

Reading and Preaching the Word of God

It was Hughes Oliphant Old, in his *Worship That Is Reformed According to Scripture*,¹ who first opened my eyes to the history and importance of *lectio continua* preaching, which is reading and preaching through the Bible, book by book, chapter by chapter, and verse by verse, in order, without omitting sections. He also gave me courage to pursue such preaching yet today.

Old's book has been reissued in a revised and expanded edition as *Worship Reformed According to Scripture*. Here is some of what he has written about our goodly heritage of *lectio continua* preaching:

Origen (ca. 185-ca. 254)...preached through the books of the Old Testament one by one. Today we have some twenty of his sermons on Genesis, about fifteen on Exodus, and a similar number on the other historical books....The ministry of Origen was to preach through the whole of the Bible, book by book, chapter by chapter.

John Chrysostom (ca. 347-407)...preached through most of the books of the New Testament. We have eighty-nine sermons on the Gospel of Matthew. When we look at these sermons, we discover that he proceeds through the whole of the Gospel explaining the text verse by verse.

Ambrose of Milan (ca. 339-97)...preached in Milan, the capital of the Western empire, at the same time John Chrysostom filled the pulpit in Antioch. Ambrose fascinated his congregation with his expositions of the Old Testament.

Augustine of Hippo (354-430)...preached a *lectio continua*.

Ulrich Zwingli (1481-1531)...started out by taking the Gospel of Matthew and preaching through it verse by verse, day after day for a whole year. To use the technical term, he preached a *lectio continua* of the Gospel of Matthew....Zwingli began his reform with a return to the classical practice of systematic expository preaching....Like a Swiss John Chrysostom he preached through the Bible, verse by verse, one book at a time.

John Oecolampadius (1482-1531)...became preacher at St. Mark's Church, where he set to work preaching, just as John Chrysostom had done, through one book of the Bible after another.

Matthew Zell (1477-1548)...began his ministry by preaching through the four Gospels.

¹Hughes Oliphant Old, *Worship That Is Reformed According to Scripture*, Guides to the Reformed Tradition, ed. John H. Leith and John W. Kuykendall (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1984), ch. 5, "The Ministry of the Word," 57-85. For information on revised and expanded edition, see next note.

Wolfgang Capito (1478-1541)...preached through Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel.

Martin Bucer (1491-1551)...did a long series of sermons on the Gospel of Matthew, the Gospel of John, the first epistle of Peter and the book of Psalms...If the Gospels were preached though in course on Sunday morning, then the New Testament Epistles were preached through either later on Sunday, at vespers perhaps, or else at the daily preaching services. It was the same with the Old Testament books.

John Calvin (1509-64) introduced [this approach] to Geneva and that those who were exiled during the reign of Queen Mary (1553-58) took with them when they returned to England and Scotland. *The exposition of Scripture in course became one of the biggest planks in their platform of Christian revival. To them it was an essential component of Christian worship that was according to Scripture and after the example of the early church...* Sunday morning Calvin normally preached through the Gospels or the Acts of the Apostles. At Sunday vespers he would preach through the Psalms or perhaps a New Testament epistle. On weekday mornings he preached through Old Testament books...Calvin preached through most of the books of the Bible, and he preached his way slowly through each book. Normally, he took three to six verses at a time. This system produced, for example, 123 sermons on Genesis, 200 sermons on Deuteronomy, 159 sermons on Job, 176 sermons on 1 and 2 Corinthians, and 43 sermons on Galatians...His life's work was to preach through the whole Bible.

John Knox (1513-72)...became preacher at St. Giles Cathedral in Edinburgh. There he exercised as dramatic and powerful a preaching ministry as any preacher in the history of Christendom...He did this in the course of expository preaching, never departing from the text of Scripture.²

How could I do any other? So it was that, at Gilwood Presbyterian Church, in Concord, North Carolina, I began preaching through the books of the Bible, particularly the New Testament. I spent five years going through Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. I can honestly say that it was the most important thing I have ever done in regard to preaching. After that, I preached through some of the shorter letters. I am very grateful to Gilwood for the opportunity and privilege of doing this.

Subsequently I was called to be the pastor of Grace Covenant Presbyterian Church, in Richmond, Virginia. In addition to preaching through Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John again, I also preached through the Acts of the Apostles, the Letter to the Romans, Philipians, 1 and 2

²Hughes Oliphant Old, *Worship Reformed According to Scripture*, revised and expanded edition (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2002), 63-78, emphasis added; for a fuller treatment, see Hughes Oliphant Old, *The Reading and Preaching of the Scriptures in the Worship of the Christian Church*, seven volumes (Grand Rapids, Michigan and Cambridge, U.K.: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1998 ff.), of which volumes one through six are in print and volume seven is forthcoming.

Timothy, Titus, Philemon, 1, 2, and 3 John, and Jude. Again, I am very grateful to Grace Covenant for the opportunity and privilege of having done this.

Through most of the years of my preaching, I have used the Revised Standard Version of the Bible. After years of anticipation, I used the New Revised Standard Version for five years, which I take to be more than a fair trial. I was reading Mark, chapter 8, the day I put it down. Verse 34 reads, according to the NRSV, “If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.” Besides being perfectly barbarous English (how many people would be on that cross?), using plurals to avoid male pronouns, those very evasions made it also seem to me to fall under the condemnation of the subsequent verse 38: “Those who are ashamed of me and of my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, of them the Son of Man will also be ashamed when he comes in the glory of his Father with the holy angels” (NRSV, again with the unwarranted plurals). Beginning in 2002, I have been using the English Standard Version, which I have found to be a most faithful and felicitous translation.

I should note that in my studies of the Bible I have learned much from the commentaries of John Calvin. I should also note that in my study of theology I have learned much from John Calvin and from John H. Leith. He has also done much to encourage my preaching.

As I have continued forward in *lectio continua* preaching, I have been much encouraged by the preaching ministries of my colleagues David Wood and Steve Bryant, who joined me along the way in this adventure. I have learned of others who also preach *lectio continua*: Ron Scates, Jeffrey Wilson, Louis Williams, and Bob Fuller. In fact, we have now developed an email discussion list of fifty-five of us preaching in this way. I am also grateful for help and encouragement not only from Hughes Oliphant Old but also from Stan Hall and Richard A. Ray. I would appreciate hearing from others who preach in this way.

My daughter, Campbell Goodloe Hackett, is a student at Princeton Theological Seminary. One of her New Testament professors, the late Dr. Donald Juel, once introduced a text from Mark to the class and suggested that almost no one had ever heard a sermon on it. My daughter put up her hand. He was dubious, but Campbell said that she had grown up in a church where the minister preached straight through the books of the Bible, including Mark. Juel was shocked that anyone did that. My question is, Why is such preaching unusual? It could and should be the norm.

I am more keenly aware of the shortcomings of the following sermons than are any who heard them or any who will read them. I offer them here less for any illusions I have about the value of their content and more for the importance of the substantive and historic pattern of preaching the Bible *lectio continua*, submitting ourselves to the authority of the Word. That can still be done today! Here is the proof. It is my prayer that others will be made bold to follow in this way and to do better than I have done.

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