

Lectio Continua

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I. Greek and Latin Patristics

The Latin term *lectio continua* (“continuous reading”) refers to the early Christian practice of reading entire books of the Bible continuously in public worship and for private purpose. Only as of the 4th century onwards did it become the rule in Christian liturgy to read *pericopae*, “cut-out parts of the text” according to a specified order (a practice that most Christian churches have had until today).

The practice of *lectio continua* probably derives from the reading customs in Jewish synagogues where, in antiquity, the Torah and the Prophets were read continuously, beginning at each worship service with the very line at which reading during the last service ended. It has often been claimed that this practice influenced early Christian worship, but it is however difficult to substantiate this alleged claim based on Christian sources, as well as determine the impact it has had on individual aspects of this reading practice in Christian worship (Kunze).

Justin (1 *Apol.* 67.3) reports that NT writings (“the memories [ἀπομνημονεύματα] of the apostles”) were read during the gatherings of the Roman parish in the mid-2nd century “until it is sufficient” (μέχρις ἐγχαρῆι), a phrase that might refer to a certain measured division of the readings (Glauert: 68), although Justin does not specify either text selections or their demarcations. Tertullian (*Praescr.* 36.1) and others testify to the custom of reading the Pauline epistles, but it is not clear whether this was a *lectio continua* proper or the continuous reading of parts of these letters without following a preset order (the so-called eclogary).

While a reading order is frequently mentioned in late antiquity, e.g., in Cyril of Jerusalem, Augustine, or the *Apostolic Constitutions*, it is difficult to determine precisely which order is meant and whether this mention refers to a long-standing practice or to a recent development. The same is true for the private reading of biblical texts to which, e.g., Jerome and John Chrysostom refer (Harnack). It seems that, in early Christianity, a *lectio continua* in the strict sense of the reading of entire books or even large portions of the Bible continuously seldom took place. More often, a *lectio currens* or *semicontinua* (“Bahnlese”; see Meyer) was in practice: not every individual biblical writing as a whole, but certain portions like Matt 5–7; Rom 7–9, or 1 Cor 10–14 were read in consecutive worship services, especially during fasting periods. These

textual sequences were interrupted by fixed readings on festive days (Godu: 248). Dividing up these portions and deciding when to stop reading and where to continue was left to the person who performed them (Volp).

In sum, it is difficult to determine the precise character of the practice of *lectio continua* in the early church. It can however be safely said that a *lectio continua* proper was most probably established no earlier than the time of the rise of cenobitic monasticism with its practice of meditating upon biblical texts individually and successively (cf., e.g., *Regula Benedicti* 48.1; see "Lectio divina").

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II. Reformation Era and Modern Christianity

1. The Canon as Liturgical Challenge. *Lectio continua* refers to "the continuous reading of a biblical book or a large section of one in successive worship services without omission or without reading the books or sections thereof in any other order than that of the text" (Kunze: 90). It is distinguished from *lectio semi-continua* and *lectio currens*. In these latter two, significant portions of biblical books are read in successive worship services, but large sections may be left out. The reading of select pericopes (*Eklogadie* or *Perikopenlesung*) is a basic alternative to *lectio continua* and *lectio semi-continua* because a coherent unit of text is isolated from its context and selected for reading.

The Bible, due to its sheer size and scope, has challenged the praxis of church reading; the Bible can never be read through publicly in its entirety. Yet, the church regards the entire Bible as canonical, thus reading the whole Bible is both important and necessary. The churches of the Reformation insisted on reading the entire Bible because they saw the church as creature of the word (*creatura verbi*). God gives the church the task of making the entire Bible heard so that human truth cannot stand above the truth of Holy Scripture. Modern biblical studies too offer arguments on behalf of reading the Bible as a whole. Redaction criticism and canon criticism, for example, have highlighted the relevance of the larger canonical contexts in which individual biblical texts are found.

Lectio continua, however, is only really feasible if all biblical books are read in one specific location in church with more or less the same congregants attending all the services in sequence. Only in this

way can churchgoers appreciate all texts within their complete biblical context.

2. *Lectio continua* in the Reformation. Martin Luther was dissatisfied with the lectionary tradition he inherited (see "Lectionary"). Nevertheless, he retained it as a "traditio humana" (cf. CA 26 on the maintenance of the *ordo lectionum in missa*) and continued to use the medieval lectionary. By contrast, on January 2, 1519 Huldrych Zwingli began preaching in accordance with a *lectio continua*. Zwingli began with Matthew and continued through Acts, 1 Timothy, Galatians, 2 Timothy, 1 and 2 Peter, and Hebrews. In June 1525, the Carolinum was established in Zurich. The Carolinum's educational program ("Prophezey") consisted of daily reflections on biblical texts as *lectio continua*. These reflections sometimes occurred in the form of a church service and sometimes in the form of a class. Calvin also criticized pericope readings. He characterized pericopes as mere *sectiones* and practiced a *lectio continua* or *lectio semi-continua*. The goal was to ensure that the entire Bible was heard and not just simply allow the same texts dictated by church authority to be read over and over again.

The consequence of giving up the pericope-based lectionary tradition meant, firstly, a radical paring back of the liturgical year. The year would no longer consist of a structure of Sundays and holidays based on given biblical texts, but only of the major holidays. Secondly, this meant reducing the amount of time devoted to the mere reading of the biblical text without the sermon in the service. The introduction of a *lectio continua* always meant in effect that the text read also became the text preached.

In the second half of the 16th century, in 1555 at the instigation of Lutheran theologian Joachim Westphal a dispute arose between the Lutheran and Reformed churches over the question of the lectionary. In 1556 Calvin contended that the Lutherans were holding on to a relic of Catholicism by maintaining the use of the lectionary. In subsequent decades the dispute became central to the controversy between Lutherans and Reformed theologians. The two sides also drew on the Bible for their arguments. Passages like Deut 31:10–12; Acts 15:21, and Col 4:16 were used in order to prove that it was a divine command to regard Scripture in its entirety, not only certain sections arbitrarily chosen by the church.

In fact, the practical question emerged as to who should choose the texts to be read and preached. The 1563 church order of the Electoral Palatinate put the right to decide in the hands of the superintendents. Yet by 1585 all of the churches in the Palatinate had returned to the traditional order of Gospel readings. In the Anglican Church, for example, the *Book of Common Prayer* initially organized Scripture readings in such a way that the OT

was read in *lectio continua* once a year and the NT three times a year. This required continuous reading not only in worship and prayer services on Sundays and holidays, but also on weekdays.

In the modern era, literacy rates of the general public increased. The Bible was thus no longer only read in church, but also more often in school and took place in private settings for the first time. *Lectio continua* played a major role in each of these settings. The Prussian school ordinance of the mid-18th century stipulated that students should read a biblical book in *lectio continua* for weekday lessons, and during Saturday lessons they should study the text for the Sunday service.

3. Contemporary Use of *Lectio continua*. In comparison to a strict *lectio continua*, *lectio semi-continua* is much easier to put into practice. The revision of the Catholic lectionary after the Second Vatican Council (*Ordo Lectionum Missae*, 1969) bases its selection of Gospel and Epistle readings on the principle of *lectio semi-continua*.

In contemporary practice, the *lectio continua* has brought forth mixed views. On the one hand, an increasing number of pastors in Evangelical Reformed churches in Switzerland are backing away from *lectio continua* and choosing the lectionary of the Evangelical Churches in Germany or the *Revised Common Lectionary* as the basis for their sermons. On the other hand, *lectio continua* does have its advocates (cf. Bäumlin; Christ) and is being implemented in new, although previously unusual, forms. The proposal of a *lectio (semi-)continua* of the Torah is one example (cf. "Lectionary, Modern Europe and America").

There are pragmatic reasons both for and against *lectio continua*. A problem is that a continuous reading can only be fully carried out by those who very regularly attend services, which is only a minority of Christians in Europe and North America. In addition, reading the same texts in different churches according to the cycle provides an opportunity to strengthen ecumenical ties among churches. This argument was made by the Reformers of the late 16th and early 17th centuries. Yet it is not convincing because there are different lectionaries used in the various churches. Nevertheless, *lectio continua* has the potential to bring to a churchgoer's attention texts that would otherwise not be selected by the church and consequently "fall through the cracks." It also allows for biblical texts to be presented in their canonical context and facilitates contemplation by way of congregational preaching. This is particularly advantageous for preachers and can enrich liturgical and educational activities in the congregation.

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See also → Lectio Divina; → Lectionary; → Liturgy