

What Is The Lectionary?

In almost every Christian worship service, in almost every Christian church, in almost every Christian denomination, a pastor or a layperson reads lessons from the Bible. Though this statement may not surprise us, what may surprise us is many of these Christian churches from different Christian denominations read some of the same Bible lessons each week. This is possible because of the Lectionary. In this column entitled, "Questions About Christianity", we are looking at the different parts of a basic Christian liturgical worship service. This month we will learn about the Bible lessons that are read in worship services by answering this question, "What is the Lectionary?"

When the earliest Christians gathered for worship, they did not read the same Bible lessons everywhere. Pastors usually picked his own lessons to read from the Old Testament and New Testament. As the Christian Church year developed, certain lessons were assigned to certain days and copyists placed marginal marks in the Bible to indicate on which Sundays these lessons were read. Eventually these sections were "cut out" of Bibles and copied into a book called the Lectionary, which means "the book of reading." This was done so if a congregation did not have a complete copy of the Bible they always had the Lectionary to use in the church service. The word pericope (a Greek word meaning "cut out") is also used to designate these lessons. Around 1,000 A.D. the Lectionary was well developed and used in most Christian churches on a yearly basis. However, around the 1970's this historic one-year Lectionary was revised and expanded to a three-year Lectionary in which the same lessons are read once every three years. Today, many Christian churches use either the historic one-year Lectionary, or the revised three-year Lectionary, or a similar one their church denomination developed.

The Lectionary assigns three lessons for each worship service throughout the Christian Church year. The first lesson is called the Old Testament lesson because it is from the Old Testament. Many of the Old Testament lessons are from the books of the prophets (Isaiah-Malachi) because they contain prophecies about Jesus' coming, which are usually closely connected with the Gospel lesson about Jesus' life. However, during the season of Easter the Old Testament lesson is usually from the New Testament book of Acts because it explains how the Christian Church developed. Today, many Christian churches still use either the historic one-year Lectionary or the revised three-year Lectionary, which contain Old Testament lessons from the books of the prophets. However, some choose to use other Lectionaries with more Old Testament lessons from the historical books of the Old Testament (Genesis-Esther) instead.

The second Bible lesson from the Lectionary is called the Epistle Lesson. The word Epistle means "letter". These lessons come from the New Testament Epistles (Romans-Jude). On festival days and certain other Sundays, the Epistle lesson is closely connected to the Old Testament lesson and the Gospel lesson. However, most other weeks a series of lessons from the same Epistle, such as Romans and 1 Corinthians, is read over a several week span. The original writers of the Lectionary chose to do this so Christians could better understand what the Epistle was about. Today, many Christian churches still use either the historic one-year Lectionary or the revised three-year Lectionary with a series of Epistle lessons from the same book. However, some choose to use other Lectionaries with Epistle lessons that are closely connected to the Old Testament and Gospel lessons instead.

The third Bible lesson from the Lectionary is called the Gospel lesson. It is called the Gospel lesson because it comes from one of the four gospels (Matthew, Mark, Luke, John). In the historic one-year Lectionary, lessons from each of these four books are read throughout the Christian Church year. However, in the revised three-year Lectionary lessons from the book of Matthew are mainly read in the first year. Lessons from the book of Mark are mainly read in the

second year. Lessons from the book of Luke are mainly read in the third year, while lessons from the book of John are read from time to time throughout all three years. Today, many Christian churches still read the same Gospel lessons from the historic one-year Lectionary or the revised three-year Lectionary with very little changes.

Regardless of what Bible lessons are read in a Christian worship services, what is important is they are read. When Bible lessons are read Christians learn how the world was created, how sin entered the world, how God promised to send a Savior, the history of the nation of Israel, how Jesus is the Savior, and the history of the early Christian Church. Christians also learn about the teachings of the Bible such as the Ten Commandments, the Trinity, how Jesus saved us, Baptism, the Lord's Supper, and many others. In addition, when Christians hear these Bible lessons in worship services, God the Holy Spirit creates and strengthens their faith so one day they can live with the Triune God in heaven forever.