *lectio continua*. Texts are to be those which are “in a higher decree devotional” and will “awaken devout feeling.” Selections are to be governed by “good taste and devout feeling.”<sup>45</sup>

As we approach the contemporary scene, a cursory glance provides not much in the way of encouragement from the Reformed or broader Protestant community. No advocates for *lectio continua* Bible reading can be found anywhere from the mid to late 20th century: not in the writings of Andrew Blackwood, Professor of Practical Theology at Princeton Theological Seminary from 1930 to 1950<sup>46</sup>; not in Thomas Oden’s encyclopedic *Pastoral Theology* (1983)<sup>47</sup>;

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<sup>42</sup> J. H. Jowett, *The Preacher: His Life & Work* (New York: George H. Doran Company, 1912).

<sup>43</sup> Ibid, pp. 159, 161.

<sup>44</sup> John A. Broadus, *On the Preparation & Delivery of Sermons* (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1870, 1944).

<sup>45</sup> Ibid, p. 359.

<sup>46</sup> Andrew Blackwood, *The Fine Art of Worship* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1939) and *Leading in Public Prayer* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1957).

<sup>47</sup> Thomas C. Oden, *Pastoral Theology: Essentials of Ministry* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, Publishers, 1983).

not in the *Leadership Handbooks of Practical Theology, Volume One, Word and Worship*<sup>48</sup>; not in William H. Willimon's *Preaching and Leading Worship*<sup>49</sup>; not in contemporary books on preaching by Lloyd-Jones, Adams, Still, Stott, Robinson, and Chapell<sup>50</sup>; not in the more recent serious books on Reformed worship<sup>51</sup>; not in the important volume honoring Edmund P. Clowney ambitiously entitled *Practical Theology and the Ministry of the Church, 1952-1984*<sup>49</sup>; not in The Master's Seminary's *Rediscovering Pastoral Practice*,<sup>51</sup> and which represents the thinking of serious, conservative non-charismatic, semi-Reformed evangelicals; and not in the evangelical and/or Reformed periodicals: *Leadership, Christianity Today, Reformation & Revival, Reformed Worship*; not in *The Journal of Pastoral Practice*, published at Jay Adam's initiation and editorial leadership by the Christian Counseling and Education Foundation from 1977-1992, revamped and republished as *The Journal of Biblical Counseling* since 1992.

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<sup>48</sup> James D. Berkley, ed., *Leadership Handbooks of Practical Theology, Volume One, Word and Worship* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1992).

<sup>49</sup> William H. Willimon, *Preaching and Leading Worship* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1984).

<sup>50</sup> D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Preaching and Preachers* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 1971); Jay E. Adams, *Preaching with Purpose* (Phillipsburg, New Jersey: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company, 1982); William Still, *The Work of the Pastor* (Aberdeen: Didasko Press, 1976); John R. Stott, *Between Two Worlds: The Art of Preaching in the Twentieth Century* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1982); Haddon W. Robinson, *Biblical Preaching* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1980); Bryan Chapell, *Christ-Centered Preaching: Redeeming the Expository Sermon* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1994).

<sup>51</sup> Jean-Jacques von Allmen, *Worship: Its Theology and Practice* (London: Lutterworth Press, 1965); William D. Maxwell, *An Outline of Christian Worship: Its Developments and Forms* (1936; London: Oxford University Press, 1952); Robert Rayburn, *O Come Let Us Worship* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1980); Donald Macleod, *Presbyterian Worship: Its Meaning and Method* (Richmond: John Knox, 1967); James Hastings Nichols, *Corporate Worship in the Reformed Tradition* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1968); H. G. Hageman, *Pulpit & Table: Some Chapters in the History of Worship in the Reformed Churches* (Richmond, Virginia: John Knox Press, 1962). Marva J. Dawn, *Reaching Out Without Dumbing Down* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995). John Frame, *Worship in Spirit & Truth* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 1996). We can add to the list Methodist James F. White, *Introduction to Christian Worship* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1980); D. A. Carson (ed.), *Worship: Adoration and Action* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1993), which includes essay by Edmund P. Clowney on "Presbyterian Worship," pp. 110-122.

<sup>49</sup> Harvey M. Conn, ed., *Practical Theology and the Ministry of the Church, 1952-1984: Essays in Honor of Edmund P. Clowney* (Phillipsburg, New Jersey: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company, 1990).

<sup>51</sup> John MacArthur, et. al., *Rediscovering Pastoral Ministry* (Dallas: Word Publishing, 1995).

Worldcat (World Catalogue search of the Library of Congress) and Atla (American Theological Library Association search of over 600 journals of which 50 are full-text) search engines produced only a handful of books or articles mentioning the public reading of Scripture and even fewer mentioning *lectio continua*. Of those only two could legitimately be considered advocating *lectio continua* as a method of Scripture selection. Both of these may be traced to a single influence, Hughes O. Old.<sup>52</sup> *Lectio continua* preaching has its champions, *lectio continua* reading has not, save one.<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>52</sup> John P. Burgess, "Shaping a Congregation Through *Lectio Continua*" in *Reformed Liturgy & Music*, Vol. XXX, Number 1, 1996, pp. 3-6. The author confesses that much of his account of the history of *lectio continua* he "gleaned from personal conversation with Hughes Oliphant Old," and from Old's *Worship That is Reformed According to Scripture* (p. 6, note 8). The other advocate, not surprisingly, is Hughes O. Old, writing in *Reformed Worship*, No. 8, Summer 1988, pp. 24-25.

<sup>53</sup> Where the reading of Scripture has been discussed in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century literature, interest has been limited primarily to the "how-to's" of reading. Blackwood (writing in 1939) affirms that "the reading of the Scriptures is perhaps the most important part of public worship." He offers comments upon responsive readings, the pulpit Bible, the strengths of the King James Version, the "how-to's" of public reading, and the virtues of the lectionary." (p. 128. An interesting aside: writing in 1939, Blackwood says, "A generation ago the minister who wished to be up with the times was either using the responsive reading, or else wondering why he was not." While in the end he endorses its use, he speaks of the responsive reading as a passing fad, a view with which the present writer has some sympathy. Among the anti-arguments: "The Psalms were written to be sung, not read; that the responsive reading consumes valuable time, with no appreciable effect; and that it quickly becomes formal, almost perfunctory" [pp. 128-129]). H. G. Hageman (1962) recalls the Reformation era practice of *lectio continua*, acknowledges "there is more to be said for the custom than most of us are willing to admit," laments the current practice of a single lesson determined by the sermon, insists it "calls for correction," and concludes that church committees, lectionaries, or the Christian year may serve as guides in selecting which Scriptures shall be read. *Lectio continua* is, in most cases, impractical today, he says, because "many of our congregations would weary of it" (123). Von Allmen (1965) devotes 7 pages to the subject, comparing *lectio continua* and *lectio selecta*. He notes that the *lectio selecta* has gradually come to prevail even in the Reformed churches, and says, surprisingly, "and we must rejoice about it," though he doesn't want *lectio continua* to be entirely superseded (134). Donald MacLeod (1967) is concerned about the growing ignorance of the Bible among Protestants. His answer is a calendar-based *lectio selecta* lectionary that he claims "covers the Bible in two years," which of course, it doesn't except highly selectively (114). Rayburn (1980) urges both a Old Testament and New Testament reading, but never mentions *lectio continua*. Willimon, a Methodist (1984), wants to see more Scripture read and urges three lessons every Sunday, as well as "the orderly reading of Scripture" (19). *Preacher & Preaching* (1986), a significant effort to promote biblical preaching, does have a promising chapter entitled "Reading the Word of God Aloud" (Samuel T. Logan, Jr., *The Preacher & Preaching: Reviving the Art in the Twentieth Century* [Phillipsburg, New Jersey: Presbyterian & Reformed Publishing Company, 1986]). But, alas, it too turns out to be concerned only with the mechanics of reading. The same is true of Chapell (337ff). The *Leadership Handbooks* (1992) devotes 1-1/2 pages to "the public reading of Scripture" out of 500 in volume one on "Word & Worship." It recommends frequent use of "familiar texts and devotional texts" because "they create a spirit of warmth and gratitude" (188). *Worship in the Presence of God*, a collection of essays written by committed Presbyterian traditionalists, includes a chapter on "The Reading of Scriptures," by Louis F. DeBoer, in Frank J. Smith & David C. Lanchman (ed.), *Worship in the Presence of God* [Greenville, South Carolina: Greenville Seminary Press], 1992). He says quite a bit about the importance of reading Scripture. He even urges the reading of two full chapters, one from each testament, in each service. But his criteria of selection is not *lectio continua*, which goes unmentioned, but thematic connection with

Let us restate what we have found: Among the books on pastoral theology, preaching, and worship; among the journals and magazines we can find no champions of *lectio continua* Scripture reading in the 19th and 20th centuries, excepting Baird and Old. Increased *lectio selecta* Bible reading has had its advocates. Skillful Bible reading has had its advocates. *Lectio continua* preaching has had its advocates. *Lectio continua* reading has not outside of Baird and Old.

As we push into the 21st century the picture brightens only slightly. Clayton J. Schmit has written *Public Reading of Scripture: A Handbook*.<sup>54</sup> Its concern is with the training of lay readers, or lectors. How texts are selected to be read and how much is to be read is not discussed. As was true of works cited above, his concern is with the mechanics of public reading. The bad news is most of the books on worship written out of the Evangelical and/or Reformed tradition (the lines between these two groups are fluid, hence my imprecision) still mainly ignore Scripture reading generally and *lectio continua* specifically. These include those books edited by D. A. Carson (with articles by R. Kent Hughes on “Free Church Worship,” and by Timothy J. Keller on “Reformed Worship in the Global City”)<sup>55</sup>, R. J. Gore,<sup>56</sup> D. G. Hart,<sup>57</sup> and D. G. Hart and

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the theme of the preacher’s sermon. Another collection of essays written in honor of Calvin Seminary’s Old Testament Professor John H. Stek carries the hopeful title of *Reading & Hearing the Word* (Arie C. Leder, [Grand Rapids: CRC Publications, 1998] ). Yet even in this volume, the subject of *lectio continua* reading is ignored, indeed, despite the title, the whole subject of the public reading of Scripture is omitted. No advocates of *lectio continua* Scripture reading are to be found. Even the esteemed Dr. Old limits his advocacy to *lectio continua* preaching and omits to press the case for reading in his *Worship That Is Reformed According to Scriptures* (Guides to the Reformed Tradition, Atlanta, John Knox Press, 1984). Only with the publishing of his multi-volumed *The Reading & Preaching of the Scriptures in the Worship of the Christian Church* can we find positive advocacy for *lectio continua* reading of the Scripture (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., Vol. 1-7, 1998–).

<sup>54</sup> Clayton J. Schmit, *Public Reading of Scripture: A Handbook* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2002).

<sup>55</sup> D. A. Carson, ed., *Worship by the Book* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 2002).

<sup>56</sup> R. J. Gore, Jr., *Covenantal Worship: Reconsidering the Puritan Regulative Principle* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing Company, 2002).

<sup>57</sup> D. G. Hart, *Recovering Mother Kirk: The Case for Liturgy in the Reformed Tradition* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Book House, 2003).

John R. Muether.<sup>58</sup> Michael Horton recommends Old Testament and New Testament readings, the second reading determined by its relation to the theme of the primary reading, i.e. the text to be preached.<sup>59</sup> Meyer strongly commends extended Bible reading and includes four readings in his morning service (Old Testament, Epistle, Psalm, Gospel), but provides no criteria for selection except pragmatic considerations according to the wisdom of the ministers and elders.<sup>60</sup> Horace T. Allen compares and contrasts *lectio continua* and *lectio selecta* urging a combination of the two along the lines of the common lectionary in *Christian Worship in Reformed Churches Past & Present*.<sup>61</sup>

Among the books on worship published in the 21st century, we can turn only to Ligon Duncan in *Give Praise to God* to find positive advocacy for *lectio continua* Scripture reading in public worship.<sup>62</sup>

Among the magazines and journals, we find some encouragement of late. There has been some lamenting of the sorry state of Scripture reading and advocacy for its increase.<sup>63</sup> Several articles have even been written positively commending *lectio continua* public Scripture reading.<sup>64</sup>

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<sup>58</sup> D. G. Hart and John R. Muether, *With Reverence and Awe: Returning to the Basics of Reformed Worship* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing Company, 2002).

<sup>59</sup> Michael Horton, *A Better Way: Rediscovering the Drama of God-Centered Worship* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Books, 2002), pp. 89-90.

<sup>60</sup> Jeffrey J. Meyers, *The Lord's Service: The Grace of Covenant Renewal Worship* (Moscow, ID: Canon Press, 2003), pp. 156-162; 194-200.

<sup>61</sup> Horace T. Allen, Jr., "Calendar & Lectionary in Reformed Perspective & History," in Lukas Vischer (ed.), *Christian Worship in Reformed Churches Past & Present* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003).

<sup>62</sup> J. Ligon Duncan, "Reading & Praying the Bible in Corporate Worship," in Philip G. Ryken (ed.), *Give Praise to God: A Vision for Reforming Worship* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2003), pp. 141-148.

<sup>63</sup> Donald N. Bastian, "The Silenced Word," in *Christianity Today* (March 5, 2001, Vol. 45, No. 4, p. 92); Christopher K. Lensch, "The Public Reading of Scripture," *Western Reformed Seminary Journal* (February 2000, Vol. 7, No. 1, pp. 19-22); Dwight A. Randall, "Scripture Reading & Worship," *Life News* (Internet

So again we ask, what happened by the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century that led to the disappearance of Bible reading in general, and *lectio continua* reading in particular? Tracing this development is difficult and conjectural. Still, we can identify several trends and/or movements that influenced the shift away from the Reformation-era practice of extensive, whole-chapters per service readings.

### ***Scholasticism***

Hughes Old suggests that the first reason for the decline of *lectio continua* Scripture reading has to do with the manner in which Reform came to the English-speaking world. Continental Reformed Protestantism arose out of the new learning of the late Renaissance. It rejected the scholastic method in favor of a return *ad fontes*, to the original sources themselves, which were to be interpreted in their integrity. The preaching inspired by the new learning of Christian humanism was concerned to be textual. It drank deeply from the wells of biblical and Patristic sources. It rejected Medieval preaching methodology, with its reliance upon rhetorical tricks and gimmicks. The preaching of Zwingli, Calvin, Oecolampadius, Capito, and the whole host of continental Reformed Protestants was biblical rather than topical, expository rather than scholastic, simple and plain rather than ornate, *lectio continua* rather than *lectio selecta*.

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Magazine); Arthur Howe, "The Public Reading of the Scriptures," *The Banner of Truth Magazine* (Issue 499, April 2005), pp. 17-21.

<sup>64</sup> David Jussley, *Lectio Continua: The Best Way to Teach & Preach the Bible*, *The Banner of Truth Magazine* (Issue 499, April 2005, pp. 12-16); James C. Goodloe, IV, "Righteous Judgment," *The Presbyterian Outlook* (February 7, 2004).

But as Hughes Old points out, “The new learning of the Christian humanists had appeared in only a few churches in England; it had not produced an elite corps of biblical scholars all eagerly studying the original languages as it had, for example, in the Upper Rhineland.”<sup>65</sup> The consequence of this for preaching was direct. Throughout Henry VIII’s reign and even into Edward VI’s, “we hear only occasionally of preachers who are able to do the kind of expository preaching that so many of the Continental Reformers did.”<sup>66</sup> Instead they continued the Medieval practice of dividing the text analytically, and applying it to various religious and moral questions.

This absence of a clean break from scholastic preaching can be seen even among the Puritans. They tended not to follow the Continental Reformers in using the form of the patristic homily, that is, a running commentary on a passage of Scripture. “In England,” Old explains, “the break between medieval homiletics and Reformation homiletics was not nearly as clear as it was on the Continent.” “The Puritans,” he says, “most frequently used the scholastic, analytical form.”<sup>67</sup> “England,” he continues, “never had anything like the patristic revival to which Rhenish Protestantism was heir.”<sup>68</sup>

Old maintains that the Puritans attempted to establish the *lectio continua*. Their official orders of service (as noted above) show that. But the scholastic method made this difficult. “The scholastic sermon form slowed down the *lectio continua*. Rarely could one cover in one sermon more than a

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<sup>65</sup> Old, *Reading and Preaching*, Vol. 4, p. 148.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid, cf. Vol. 5, p. 29.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid, p. 326.

single verse of Scripture using this form.”<sup>69</sup> The pace slowed to single verses, and even to multiple sermons on single verses. “What this ultimately meant was the finishing off of the *lectio continua* and the gradual development of thematic preaching.”<sup>70</sup>

The Puritans, for the most part, maintained the “plain style” of the Continental Reformers. But they did so within a Scholastic analytical framework which made *lectio continua* preaching all but impossible to maintain.

As noted above, John Cotton described in the *New England Way* in 1642 the practice of reading a chapter from one testament in the morning and the other testament in the evening, each in addition to the reading of the text to be preached.<sup>71</sup> This had been significantly eclipsed by the next generation, as the expository reading was dropped in favor of the “sermon proper.” Increase Mather was among those who influenced the New England churches away from *lectio continua*. He began to limit the Scripture reading to that which was to be preached, and urged others to do the same.<sup>72</sup> The Brattle Street church was founded in 1699 with a number of liturgical reforms in mind, including the restoration of the Old Testament and New Testament readings, as recommended by the *Directory*. However, few New England churches followed Brattle Street’s

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<sup>68</sup> Ibid

<sup>69</sup> Ibid, p. 327.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid.

<sup>71</sup> Old, *Reading & Preaching*, Vol. 5, p. 172.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid.

example. The important point to be observed is that already by the 1690's what had been practiced in the 1630's had eroded and had to be revived by the Brattle Street Church.<sup>73</sup>

A generation later Cotton Mather, writing in his *Ratio Disciplinae* provided a typical order of worship in his day (1726).

Announcements

Prayer

Psalm sung

Reading of Scripture & Sermon (*lectio selecta*)

Short prayer

Psalm sung

Benediction (typically the Apostolic)<sup>74</sup>

Mather then discussed the matter of *lectio continua* Scripture reading, admitting a diversity of practice in New England. He acknowledged the position of John Cotton, who argued in 1645 (in his book *Singing of Psalms*) that the reading of Scripture was an “ordinance” of public worship distinct from preaching. Mather also notes that this is the position of the Westminster *Directory*.

The New England churches, however, followed three different patterns:

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<sup>73</sup>Ibid.

<sup>74</sup>Cotton Mather, *Ratio Disciplinae Frutrum Nov-Anglorum: A Faithful Account of the Discipline Professed & Practiced in the Churches of New England* (1726, New York: Arno Press, 1972), p. 67.

1. Some read Scripture *lectio continua* without commentary.
2. Some read Scripture *lectio continua* with commentary.
3. Some only read the passage of Scripture to be preached.

Respecting the churches that only read the Scripture to be preached, he listed the following reasons:

1. They could see no precept or pattern in Scripture for reading without exposition.
2. Proper sermons typically include the reading of multiple passages of Scripture with the advantage that their use is in the context of their “place and use in divinity.”<sup>75</sup>
3. While exposition by gifted men is to be preferred to bare reading, some ministers’ gifts require a different manner of handling the word of God than sequential exposition.
4. Some chapters of the Bible are not appropriate for public reading.
5. Public reading of Scripture may lead to the neglect of Scripture reading in families.

Horton Davies maintains that Cotton Mather objects to “lections without commentary.”<sup>76</sup> No such objections, however, can be found by the present writer. Mather merely lists the various pros and cons, without committing himself to one side or the other. Indeed he claims that to refer to readings without commentary as “dumb readings” is “esteemed improper and indecent.”<sup>77</sup> He concludes his review of the various approaches to Scripture reading saying,

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<sup>75</sup> Ibid, p. 64.

<sup>76</sup> Davies, *American Puritans*, p. 298, note 2.

<sup>77</sup> Mather, *Ratio*, p. 67.

“If there be not a perfect *harmony* in the churches about the *manner* of performing this duty, however there is perfect charity; It breeds no difference. Yea, that the *Scriptures be publicly read*, in some sense, it may be said, *they are all agreed.*”<sup>78</sup>

Yet those wishing to limit the public reading to the preaching text ultimately carried the day, the arguments #1-5 above, apparently gaining universal approval. The preference for lengthy, highly analytical sermons among the Puritans and their descendents would seem to be the primary reason, the reason driving all other reasons, for the disappearance of *lectio continua* Scripture reading in English-speaking Reformed churches.

### ***Public versus Private***

Old points to a second development in English Puritanism that tended to undermine *lectio continua*. This was the problem of the separation of the reading of the word from the preaching of the word. Often forced out of the regular parish services by political or ecclesiastical authorities, much Puritan *lectio continua* preaching was done at “lectures” held Sunday afternoon or midweek. Expository preaching became separated from worship, and the sermon from the lectionary. This was the case both among Anglicans as well as Puritans, whose preaching often was unrelated to the lectionary. Even among the emerging Congregationalist and Presbyterian churches the sermon was moved to the end of the service, separated from the Scripture lesson.

The Scripture reading gradually came to lose its importance as a distinct element of public worship.<sup>79</sup>

### ***Weekday versus Sunday Lections***

A third reason for the loss of the *lectio continua*, closely associated with the preceding, has to do with the distinction between weekday and Sunday Scripture readings in both the Anglican and Puritan traditions. The Prayer Book lectionary, by Cranmer's design, took the congregation through the Old Testament once and the New Testament three times in a year (4 chapters a day in Morning and Evening Prayer).<sup>80</sup> Cranmer was committed to the *lectio continua* in the weekday services. The dearth of qualified preachers or literate congregants (who could read the Bible for themselves) meant that the reading of Scripture was seen as a major means through which the Reformation would make progress in England. This was understood by the designers of the 1549 and subsequent Prayer Books. The English lectionary was "a serious attempt to guarantee the reading of the whole Bible through in the course of a year in such a way that the literary integrity of the different books (was) respected and the context of each passage is evident," writes Old.<sup>81</sup> But the Sunday lectionary followed a different course. The *lectio selecta* became the norm for the weekly Lord's Day communion services and holy days.

The Puritans, like the Continental Reformers, moved the daily service into the home. They came to make a distinction between the public reading of Scripture, for which the minister gave

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<sup>78</sup> Ibid, pp. 67-68.

<sup>79</sup> Old, *Reading & Preaching*, Vol, 4, p. 328.

<sup>80</sup> Old, *Reading & Preaching*, Vol. 4, pp. 151-155.

explanation and comment (the expository reading or sermon proper), and the private reading of Scripture, in which no comment was made.

A “simple reading, or ‘dumb reading,’ was deemed inadequate for a service of worship,” for increasing numbers of New England’s Puritans, notes Hambrick-Stowe in *The Practice of Piety*.<sup>82</sup> As we have seen, whenever Reformed Protestants in the English-speaking world had an opportunity to shape their own services, whether among the post-Restoration Presbyterians and Congregationalists in England, the Scots, or the Puritans in New England, “expository readings” of a chapter of the New Testament and the Old Testament became a feature of their worship. Supporting it were *lectio continua* readings in family worship for which reading without commentary was deemed acceptable. When the expository reading was dropped in later centuries in favor of the single long sermon upon short text, it was done in the context of extensive *lectio continua* readings in homes, of which the M’Cheynne Lectionary is a surviving example. As noted, Cotton Mather refers to the sentiment in New England that *lectio continua* reading without commentary in public worship would undermine the same in family worship. It would “invite private Christians to neglect” their duty of reading Scripture “in private families.”<sup>83</sup> Ironically, the prevalence of *lectio continua* in the daily services of the established church and in Puritan and dissenting homes tended to undermine the need for *lectio continua* reading in the Sunday services.

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<sup>81</sup> Ibid, p. 157.

<sup>82</sup> Charles E. Hambrick-Stowe, *The Practice of Piety: Puritan Devotional Disciplines in Seventeenth-Century New England* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1982), p. 110; Old, *Reading & Preaching*, Vol. 4, p. 328.

<sup>83</sup> Mather, *Ratio*, p. 64.

### ***Time Constraints***

The constraints of time under which public services were (and are) conducted must also be given significant consideration. As noted above, the Westminster *Directory* expressed concern that the expository reading be done with “regard . . . unto the time.” The *Directory* sought to prevent the sermon or some other ordinance from being “straitened” (i.e. reduced, restricted, shortened) or “rendered tedious” by lengthy comments on the Scripture reading. Horton Davies estimates that the Puritan worship service lasted 3 to 3-1/2 hours. Even among the Puritans there were limits. As the second sermon grew to be 1-1/2 to 2 hours in length, it eventually came to swallow up the expository reading.<sup>84</sup> The first “sermon” came to be seen as a redundancy, especially since Scripture reading could be done at home. Yet what was lost was the sequential, extended reading envisioned by the *Directory* or as practiced the first generation in New England, among the Dissenters in England, and for several generations in Scotland.

### ***Pietism***

Fifth, the Pietistic movement of the 17th and 18th centuries brought a fresh concern for heart-felt religion and for conversions. Its concern for warm feelings, personal piety, devotional Bible study, and inspiration services was not well served by extended readings from obscure chapters of the Old Testament. Selected inspirational verses were better suited to these ends than were large chunks of Scripture read from, say, 1 Samuel. This preference for the inspirational is clear in more recent times in the pastoral manuals of Broadus and the *Leadership Handbook* cited above.

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<sup>84</sup> Davies, *American Puritans*, p. 11.

Churches that would never have dreamed of adopting the Anglican lectionary nevertheless adopted a *lectio selecta* based upon evangelistic and inspirational criteria even as they abandoned the *lectio continua*.

As pietism developed into revivalism, and as churches increasingly adopted the revivalistic format, time-constraints further squeezed-out Scripture reading. Choirs, solos, duets, and other forms of “special music” had to be accommodated. Something had to give way to the needs of evangelism and inspiration. It was natural to reduce the Bible reading.

The result of these trends, the long Puritan sermon, weekday *lectio continua* at home, the requirements of pietism, and the constraints of time, was that *lectio continua* public reading dropped out of the public worship of English-speaking Reformed Protestantism by the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century. This was true of New Light and Old Light churches of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, New School and Old School churches of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and Fundamentalist and Modernist churches of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, from churches of English Dissenting, Puritan, and Scottish Presbyterian heritage. Across all these divisions there was a curiously uniform neglect of extended *lectio continua* Scripture reading. The practice was not maintained nor revived in American, or English, or Scottish Protestantism, whether Presbyterian, Congregationalist, Baptist, or Methodist from the time of the beginning of its erosion in the middle 17<sup>th</sup> century until the late 20<sup>th</sup> century. *Lectio continua* preaching was maintained in some circles, *lectio continua* reading was not. Not until the liturgical reform movements of the mid to late 20<sup>th</sup> century did *lectio continua* Scripture reading begin to get

some attention again. The reintroduction of this plank from the Reformer's platform of church reform is one of the major needs of our day.

## **Recovery**

How do we go about recovering the public reading of Scripture, specifically *lectio continua* Scripture reading in our churches? Consider the following.

1. *Read a chapter of each Testament in each service*, as recommended by the Westminster *Directory for the Public Worship of God* (see above). By this we mean read not *slavishly* but *roughly* a chapter. Some chapters are long and need to be broken up into several pieces. Other sections of Scripture are not well-suited to the public reading, and so may need to be skipped over. In other words, the reading should be of *suitable* length. But the basic guideline should be a chapter per Testament per service.

2. *Read the Testament not being preached*. This guideline is proposed as a way of maintaining biblical balance. If the Gospel of Matthew is being preached in the morning service, then read Old Testament books along with the text from Matthew being preached. If the books of Samuel and Kings are being preached in the evening, then read a gospel, Acts, or an epistle alongside of the Samuel/Kings text being preached.

3. *Read passages that are accessible to the congregation*. It would probably prove unwise to begin the implementation of a program of *lectio continua* readings in the book of Leviticus. It

can be done, but it is not recommended. Start with the Gospels, Acts, Psalms, Epistles, Proverbs, or an Old Testament narrative.

4. *Consistent with this, skip over (with descriptive comments) exceptionally remote or difficult texts.* Passages such as Exodus 25-31 (describing the Tabernacle and its furnishings, Joshua 15-21 (outlining the distribution of the Promised Land to the 12 Tribes), 1 Chronicles 1-9 (genealogies), Nehemiah 3 (describing the placement of workers on the walls of Jerusalem) ordinarily are best handled with a summary comment while transitioning to the next text to be read.

5. *Vary scriptural types.* It would probably be unwise to plow through one Minor Prophet after another, or straight through Old Testament narrative from Genesis to Nehemiah. Instead, vary the diet. Move from gospel to Old Testament narrative to epistle to Old Testament poetry to Acts to Old Testament wisdom and so on.

6. *Provide brief introductions to books and chapters.* By “brief” we mean normally a few sentences lasting 15-45 seconds. A few comments setting the stage of the text to be read or anticipating a difficulty in the text can do much to enhance the spiritual profitability of the reading.

7. *Read slowly, clearly and with nuance.* J. C. Ryle credited the reading of Scripture in the context of worship as being instrumental in his own conversion. The text was Ephesians 2:8,

described by J. I. Packer as skillfully read in church “with significant pauses, thus achieving great emphasis.”<sup>85</sup> Scripture may be read with more or less skill. Our final concern is that care be taken to read the Scripture well. The reading should not be rushed. Neither should the reading drag. The text to be read should be studied carefully enough that it can be read with comprehension and nuance, enhancing the understanding of the congregation. There is a direct relationship between the skill with which Scripture is read and the value of that reading for the listeners. Edification, after all, is the goal at which we are aiming. Substantial portions of Scripture should be read in the assemblies of God’s people because this is what God required of them in Bible times, what was practiced by the Patristic church and Reformation-era Reformed churches, and above all, because the reading of Scripture edifies the people of God.

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<sup>85</sup> J. I. Packer, *Faithfulness and Holiness: The Witness of J. C. Ryle* (Wheaton, Illinois: Crossway Books, 2002), p. 27.

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