

Reclaiming Our Birthright ~ Dark Times

Paul Bosch writes to the ELCIC community...

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

In this, the second of my letters on “Reclaiming Our Birthright”, we consider this question: What went wrong, in the years following the Apostolic age, that the Reformation should become, in time, a tragic necessity?

The Apostolic age had been a time of testing for the infant church: persecutions, harassment, marginalization. The church became a kind of underground movement, meeting often in secret in private homes to escape the threats of arrest, imprisonment, and even martyrdom. In spite of these very real threats, the church of Jesus Christ continued to grow and flourish, perhaps in large measure because of the new respect and dignity the infant faith held out to the persecuted, the harassed, the marginalized: women, children, slaves, the poor, and the “poor in spirit”.

But in the Fourth Century, the emperor Constantine himself became a Christian, in a conversion experience that changed the course of history. Now, almost overnight, the Christian faith was not only tolerated, it became the official religion of the empire. Whereas the infant Church of the Apostolic age had met for worship in private homes—the community gathered around the family table and led by its bishop—now the very first Christian church buildings were being built, the so-called *basilicas* of the Mediterranean basin.

Rather than retaining in its architecture what you might call the domestic model for its worship spaces—the family of God gathered around the table of its feasting—a new, and in the view of many, uncongenial architectural model was adopted: that of the imperial Byzantine law-court. Here one sees a distinctly two-room space: “nave” here, “chancel” there, the chancel elevated, as in the law-court, some rows of steps above the “nave”. Behind the altar sit the bishop and pastors and worship leaders, in the exact location where judges sat in the law-courts. To right and left are positioned lecterns: originally, one for prosecuting attorney and another for defense attorney.

Unhappily, the Church’s new-found respectability resulted as well in unaccustomed—and often unbecoming!—power, prestige, and privilege. Two developments in this period were especially destructive to Christian worship: the community’s leadership became increasingly hierarchical, and the community’s worship became increasingly “presentational”.

1) A hierarchical leadership led the Church in the direction of clericalization. Distinctions between clergy and laity were exacerbated. No longer was the Biblical and Apostolic understanding of “the priesthood of all believers” understood or cherished (1 Peter 2:9).

A clear signal of this clericalization could be perceived every Sunday at worship: Here were clergy and worship leaders located in a space apart from worshippers—and elevated! The clear, if perhaps unintended, signal: There in the chancel are the holy things, the holy action, the holy people; here in the nave I’m far away, less close to God and the holy action, the holy “stuff”.

2) Further, worship itself became “presentational” rather than participatory. That is to say, the liturgy became a “presentation” of clergy for the benefit of laypeople. Without a great deal of exaggeration, you could say that clergy, during these dark times, became owners and operators of a religious “franchise” at which laypeople were the “customers”. The sense all but disappeared of an egalitarian Christian community gathered in thanksgiving (“eucharist”) around its Head present in Word and Sacrament.

Other abuses crept into Christian worship life. Private masses —clergy without congregation!— were celebrated. The cup was withheld from the people: the rude masses were not to be trusted not to spill its contents!

Moreover, as the Latin language languished and disappeared from common speech, the Service, still in the old language, became increasingly incomprehensible to the common folk. Our term “hoc us pocus” is a corruption of the old Latin words spoken by the priest at Mass: “*Hoc est corpus.*” The priest was reciting the Words of Institution: “This is my body...”

It was in this soil that the seeds of Reformation could not fail to take root and bloom. Of that, more in my next Letter (*Worship Matters* 5).

Fondly,

Paul.

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Pastor Paul F. Bosch has served a long and fruitful ministry as parish pastor, campus pastor and seminary teacher. A contributor to Lutheran Book of Worship, he served on the ULCA's Commission on Church Architecture, the LCA's Management Committee for Worship, and on the ELCIC's Working Group on Worship. In 1996, Pastor Bosch was named the ELCIC's first Companion of the Worship Arts. In 2002, he was named Dean of the Chapel Emeritus at Waterloo Lutheran Seminary. Pastor Bosch resides in Waterloo, Ontario.

Supplemental Resources

There are two significant collections of potentially useful supplemental resources available at Lift Up Your Hearts, the worship and spirituality website of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada. The one is the lovely series of *Pastoral Essays on the Statement on Sacramental Practices*. They were published in 1992. Several of the essays presage and complement the work done on *Reclaiming Our Birthright*. The series of essays is available in the Sacramental Practices section of the ELCIC Resources & Helps page at Lift Up Your Hearts. The full address is <<http://www.worship.ca/sec3.html#sacprac>>.

A second body of helpful material is that of Paul Bosch's essays in the Worship Workbench series. Here again, several of the items will prove timely and helpful. Pastor Bosch's essays appear on a dedicated page at Lift Up Your Hearts. The full address is <<http://www.worship.ca/workbench.html>>. Of the sixty or so essays in the Workbench collection those which most closely bear on *Birthright* matters are flagged on the *Worship Workbench* page.

Program Committee for Worship

The national worship work of the church is overseen by the ELCIC's Program Committee for Worship. Members are André Lavergne [lavergne@telc.ca], pastor of Trinity Lutheran Church in New Hamburg, ON (chairperson); Jann Boyd [bugboyd@hotmail.com], Assistant Professor of Worship and Homiletics at Lutheran Theological Seminary, Saskatoon, SK (secretary); Karen Johnson-Lefsrud [johnsonlefsrud@shaw.ca], Director of Pastoral Care, Luther Court Society and Housing Foundation, Victoria, BC. The national office's Kolleen Karlow sky [kkarlow skyclark@elcic.ca] serves as Program Coordinator for Worship. We welcome conversation related to our work. Drop us a line!