

Reclaiming Our Birthright ~ The Reformation

Paul Bosch writes to the ELCIC community...

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

We turn in my third Letter to the Reformation.

Luther was not the first to call attention to the abuses and perversions that had crept into Christian worship over the years. We may assume that, in every age, there rose up faithful pastors and bishops and people who fully understood the promise of the Gospel and who cherished and enabled the realization and enactment of that promise every Sunday when their communities gathered around Word and Sacrament.

What Luther and other Reformers called for, in their criticisms of the abuses they had seen, had been pointed out in earlier generations as well. But circumstances and a changed cultural context—not least the recent development of moveable type and the invention of the printing press!—contributed to disseminating the Reformers' views to an ever-expanding audience of scholars and common folk alike. A host of political, social, and theological factors converged, in Luther's day, to provide a fertile soil for reform. Hence, with understandable warrant, history has come to mark the 16th Century as the Age of the Reformation.

Luther's reforms in worship were in the beginning relatively modest and conservative. He actually retained the Latin language in the Mass, in his first attempts at worship renewal, and only later came to the conviction that a Mass in the people's own vernacular—in his case, German—was more to be desired than whatever value the Latin offered as a “universal” tongue.

Luther's voice was to be heard among those calling for a revival of regular, every-Sunday, Biblical preaching. And his sermons, letters and tracts were reproduced by the new technology (printing) and widely disseminated.

He was a skillful hymn-writer and introduced the singing of vernacular, that is, German, hymns by the congregation into the order of Mass.

He restored the cup to the people in a gesture he characterized as an attempt to “enlarge the sign”. (Following a similar reasoning, he admitted preference for a baptism by immersion rather than sprinkling, as the fuller and more compelling and persuasive “sign”!)

In a cultural context that had seen faithful Christian people attend Mass regularly, but rarely commune, for fear of not being worthily prepared, Luther struggled mightily to encourage frequent reception of Bread and Cup among worshippers, precisely because we do not have to earn them: They are unmerited gifts of God's grace, for our building up in faith and piety. See John Kleiner's *Worship Matters* 8, below.

As a consequence of all of the above, the Lutheran Reformation has been characterized by many scholars as basically conservative—more conservative than the ensuing Calvinist reforms, and arguably more conservative than those of the English Reformers. Certainly the changes proposed and adopted in the piety and worship life of Continental and Scandinavian Lutheran churches during this period possessed a solid “catholicity” (small “c”) unknown in other sectors of the Church in Western Europe. The structure and Order of Mass was retained; there was no dramatic destruction of vestments or candles or crucifixes; there were no significant purges in the actions of priest or people at Mass;

church architecture was not significantly altered, yet —although Luther himself expressed preference for a free-standing altar. Even the institutional forms of church order were retained and given honour in the Lutheran Reformation: The infant Lutheran Churches in both Sweden and Finland retained the historic episcopate, and a three-fold expression of church order: bishop, priest and deacon.

As one of my teachers has observed, the principle that seemed to guide Luther and the Lutheran Reformers seemed to be this: “Retain everything in the Tradition that is not contrary to scripture”, whereas the guiding principle of more radical Reformers seemed to be “Throw out everything in the Tradition that is not expressly commanded in scripture.” If that is not an over-statement, it represents a significant distinction in attitude and outlook, you will agree.

Perhaps most striking and provocative among all the theological affirmations and convictions of the Age of Reformation is this splendid definition of the Church: The church is “the assembly of all believers among whom the gospel is purely preached and the holy sacraments are administered according to the Gospel.” (*Augsburg Confession 7: 1*) Note that it is a *liturgical* definition: The Church is that group of people gathered under Word and Sacraments.

And Luther’s splendid insight about the gifts of full participation in the Holy Communion has today an almost existentialist hortatory appeal. In answer to his own question in the *Small Catechism*, “How can bodily eating and drinking [at the Lord’s Table] do such great things?” he replies, “Eating and drinking certainly do not do it, but rather the words that are recorded: ‘given for you’ and ‘shed for you for the forgiveness of sins.’ These words, when accompanied by the physical eating and drinking, are the essential thing in the sacrament, and whoever believes these words has what they declare and state, namely, ‘forgiveness of sins.’” (*The Small Catechism: The Sacrament of the Altar 7-8*)

In our next Letter (*Worship Matters 6*), we discover once again some Dark Times for faith.

Fondly,

Paul.



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 ELCIC’s worship and spirituality website. The one is the lovely series of *Pastoral Essays on the Statement on Sacramental Practices*, 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 collection those which most closely bear on *Birthright* matters are flagged on the *Worship Workbench* page.