

How the Reformers Dealt with Change in the Church

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Presented here with minor modifications.]

“Change” is a strange little word. It strikes terror in the hearts of some.¹ It brings hope and joy to others. “Change” can be considered the most negative and vulgar of terms, while others view it as a positive engine of progress. Just as beauty is in the eye of the beholder, so from the beginning we must recognize that reactions to change will vary widely. Change can be, and often is, a very emotional issue. Undoubtedly that is why we are told, “Don't make change just for the sake of change.”

Change is on the minds of the people in our congregations and on our own minds too. The oldest members in our congregations have seen a great many changes in one lifetime. They have gone from Model Ts to the space shuttle, from kerosene lanterns to neon lights whose electricity is generated by nuclear plants, from crank phones on party lines that were large wooden boxes to cell phones weighing a few ounces, from three-cent stamps to 37-cent stamps that are quickly being replaced by email. The church and its pastors have undergone their share of change too. Today you can count the number of regular German services on one hand though they used to be quite common. Instead of everyone in the congregations being from the same ethnic group, if not the same general group of families, we have more and more congregations that boast a variety of racial and ethnic backgrounds. During the years of my ministry a new catechism, a new Bible translation, and a new hymnal have been introduced. We have gone from everyone using the common cup in celebrating the Lord's Supper to the common cup used with individual cups or to individual cups alone.

Not all changes are greeted with enthusiasm. Frequently people ask, “Why do things have to change at all?” Maybe we join them in that question. There is another tendency too. I'm told that it's natural that the older we get, the less we want to deal with change.

That there are differences of opinion when it comes to change is nothing new. In spite of our preferences to the contrary, change does come. The Greek philosopher Heraclitus (540-480 BC) stated, “Nothing endures but change.” That same Greek also opined, “You cannot step into the same stream twice.” Nothing remains exactly the same—except for our Lord who is the same yesterday, today, and forever (He 13:8). Caught up in contemporary thought, today's church leaders and theologians are so occupied with the question of change that they might well paraphrase the ancient philosopher and have him say, “You never enter the same church twice.” From the outset we need to recognize that change by its very nature produces tension. Thomas Carlyle put it this way: “Today is not yesterday; we ourselves change; how can our works and our thoughts, if they are always to be the fittest, continue always the same? Change, indeed, is painful but ever needful; and if memory have its force and worth, so also has hope.”²

In writing on the pastor's role in dealing with change, a seminarian noted almost 20 years ago: Change is viewed as either good or evil by an individual or individuals on the basis of their evaluation of the change. Even then the change may still not be in line with the judgment rendered concerning it. The change may be good, although it is judged to be bad, or it may be bad, although it is judged to be good.³

¹ “Change doth unknit the tranquil strength of man” —Matthew Arnold.

² Quoted in Edwin L. Lueker, *Change in the Church*, p 21.

³ Daniel Schoeffel, *The Pastor's Role in Making Changes in the Church—Past, Present and Future*, WLS Senior Church History Paper, May 1985, p 1.

It should not surprise us then that there are different ideas about change as it relates to today's church. Some people will insist that change must take place in the church. "Change is inevitable," they say. For them it is only a question of what kinds of change will take place. Some of them might go so far as to support change simply for the sake of change. "It's about time we did things differently. The old way is boring." On the other side, there are those who stick with the old simply because it is tried and tested. "If it ain't broke, don't fix it." For this group the question is whether there should be change at all. "A changeless church for a changing world" quickly becomes their motto in everything. Perhaps Confucius (551-479 BC) was surrounded by such a wide variety of opinions when he suggested, "Only the wisest and stupidest of men never change."

As the seminarian above noted, change is not necessarily a bad thing—even for the church. Thomas Aquinas is reported to have said, "If the primary aim of a captain was to preserve his ship, he would keep it in port forever." Every now and then God stirs up the world, creating (or permitting) the kind of sweeping change that alters what was commonly accepted. The Reformation certainly was one of those times. Following 1517 it was not business as it had been traditionally conducted throughout the Middle Ages. In some areas the changes were dramatic and massive; while in other ways, change was so minimal as to be virtually nonexistent. The Reformers were faced with a challenge. What should they change and what should they leave alone? In looking at how the Reformers addressed the question of change, we can evaluate our own view of change. Although we do not share Reinhold Niebuhr's theology, we can identify with a prayer he offered in a 1943 sermon, "God, give us grace to accept with serenity the things that cannot be changed, courage to change the things which should be changed, and the wisdom to distinguish the one from the other."

The Reformation by its very nature involved change. "Reform" has as its underlying meaning "to amend or improve by change of form or removal of faults or abuses." The purpose of reformation is "to become changed for the better."⁴ We have no problem remembering that the Reformation involved the "removal of faults or abuses." But it does sometimes slip our minds that this was a "change" from the status quo, albeit "for the better." Although the maxim itself did not come into common usage until later, it summarizes well the perspective of the Reformers: *Ecclesia reformata, semper reformanda*—"the church reformed must always be reformed."

Perhaps you have heard that expression before, but what did the Reformers mean by it? In the context of the sixteenth century *Ecclesia reformata, semper reformanda* was neither liberal nor conservative, but radical, in the sense of returning to the "root." The Reformers believed the church had become corrupt, so change was not only needed; change was demanded. But it was a change in the interest of preservation and restoration of what God had given in the past.

A cultural assumption of the Reformers' day was "older is better." Yet one of the most serious charges the Roman church authorities hurled at the Reformers was that they were "innovating." John Calvin responded to this and other charges in his 1543 treatise *The Necessity of Reforming the Church*. As he put it, "We are accused of rash and impious innovation for having ventured to propose any change at all [in] the former state of the Church." He then goes on to counter the charges leveled against the Reformation by insisting that they were not "innovating," but restoring the church to its true nature, purified from the "innovations" that had riddled the church through centuries of neglect of Scripture and theological laxity.⁵ The "change" of the Reformers was a "turning again" to the teachings of Jesus Christ, lived out by the first disciples and the early church and witnessed to in the writings of the Old and New Testaments. The change of the Reformation was actually eliminating additions to God's truth.

⁴ Webster's Ninth New Collegiate Dictionary, p 990.

⁵ Electronic edition of this work is available at http://www.swrb.com/newslett/actualNLsJNRC_ch02.htm

The Reformers rejected the idea that tradition can provide a sufficient basis for matters of faith. Instead, the Reformers insisted that the Word of God is the only source in matters of faith, and that all other sources of knowledge, including a church's tradition, have to go back to this central source.

The Reformers were appealing to Scripture—*Sola scriptura*. According to Reformation historian David Steinmetz, by submitting themselves to Scripture, the churches of the Reformation movement were purging themselves of the “innovations” that had crept into the early and medieval church.⁶ “Change” in this instance was nothing new. It was merely a return to a more ancient and purer church—one in which the word the prophets was made more certain. The Reformers agreed with the apostle Peter, “Above all, you must understand that no prophecy of Scripture came about by the prophet's own interpretation. For prophecy never had its origin in the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit” (2 Pe 1:20-21).

When we use the slogan *Ecclesia reformats, semper reformanda*, we must be careful that we do not read more into it than the Reformers did. First of all, the phrase does not imply that “newer is always better.” In many places where this Reformation motto appears, the phrase is completed with a clarifying addition so that it reads: *ecclesia reformats, semper reformanda secundum verbum Dei*—“the church reformed must always be reformed according to the Word of God.” Change dare never contradict God's revelation. Change must always be grounded in Scripture.

The second thing that we must recognize is that the Reformers understood that the church cannot reform itself. Sometimes *reformats . . . reformanda* has been mistranslated as “reformed and always reforming.” In fact you see this translation frequently used by Reformed groups, especially Presbyterians. Such a rendering can mislead us to believe that the church is the agent of its own reformation. That is never the case. God is the agent of reformation. The church is the object of God's reforming work. God's agency and initiative have priority here. The Latin verb is passive in voice. *Semper reformanda*, with *est* understood, is a passive periphrastic construction, a gerundive with a form of *esse*, to express necessity. Therefore the expression is translated “must always be reformed.” Harold Nebelsick puts it well: “We are the recipients of the activity of the Holy Spirit which reforms the church in accordance with the Word of God.”⁷ The church is God's church, the creation of God's Word and Spirit. God's Word and the Spirit guided the church's formation and oversee its reformation.

The Reformers recognized that the church continues to need reforming because we are sinners. Since the church is made up of individuals gathered together around the Word and the sacraments, we have to acknowledge that the visible church even at its best is a frail and fallible human institution. We know that “we have this treasure in jars of clay” (2 Co 4:7). Recognizing how we fall far short of God's intentions, we must continually submit all that we say and do to the reforming light of God's Word. By itself the visible church is frail and by ourselves we are fallible. We are a work in progress; not yet what we should be nor what we shall be.

When we talk about Reformers, however, we recognize that they came in many “flavors.” There were the humanist reformers who never thought of leaving the church but only of restoring the early church—whatever that was. There were the Reformed theologians—Zwingli, Calvin, Bullinger, and Beza—who wanted to weed out everything that smacked of Romanism, including liturgical worship and ecclesiastical art. Radical reformers—Muentzer, Schwenkfeld, Menno Simons and the Anabaptists—wanted in one way or another to do

⁶ David Steinmetz. “The Intellectual Appeal of the Reformation,” *Theology Today*, January 1, 2001.

⁷ Harold Nebelsick, “Ecclesia Reformata Semper Reformanda,” *Reformed Liturgy and Music*, Spring 1984.

all of the above and only succeeded in antagonizing everyone because they wanted to separate themselves from society. They all were involved in changing the status quo.

In one sense the Lutheran reformers were no different. They often implemented change. But the real Lutheran Reformation did not automatically declare everything that previously existed to be bad. Change was instituted when there was a good reason for change. Rather than change being a personal experiment and experience, change was the result of two factors: what God requires and how God's people are well served.

Martin Luther was involved in change. In fact without exaggerating we can state that Luther's entire life was one of change. When he entered the monastery, Luther's life headed in a new direction. When he stood before the emperor and the princes at Worms, he demonstrated that he was no longer what he had been. Yet Luther was not always the instigator of change. When he was placed in protective custody at the Wartburg, others picked up the mantle of reformation and carried it to extremes.

During Luther's absence the formerly Lutheran and now increasingly radical reformer, Andreas Rudolf Bodenstein von Karlstadt, and others took it upon themselves to introduce significant changes in the way worship was carried out at Wittenberg. At the end of September 1521 the first changes in the practice of the mass began to take place. This was accompanied by intense discussions about the advisability, as well as the validity, of the changes. By the end of the month Melancthon had celebrated a private mass in his home at which the cup and the bread were given to all present. On October 6, Gabriel Zwilling preached in the Augustinian monastery against the celebration of private masses. As late as October 17, Karlstadt himself opposed the abolition of the mass.

Karlstadt considered himself to be the champion of the new movement now that Luther was gone. Through his public disputations and sermons he encouraged the people to take action. He announced that no one should attend mass. His preaching moved mobs to vandalize church property and harass priests. E. G. Schwiebert in his classic, *Luther and his Times*, comments:

Carlstadt's sincerity was unquestionable, and much of his preaching was in accord with the new movement, but he tried to introduce too drastic changes too rapidly. To a people still steeped in Catholic forms and doctrines he made such statements as: "Who partakes only of the bread, sins"; "Organs belong only to theatrical exhibitions and princes' palaces"; "Images in churches are wrong"; "Painted idols standing on altars are even more harmful and devilish."⁸

Karlstadt believed that Luther would approve of his actions. But that was not the case. Luther wrote concerning his former colleague:

It is written in Paul, 'If anyone aspires to the office of bishop, do not hinder him, for he desires a noble task' [I Tim. 3:1]. But to force one's way in is to do as Karlstadt did; during my absence he abandoned his citadel (that is, his pulpit), occupied my pulpit, changed the mass, etc.⁹ All this he did on his own authority. So he did also in Orlamünde,¹⁰ and he said he wanted to give the theologians some trouble.¹¹

⁸ E.G. Schwiebert, *Luther and his Times*, p 536.

⁹ While Luther was absent in the Wartburg Castle in the fall of 1521 and the spring of 1522, Andreas Karlstadt took it upon himself to introduce changes in Wittenberg that confused the people. Cf. LW 51, 69-100.

¹⁰ In 1524 Karlstadt introduced even more radical changes in the church in Orlamünde, near Wittenberg, and was expelled from electoral Saxony on account of them.

¹¹ Martin Luther, *Luther's Works*, Vol. 54 : Table Talk. Edited by Jaroslav Jan Pelikan, Hilton C. Oswald and Helmut T. Lehmann. *Luther's Works*. Philadelphia: Fortress Press, p 80. Hereafter simply LW 54,80.

Elector Frederick the Wise was disturbed by the news that Karlstadt had officiated at the Lord's Supper without clerical vestments and that he had encouraged the lay people to take the bread and the wine with their own hands directly off the altar. These changes upset the people too. Why had their old religious practices been permissible one day and wrong the next? Why were all the old customs being thrown out, along with their statues and paintings and stained glass?

Karlstadt, of course, was not the only one who promoted radical changes. Gabriel Zwilling, Thomas Muentzer, and the so-called Zwickau prophets all demanded that the old must be overthrown and that something new must replace it. The change was too much, too fast, with little or no explanation of why it was being done.

Finally, Luther returned from the Wartburg to restore order. On March 9, 1522, Invocavit Sunday, he preached the first of what became a series of eight sermons. With these sermons Luther addressed the changes that had taken place. These powerful gospel sermons restored tranquility and order almost immediately. In addition, Luther led his congregation away from fanatical enthusiasm back to the spirit of the gospel. He answered the questions that had weighed heavily on the hearts and consciences of so many.

In the first sermon Luther addressed the matter of the mass that had been violently attacked and frequently changed. He chided the people responsible:

Therefore all those have erred who have helped and consented to abolish the mass; not that it was not a good thing, but that it was not done in an orderly way. You say it was right according to the Scriptures. I agree, but what becomes of order? For it was done in wantonness, with no regard for proper order and with offense to your neighbor. If, beforehand, you had called upon God in earnest prayer, and had obtained the aid of the authorities, one could be certain that it had come from God. I, too, would have taken steps toward the same end if it had been a good thing to do; and if the mass were not so evil a thing, I would introduce it again. For I cannot defend your action, as I have just said.¹²

Now do not make a "must" out of what is "free," as you have done, so that you may not be called to account for those who were led astray by your loveless exercise of liberty

Let us, therefore, feed others also with the milk which we received, until they, too, become strong in faith. For there are many who are otherwise in accord with us and who would also gladly accept this thing, but they do not yet fully understand it—these we drive away. Therefore, let us show love to our neighbors; if we do not do this, our work will not endure. We must have patience with them for a time, and not cast out him who is weak in faith; and do and omit to do many other things, so long as love requires it and it does no harm to our faith.¹³

His first point is that change must be carried out in an orderly fashion, that is, patiently and with a loving concern for those whose faith is weak.

In his second sermon Luther concerned himself with images:

Now if I should rush in and abolish it by force, there are many who would be compelled to consent to it and yet not know where they stand, whether it is right or wrong, and they would say: I do not know if it is right or wrong, I do not know where I stand, I was compelled by force

¹² LW 51,72.

¹³ LW 53,73.

to submit to the majority. And this forcing and commanding results in a mere mockery, an external show, a fool's play, man-made ordinances, sham-saints, and hypocrites. For where the heart is not good, I care nothing at all for the work. We must first win the hearts of the people. But that is done when I teach only the Word of God, preach the gospel, and say: Dear lords or pastors, abandon the mass, it is not right, you are sinning when you do it; I cannot refrain from telling you this. But I would not make it an ordinance for them, nor urge a general law The Word would sink into the heart and do its work. Thus he would become convinced and acknowledge his error, and fall away from the mass; tomorrow another would do the same, and thus God would accomplish more with his Word than if you and I were to merge all our power into one heap. So when you have won the heart, you have won the man—and thus the thing must finally fall of its own weight and come to an end. And if the hearts and minds of all are agreed and united, abolish it. But if all are not heart and soul for its abolishment—leave it in God's hands, I beseech you, otherwise the result will not be good

In short, I will preach it, teach it, write it, but I will constrain no man by force, for faith must come freely without compulsion. Take myself as an example. I opposed indulgences and all the papists, but never with force. I simply taught, preached, and wrote God's Word; otherwise I did nothing. And while I slept [cf. Mark 4:26-29], or drank Wittenberg beer with my friends Philip and Amsdorf, the Word so greatly weakened the papacy that no prince or emperor ever inflicted such losses upon it. I did nothing; the Word did everything.¹⁴

A second point to keep in mind, Luther urged the leaders of his day to teach before changes were introduced. It is only through the Word that people will know God's will for their lives and only through the gospel that their hearts will be won. Ultimately, God's Word is responsible for any change that is beneficial and lasting.

In the fourth sermon Luther deals with our attitude toward change. Do not condemn something that may in fact be properly used.

[W]e must admit that there are still some people who hold no such wrong opinion of them, but to whom they may well be useful, although they are few. Nevertheless, we cannot and ought not to condemn a thing which may be any way useful to a person. You should rather have taught that images are nothing, that God cares nothing for them, and that he is not served nor pleased when we make an image for him, but that we would do better to give a poor man a goldpiece than God a golden image; for God has forbidden the latter, but not the former. If they had heard this teaching that images count for nothing, they would have ceased of their own accord, and the images would have fallen without any uproar or tumult, as they are already beginning to do¹⁵

[T]here are some who are still weak in faith, who ought to be instructed, and who would gladly believe as we do. But their ignorance prevents them, and if this were preached to them, as it was to us, they would be one with us. Toward such well-meaning people we must assume an entirely different attitude from that which we assume toward the stubborn. We must bear patiently with these people and not use our liberty Thus we, too, should order our lives and use our liberty at the proper time, so that Christian liberty may suffer no injury, and no offense be given to our weak brothers and sisters who are still without the knowledge of this liberty.¹⁶

¹⁴ LW 51,76.

¹⁵ LW 51,83.

¹⁶ LW 51,86.

Luther, in the fifth sermon in this series, once again cautioned reform-minded individuals not to take action without first instructing the people. He used as his example the manner in which they were receiving the Lord's Supper.

But you may say: We live and we ought to live according to the Scriptures, and God has so instituted the sacrament that we must take it with our hands, for he said, "Take, eat, this is my body" [Matt. 26:26]. The answer is this: though I am convinced beyond a doubt that the disciples of the Lord took it with their hands, and though I admit that you may do the same without committing sin, nevertheless I can neither make it compulsory nor defend it

Therefore no new practices should be introduced, unless the gospel has first been thoroughly preached and understood, as it has been among you

Now let us speak of the two kinds. Although I hold that it is necessary that the sacrament should be received in both kinds, according to the institution of the Lord, nevertheless it must not be made compulsory nor a general law. We must rather promote and practice and preach the Word, and then afterwards leave the result and execution of it entirely to the Word, giving everyone his freedom in this matter. Where this is not done, the sacrament becomes for me an outward work and a hypocrisy, which is just what the devil wants. But when the Word is given free course and is not bound to any external observance, it takes hold of one today and sinks into his heart, tomorrow it touches another, and so on. Thus quietly and soberly it does its work, and no one will know how it all came about.¹⁷

When it comes to the subject of change within the church, I know of no better place to begin than Luther's *Invocavit* sermons. Luther is not waxing eloquent here about some philosophical theory. The man is dealing with real life situations. His response is not based on his own thoughts and ideas; Scripture is his foundation. Here he alerts us to the dangers that are sometimes connected with change. Luther advises us on how to proceed in a God-pleasing manner. He warns us that in some cases even though the change is good, it can be carried out in a loveless fashion to the detriment of those who should be served.

However, the *Invocavit* sermons are not the only place where Luther addresses the matter of change. As the Reformation continued, Luther instituted a variety of changes. In particular, the Reformer has much to say about the way in which worship is conducted. Yet his liturgical writings are concerned more with the purpose and meaning of worship than with the simple ritual of worship. In his essay, *A Christian Exhortation to the Livonians Concerning Public Worship and Concord*, 1525,¹⁸ Luther explains the basic principles of liturgical reform without offering any actual orders of service or ecclesiastical forms. He recognized that people wanted uniform practices, but he feared that they misunderstood what unity meant.

But at the same time a preacher must watch and diligently instruct the people lest they take such uniform practices as divinely appointed and absolutely binding laws. He must explain that this is done for their own good so that the unity of Christian people may also find expression in externals which in themselves are irrelevant. Since the ceremonies or rites are not needed for the conscience or for salvation and yet are useful and necessary to govern the people externally, one must not enforce or have them accepted for any other reason except to maintain peace and unity between men. For between God and men it is faith that procures peace and unity.

¹⁷ LW 51, 88.

¹⁸ LW 53,45-49.

This I said to the preachers so that they may consider love and their obligation toward the people, dealing with the people not in faith's freedom but in love's submission and service, preserving the freedom of faith before God. Therefore, when you hold mass, sing and read uniformly, according to a common order—the same in one place as in another—because you see that the people want and need it and you wish to edify rather than confuse them. For you are there for their edification . . .

At the same time, I also ask the people to have patience and not to be astonished if differences in teaching and practice are caused by factions and sects. For who can stop the devil and his legions? . . . Thus among Christians there must also be factions and heretics who pervert faith and love and confuse the people.¹⁹

A desire for uniformity was also evident in the Reformation at Strasbourg. Under the leadership of Martin Bucer, the reforming preachers set as their first goal a standardized order of worship for the entire city. They hoped that they might also gain the cooperation of other reforming efforts in other cities.

Convinced that this worship ordinance had to be squarely rooted in the Bible, they presented their views to the theologians of Wittenberg and Zurich, hoping they could arrive at a conception that would be shared by the entire Reformation movement . . . In the booklet *Ground and Cause* (*Grund and Ursach*), printed in the last days of December 1524, Bucer explained and justified the changes in the worship service.²⁰

Martin Bucer, unlike Martin Luther, wanted the break with Rome to be evident in the way the worship service was conducted. Laypeople, he hoped, would notice that there was a difference.

A cool spirit of sternness and sobriety now pervaded worship in Strasbourg. Bucer did not just attack the idea that the Mass was a sacrifice; he also rejected priests' liturgical garments, the altar, and any form of ritual. Holy water and candles were to be done away with, as well as oil, salt, and consecrated water at baptisms. A simple table, prayers, psalms sung in German, and sermon—that was it. The Lord's Supper was celebrated every Sunday, and those attending were given the cup as well as the bread . . . The Strasbourg ministers were exceptionally rigorous in dealing with the numerous medieval church holidays, images, altarpieces, and side altars, abolishing them in their entirety. In this, the Strasbourg churchmen followed the model set by Zwingli and the church in Zurich.²¹

Luther did not consult other reformations to see what they were doing. He did, however, work with the pastors in his area. The earliest and shortest of his liturgical writings is the pamphlet *Concerning the Order of Public Worship*,²² 1523. On January 29, 1523, Luther promised to provide the congregation at Leisnig in Saxony with an “order for singing, praying, and reading.” The situation in Wittenberg made it necessary for him to fulfill this promise as quickly as possible. After he had rejected Karlstadt's violent reformation of worship, Luther could not just reinstate the traditional order of worship. He had to point out how the former way of worship, the Roman mass, was undesirable without supporting revolution. He had to spell out the basic principles of an evangelical reform of the liturgy and their practical application. This he did in *Concerning the Order of Public Worship*.

¹⁹ LW 53,48.

²⁰ Martin Greschat, *Martin Bucer: A Reformer and His Times*, p 63.

²¹ Ibid.

²² This pamphlet can be found in LW 53,9-14.

Karlstadt had discontinued the daily masses in Wittenberg, but nothing had been put in their place. As a result the church doors were no longer open on weekdays. The first thing that Luther does is to pinpoint what was wrong with the old way, that is, the abuses involved.

Three serious abuses have crept into the service. First, God's Word has been silenced, and only reading and singing remain in the churches. This is the worst abuse. Second, when God's Word had been silenced such a host of un-Christian fables and lies, in legends, hymns, and sermons were introduced that it is horrible to see. Third, such divine service was performed as a work whereby God's grace and salvation might be won. As a result, faith disappeared and everyone pressed to enter the priesthood, convents, and monasteries, and to build churches and endow them.

Now in order to correct these abuses, know first of all that a Christian congregation should never gather together without the preaching of God's Word and prayer, no matter how briefly, . . . when God's Word is not preached, one had better neither sing nor read, or even come together . . .²³

Other matters will adjust themselves as the need arises. And this is the sum of the matter: Let everything be done so that the Word may have free course instead of the prattling and rattling that has been the rule up to now. We can spare everything except the Word. Again, we profit by nothing as much as by the Word. For the whole Scripture shows that the Word should have free course among Christians.²⁴

Luther established the Word of God as the principal element in the service and provided for daily Matins and Vespers with Scripture reading and commentary.

Two other works offer more details and provide us with what might be properly called a "Lutheran liturgy." In *Concerning the Order of Public Worship* Luther had indicated the basic principles of liturgical reform and also had given a few hints for their implementation. But he had not provided a detailed outline of the evangelical service. Luther's friends outside Wittenberg were anxious to know more. Nicholas Hausmann,²⁵ the pastor in Zwickau, repeatedly asked Luther for a detailed order of service. To answer Hausmann and others Luther in December, 1523, published a step-by-step account of the changes he wanted to make in the evangelical Latin service, entitled *Formula Missae et Communionis pro Ecclesia Vuittembergensi, An Order of Mass and Communion for the Church at Wittenberg*.²⁶ He began by pointing out:

Until now I have only used books and sermons to wean the hearts of people from their godless regard for ceremonial; for I believed it would be a Christian and helpful thing if I could prompt a peaceful removal of the abomination which Satan set up in the holy place through the man of sin [Matt. 24:15; II Thess. 2:3-4]. Therefore, I have used neither authority nor pressure. Nor did I make any innovations. For I have been hesitant and fearful, partly because of the weak in faith, who cannot suddenly exchange an old and accustomed order of worship for a new and unusual one, and more so because of the fickle and fastidious spirits who rush in like unclean swine

²³ LW 53,11.

²⁴ LW 53,14.

²⁵ Hausmann (1478/79-1538) was a close friend of Luther and led the Reformation in Zwickau (1521) and Dessau (1532). Practical advice was urgently needed in Zwickau, where the enthusiasts were particularly strong. The Wittenberg riots of 1521/22 were largely due to the influence of three "prophets" from Zwickau; see LW 51,69; LW 48,364, n. 28.

²⁶ LW 53,17-39.

without faith or reason, and who delight only in novelty and tire of it as quickly, when it has worn off.²⁷

Luther then carefully explained what he was doing and why he was doing it.

We therefore first assert: It is not now nor ever has been our intention to abolish the liturgical service of God completely, but rather to purify the one that is now in use from the wretched accretions which corrupt it and to point out an evangelical use. We cannot deny that the mass, i.e., the communion of bread and wine, is a rite divinely instituted by Christ himself and that it was observed first by Christ and then by the apostles, quite simply and evangelically without any additions. But in the course of time so many human inventions were added to it that nothing except the names of the mass and communion has come down to us.²⁸

Here too Luther stressed the need for flexibility in the issue of outward form. Concerning the celebration of the Lord's Supper, Luther wrote:

The bishop should also be free to decide on the order in which he will receive and administer both species. He may choose to bless both bread and wine before he takes the bread. Or else he may, between the blessing of the bread and of the wine, give the bread both to himself and to as many as desire it, then bless the wine and administer it to all. This is the order Christ seems to have observed, as the words of the Gospel show, where he told them to eat the bread before he had blessed the cup [Mark 14:22-23]. Then is said expressly, "Likewise also the cup after he supped" [Luke 22:20; I Cor. 11:25]. Thus you see that the cup was not blessed until after the bread had been eaten. But this order is [now] quite new and allows no room for those prayers which heretofore were said after the blessing, unless they would also be changed.

Thus we think about the mass. But in all these matters we will want to beware lest we make binding what should be free, or make sinners of those who may do some things differently or omit others. All that matters is that the Words of Institution should be kept intact and that everything should be done by faith. For these rites are supposed to be for Christians, i.e., children of the "free woman" [Gal. 4:31], who observe them voluntarily and from the heart, but are free to change them how and when ever they may wish. Therefore, it is not in these matters that anyone should either seek or establish as law some indispensable form by which he might ensnare or harass consciences. Nor do we find any evidence for such an established rite, either in the early fathers or in the primitive church, but only in the Roman church. But even if they had decreed anything in this matter as a law, we would not have to observe it, because these things neither can nor should be bound by laws. Further, even if different people make use of different rites, let no one judge or despise the other, but every man be fully persuaded in his own mind [Rom. 14:5]. Let us feel and think the same, even though we may act differently. And let us approve each other's rites lest schisms and sects should result from this diversity in rites—as has happened in the Roman church. For external rites, even though we cannot do without them just as we cannot do without food or drink—do not commend us to God, even as food does not commend us to him [I Cor. 8:8]. Faith and love commend us to God. Wherefore here let the word of Paul hold sway, "For the kingdom of God is not meat and drink; but righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Ghost" [Rom. 14:17]. So the kingdom of God is not any rite, but faith within you, etc.

²⁷ LW 53,17.

²⁸ LW 53,20.

We have passed over the matter of vestments. But we think about these as we do about other forms. We permit them to be used in freedom, as long as people refrain from ostentation and pomp. For you are not more acceptable for consecrating in vestments. Nor are you less acceptable for consecrating without vestments. But I do not wish them to be consecrated or blessed—as if they were to become something sacred as compared with other garments—except that by general benediction of word and prayer by which every good creature of God is sanctified. Otherwise, it is nothing but the superstition and mockery which the priests of Baal introduced together with so many other abuses.²⁹

Luther's Latin liturgy was essentially a purified version of the traditional mass. The only German parts in it were the sermon and a few hymns. But this was not the final form of worship for Luther. He eventually wanted a completely German service. In fact German liturgies were already available. As early as 1522 Wolfgang Wissenburger in Basel and Johann Schwebel in Pforzheim had begun services in the vernacular. The same year Kaspar Kantz introduced and published a German mass. In 1523 Thomas Muentzer followed with a German Mass, Matins, and Vespers elaborately printed with all the original plainchant melodies. Other orders were introduced in Reutlingen, Wertheim, Königsberg, and Strassburg during 1524. With so many German masses there was again confusion over what was right and proper. Luther's friends therefore appealed to him to end the confusion and to submit his own German order of service. The delay was the result of Luther's desire to “do it right.” He recognized more clearly than his eager contemporaries that introducing a German mass was more than a matter of translating the text. It required the creation of new music adapted to the speech rhythm of the German language, and this work required time. Finally in 1526 the *Deudsche Messe und ordnung Gottis diensts, the German Mass and Order of Service*,³⁰ became available. It did for German what his earlier service had done for Latin.

It is interesting to note that Luther recognized that change just for the sake of having something new was not beneficial. He understood that what is “new” can quickly become “old.” Even as the German Mass was being published, he knew how quickly the “newness” of his new liturgy would wear off.

This is what I have to say concerning the daily service and instruction in the Word of God, which serves primarily to train the young and challenge the unlearned. For those who itch for new things will soon be sated and tired with it all, as they were heretofore in the Latin service. There was singing and reading in the churches every day, and yet the churches remained deserted and empty. Already they do the same in the German service. Therefore, it is best to plan the services in the interest of the young and such of the unlearned as may happen to come. With the others neither law nor order, neither scolding nor coaxing, will help. Allow them to leave those things in the service alone which they refuse to do willingly and gladly. God is not pleased with unwilling services; they are futile and vain.³¹

In discussing the matter of making changes in worship services, Luther constantly pointed people to Scripture. The changes were to do more than reflect his personal preferences. If Luther only wanted his own way, then he wasn't any better than the Roman Catholic bishops and pontiffs who had changed what God had instituted. We dare not change what is carefully laid out in Scripture. In his *Table Talks* he noted:

The papists boast that their authority in the church goes beyond the Word, and they use this argument: The apostles changed baptism, and therefore the bishops are permitted to change the sacraments.

²⁹ LW 53,31.

³⁰ LW 53,60-90.

³¹ LW 53,89.

The papists should be given this answer: Supposing the apostles did make some changes, there is nevertheless a great difference between an apostle and a bishop. An apostle is a person who is ordained by God immediately and called with gifts of the Holy Spirit, but a bishop is a person chosen by men for the preaching of the Word and the ordination of ministers in a certain place. Accordingly the apostles had authority, but this is not granted to bishops. So Elijah killed false prophets, but similar power is not accorded to any pastor at all. Paul therefore makes a clear distinction: His gifts were that some should be apostles, some doctors, some pastors.³²

There were certain practices of long standing that were best forgotten because they caused confusion. Yet that did not mean that the changes were made immediately. The “elevation” in the communion service is a case in point. In the Roman mass the priest, after consecrating the bread (and later, the wine), lifted it up so that the people could see it and adore it. In 1521 Luther wrote that “it would make no difference if there were no elevation, for that is something men have invented.”³³ Two years later he suggested that elevation could be continued “for the benefit of the weak in faith who might be offended if such an obvious change in this rite of the mass were suddenly made”³⁴ The argument against elevation was that it presupposed transubstantiation and implied the sacrifice of the mass. The argument for it was that it defied Zwingli and other radicals.³⁵ Johannes Bugenhagen omitted the elevation in the church orders he prepared.

Martin Bucer also initially retained the elevation of the elements in the Strasbourg liturgy. As late as November 1524, the bread and the wine were lifted during the reading of the words of consecration. In December 1524 that practice was dropped. Bucer provided a long explanation of this change, but he omitted any mention of the fact that Zwingli had spoken out against the elevation. Rather he stressed clear Bible teaching and the conviction that externals diverted one's attention from what was really important. He insisted:

Since we have become dead to all earthly statutes through the death of Christ and have received only two earthly ceremonies and signs from the Lord, baptism and the Lord's Supper, we therefore admonish the people to pay more attention to why he instituted them for us than to what they are in themselves.³⁶

Much later, in 1542, Luther approved the end of the elevation in the parish church in Wittenberg. Yet even in Spring 1543, one of his table companions suggested, “Doctor, in places where the gospel has not been preached so long one might, tolerate this patiently and not abolish elevation, especially where the people are not yet established in their faith.” To this Luther replied, “Yes, it's of little consequence to us. We don't care if it's abolished or not, provided the abuse—that is, the adoration—is not there. Some churches have seen that we have dropped the elevation [in Wittenberg] and have imitated us. We are pleased with that.”³⁷

In Luther's own day the Brandenburg Church Order of 1540 was often criticized for making too many concessions to Roman practice. For example, it provided for carrying the consecrated bread and wine from the altar to the sick and distributing the elements to them. When Luther was asked whether the sacrament can be carried to the sick,³⁸ he replied,

³² LW 54,287.

³³ LW 36,183.

³⁴ LW 53,28.

³⁵ LW 40,127-132.

³⁶ *Martin Bucers Deutsche Schriften*, 1:248, 15ff. Quoted in Greschat, p 64.

³⁷ LW 54,462.

³⁸ At issue was the question whether “consecration” changed the elements. In this conversation Luther informally approved of practices which he seemed to criticize elsewhere.

We don't think it should be done. To be sure, one must allow it for a while. The practice will probably be dropped, if only because they have no ciborium. What should be done about it? In our churches, too, there's debate about whether the [elements of the] sacrament should be carried to another altar for consecration. I put up with it on account of several heretics who must be opposed, for there are some who allow that it's a sacrament only while it's in use; what is left over and remains they throw away. That isn't right. We let somebody consume it. One must never be so precise [and say that the sacrament remains a sacrament when carried] four or five steps or when kept so-and-so many hours. What does it matter? How can one bless the bread for each and every one? We also retain the practice of elevating the sacrament on account of several heretics who say it must be done so. [*sic*] It must not be done so, for as long as one is engaged in the action even if it extends for an hour or two or even if one carries it to another altar or, as you do (he said this to Cordatus),³⁹ across the street, it is and remains the body of Christ.⁴⁰

When it comes to our worship practices is it necessary that everyone observe the same ceremony? That was a question on the minds of the people. Remember that they were accustomed to the mass being said in exactly the same words and in the same language no matter where they went. In spite of Luther's Latin and German services, there was still variety in Lutheran worship. Was Luther upset when people introduced different musical settings into his services? He responds:

But we do not hold that the notes need to be sung the same in all the churches. Let every church follow the music according to their own book and custom. For I myself do not like to hear the notes in a responsory or other song changed from what I was accustomed to in my youth. We are concerned with changing the text, not the music.⁴¹

Sometimes people are concerned about the language of worship. Our forefathers battled with the question of whether English could or should replace German as the language of the Sunday service. In some areas the question today is not what should be given up but should new languages be added. Luther's response to the question of language was simple and to the point, "I do not at all agree with those who cling to one language and despise all others."⁴²

In a similar fashion the question is sometimes asked about providing a variety of service forms. Should we stick with one liturgy for all our worship opportunities? This was also an issue for Lutherans of the sixteenth century. Luther commented on both days and forms for worship.

As for the other days which are called weekdays, I see nothing that we cannot put up with, provided the [weekday] masses be discontinued. For Matins with its three lessons, the [minor] hours, Vespers, and Compline *de tempore* consist—with the exception of the propers for the Saints' days—of nothing but divine words of Scripture. And it is seemly, nay necessary, that the boys should get accustomed to reading and hearing the Psalms and lessons from the Holy Scripture. If anything should be changed, the bishop may reduce the great length [of the services] according to his own judgment so that three Psalms may be sung for Matins and three for Vespers with one or two responsories.⁴³ These matters are best left to the discretion of the bishop. He should choose the best of the responsories and antiphons and appoint them from Sunday to Sunday throughout the week, taking care lest the people should either be bored by too

³⁹ Conrad Cordatus, an Austrian by birth, had been called to Brandenburg in 1539 to help introduce the Reformation there.

⁴⁰ LW 54,407. There are a number of doubtful points about the transmission of this table talk.

⁴¹ LW 53,327.

⁴² LW 53,62.

⁴³ Ordinarily, Matins had nine Psalms and eight responsories, Vespers and Compline eight Psalms and one responsory.

much repetition of the same or confused by too many changes in the chants and lessons. The whole Psalter, Psalm by Psalm, should remain in use, and the entire Scripture, lesson by lesson, should continue to be read to the people. But we must take care—as I have elsewhere explained—⁴⁴ lest the people sing only with their lips, like sounding pipes or harps [I Cor. 14:7], and without understanding. Daily lessons must therefore be appointed, one in the morning from the New or Old Testament, another for Vespers from the other Testament with an exposition in the vernacular.⁴⁵

Questions were also asked about the rites which were included in the regular services. Soon after he published his *Concerning the Order of Public Worship*, Luther issued a German translation of the order for baptism. Here the need for a vernacular form was especially pressing. He placed an emphasis on the intercession of the church on behalf of the child. Therefore Luther believed this called for prayers in which the parents and sponsors could intelligently participate. *Das tauff buchlin verdeuscht* (literally, “the baptismal booklet put into German”), *the Order of Baptism*,⁴⁶ 1523, follows the traditional Roman rite, except that the exorcism has been abbreviated, the Creed moved from its place before the Lord's Prayer to the questions, and the collect “*Deus patrum nostrorum*” (“God of our Fathers”) has been replaced by the so-called “Flood Prayer.”

In this earliest baptismal order, Luther, in order not to offend weak consciences, retained as many of the traditional ceremonies as possible. But both he and other reformers grew more and more impatient with the many man-made practices that clouded the essentials of the sacrament. In 1526 Luther, at the urging of his friend Nicholas Hausmann in Zwickau, revised the baptismal service by introducing some important changes and published *Das tauffbuchlin verdeuscht, auff's new zu gericht* (literally, “Baptismal booklet put into German, newly revised”), *The Order of Baptism Newly Revised*.⁴⁷ Here Luther omitted the exsufflation,⁴⁸ the first of the two opening prayers, the giving of salt, the first of the two exorcisms, the prayer after the exorcism, the salutation before the Gospel, the Ephphatha, the two anointings before and after baptism, and the placing of a lighted candle in the child's hands. The new order became immensely popular. Luther appended it to the *Small Catechism* (following *The Order of Marriage*),⁴⁹ and it was included in many other Lutheran church orders.

In one final area we see Luther both retaining the old and introducing the new. Luther's hymns are generally considered a significant contribution in hymnody, yet his interest in the chant is often overlooked. His hymns were readily accepted everywhere. They were translated into countless languages. They are known and loved the world over. His chants, however, remained largely unknown outside of Germany and some of them had fallen out of favor even in Germany by the end of the sixteenth century. From our perspective, his hymns seem to point forward, while his chants appear as relics of the past. But Luther himself would have felt no such distinction. Both in his hymns and in his chants he neither disdained the use of older traditional materials nor shrank from revolutionary changes in the interest of German speech rhythm and popular appeal. His great concern was benefiting the worship life of parishioners. Unlike the prevalent attitude in the Middle Ages, Luther wanted hymns and chants to be sung by the congregation as well as by the choir. Although this was a major change from tradition, it is one that we still enjoy today.

In conclusion, what can we say about the Reformers and how they dealt with change? Since more writing from Luther is available than from any other reformer, the following summation will be based mainly

⁴⁴ See LW 53,11-14.

⁴⁵ LW 53,37.

⁴⁶ LW 53,95-103.

⁴⁷ LW 53,106-109.

⁴⁸ A kind of exorcism by blowing with the breath. In Luther's 1523 baptismal order the service begins with the rubric, *The officiant shall blow three times under the child's eyes and shall say*: “Depart thou unclean spirit and give room to the Holy Spirit” (LW 53,96).

⁴⁹ See LW 53,110-115.

on what we can learn from him. Keep in mind that most Lutheran theologians of the Reformation era looked to Luther for guidance in this, as well as other areas, so looking to Luther gives a good overview of what Lutherans were doing. In many respects the Reformed theologians also would have a similar mindset about the principles of dealing with change, although their theology would have led them to different conclusions. The radical Reformers had such an abhorrence for traditional, that is, liturgical worship that there is little of benefit to be learned from them.

In preparing for the writing of this paper I spent time checking out how church leaders deal with change today. One quickly notes that there is as much variety evident on how to deal with change in the church today as there was in the sixteenth century. A host of books are in print, as well as web sites on the Internet, that offer help for “churches in transition.” Some of the advice they offer, however, is in stark contrast to what the Lutheran Reformers presented. In particular I found their procedure to be troubling. These “experts” would first decide what change needed to be made. Then they would determine how they would broach the subject to their parishioners. Then, and only then, did Scripture come into the picture. Just as preachers sometimes write a really “good” sermon and then search for a text—so these “experts” used the Scripture as a pretext to back decisions they had already made. With such a system it comes as no surprise that their results were questionable.

There is a German proverb that states, “To change and to change for the better are two different things.” When the Reformers faced change, they did not automatically view change as if it was demanded, as if the traditional was no longer useful. At the same time the Reformers did not view the traditional as something that had to be retained at all cost. They first asked themselves “what does Scripture have to say.” If Scripture had a clear answer to the issue, then they adapted accordingly. If what they were doing was not in opposition to Scripture, they tended to leave it alone. If Scripture required a change in what they were doing, they made a change.

What happens if a change falls into the realm of an adiaphoron? In that case the Reformers would ask, “How will this change benefit my people?” At times ecclesiastical customs that were in and of themselves not wrong were confusing. Change might clarify the situation. The language of worship certainly was an adiaphoron, but what benefit was there in worshiping in a language that people did not understand? How could people be edified in their worship when it was just so much “hocus pocus” to them? Yet, here too, it was evident that in different places, men came to different conclusions based on the circumstances in which they found themselves and the needs of their people.

Even when the Reformers knew a change was necessary, and they determined that it was beneficial, it is instructive to notice how they made the changes. They first taught the people what the Lord says. The people needed to know that the change wasn't just a reformer's whim. They needed to understand the reason for the change. When the people were allowed to compare the Word of the Lord with the actions of the church, they frequently saw the need for change themselves. Instruction is the first step toward introducing change.

Human nature, especially “older” human nature, doesn't like change. “Why change” is a question that must be addressed. Here patience is required. Luther had personally experienced how unsettling it was to find out that what you had been doing your entire life was in opposition to God's Word. Patience and instruction go hand in hand, if change is going to be introduced. Some people will need more time than others.

Exhibiting this patient instruction, the Reformers would gradually introduce change. Consider how Luther went from the Roman mass to a mass with the gross abuses removed to the Latin service to the German service. This was carried out over a number of years. The gradual implementation of these changes also gave him more time for instruction. Remember too that most of the instruction was done from the pulpit.

“Any change, even a change for the better, is always accompanied by drawbacks and discomforts.”⁵⁰ The Reformers were not afraid to evaluate the changes they initiated and evaluate the results of those changes. Did we accomplish what we set out to do? If a change was not mandated by Scripture and if it did not benefit the people, they were not too proud to return to the old way or to move on to "Plan B." Oh, certainly they had to battle their own pride, but they also listened to the brothers around them. They discussed what was happening, and they studied together. They restudied an issue, if necessary, in order to better understand what was the best way to go. Luther was not a Lone Ranger. It's an urban legend, perhaps of our own making, that Luther never consulted with his colleagues, never listened to what they said, or never recognized that someone else had a better way. It angered Luther whenever people came to him for a *Gutachten*⁵¹ rather than first studying what the Bible had to say on the subject.

By its very nature the Reformation involved change. The Reformation returned the Word of God to its rightful position of prominence and removed the anti-scriptural teachings and abuses that had crept into the church over the centuries. Changes were necessary. The removal of centuries of spiritual plaque was difficult. Change can be painful. But pastors who rightly handled the Word of God and shared that Word with their people had the confidence of their people. The people accepted change because they were convinced that God would bless them.

In an age that suggests everything new must be good and automatically dumps the old into the trash heap, there is much that we can learn from the Reformers. Our foundation remains the same as the one they had. We may have differences of opinion as to what the best “modus operandi” may be, but our goals must remain the same as those of the Reformers. We, first of all, learn what our Lord says and then, asking for his blessing, we work to provide what is most beneficial for God's people.

⁵⁰ Arnold Bennett, “*The Arnold Bennett Calendar*”

⁵¹ An evaluation or expert opinion that was sought to settle an issue under discussion.

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