

Reclaiming Our Birthright ~ More Dark Times

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 fourth Letter (*Worship Matters 6*) to the generations following the Reformation. Certainly among the chief cultural, social, and political events immediately following the time of Luther was the Thirty Years' War, which devastated Western Europe, and set brother against brother. In Germany alone, as many as one-in-three died in the war zone—some say the figure might have been as high as fifty percent.

Everywhere, opinions hardened, including theological opinions. The response of the Roman Catholic Church to the Reformation within its own ranks was to excommunicate the Reformers, including Luther, and to embark upon its own carefully-plotted program of reform, what we call today the "Counter-Reformation". And to be sure, many of the abuses the Reformers had decried were corrected or at least softened, in succeeding generations.

As for the followers of the Reform Movement, they splintered into still smaller and more esoteric sub-groupings, giving rise to what we recognize today as our proliferation of Christian denominations. And in many of these new groupings, the baby was always at risk of being thrown out with the bath-water. For some groups, almost anything that seemed to represent the ancient Tradition of the Church became suspect as having lost its validity: church arts and architecture, rituals, vestments, ceremonies, music. In the broadest—and most charitable!—ecumenical view, the Christian enterprise entered another Dark Time.

The reasons for this decline and darkness were again many and varied:

- 1) Political unrest and insecurity, particularly during and following the Thirty Years' War, tore families apart and set all institutions to tottering. As a result of prolonged conflict, a general cynicism arose, toward life, and, more generally, toward the Good, the True and the Beautiful. As you could demonstrate after almost any war, it would not have been difficult to trace the evolution of a profound cynicism and even a practical (if not actual) atheism in many quarters of European society, a conviction—not for the first time or the last in human history!—that "God is dead". And with the war having devastated whole populations of people, it often became difficult to provide pastors, particularly on the North American frontier.
- 2) Along with cynicism, skepticism and practical atheism, a profound relativism developed in Western Europe, particularly among intellectuals and the thoughtful. The conviction grew that anyone's Truth is as valid as anyone else's: All is relative; there are no absolutes. This had the effect, you may be sure, of eroding religious conviction.
- 3) Science and the scientific method began its dominance in human thought and life. The generations following the Reformation included the Age of Discovery—Columbus, Magellan and others. And the so-called Age of Enlightenment—the "Age of Reason"—had the effect of almost deifying rationality, at the expense not only of the human religious impulse, but also at the expense of those human sensibilities that produce and cherish the arts, poetry, and other acts of the imagination. Ritual and ceremony began to be regarded by many with suspicion, if not downright hostility, and sacraments were relegated to an arena reserved for magic and superstition.

4) Human piety and spiritual searching will not be denied, however. And so there arose, within all the churches, new and hugely successful movements of what we might call “Pietism.” These movements emphasized a personal conversion experience for each believer. As a result, their adherents in turn were often suspicious of older orthodoxies, and often forsook what we might call today the Tradition of the Church, turning their backs on that Tradition as completely and decisively as the most “atheistic” relativist.

To be sure, in the midst of darkness there was also light. You could mention the glorious music of J. S. Bach, asserting in the Eighteenth Century the fulness of Apostolic Tradition in a cultural context ruled by Pietism. And in the New World, Henry Melchior Muhlenberg, patriarch of all Lutheran Church bodies in North America, erected Augustus Church in Trappe, Pennsylvania, with a free-standing table.

5) Finally, as the New World began to be explored and settled, and its wilderness tamed, a new movement arose within many churches which had been transplanted to North American soil:

Revivalism. Partly a variant of the Pietism mentioned in 4) above, and partly a product of the vast North American frontier, Revivalism featured an itinerant and poorly-educated leadership, almost exclusively “presentational” worship forms (See *Worship Matters 4*, above), and only the most innocent and rudimentary sense of institutional order, or indeed of what I regard as the broad, grand, life-enhancing Biblical and Apostolic Tradition of the Church. Preaching and teaching in Revivalist circles tended toward Biblical literalism, even fundamentalism.

There can be almost no question that Revivalism became the single most identifiable characteristic of North American (or even more narrowly “American”) religious life and thought. All of North America’s present-day Christian denominations have been affected by it—including present-day North American Lutheran Church bodies.

In our next letter (*Worship Matters 7*) we’ll look at developments since those unsettling days, and at the emerging (and heartening!) ecumenical consensus of our own day.

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.