

A Glance at History

While it is true to say that the origin of ‘a Christian service’ is lost in the fog of history, there is can be little doubt where the buck stops – or, rather, starts: the Fathers. After all, it was the Fathers who started the ruinous process of bringing the old covenant into the new, thereby setting in train fearful and lasting changes in the *ekklēsia* which culminated in the monstrosity of Christendom.¹ And it was not only the old covenant that the Fathers drew on; they even incorporated pagan ideas and practices into *ekklēsia* life.² But, as with so many corruptions of the *ekklēsia*, it was Rome who took these ‘novelties’ and developed them to their current level. The gangrene, alas, has spread much further than Rome. Anglicans, for instance, are unashamedly patristic. And nonconformist ‘church services’, even though most of those who attend do not realise it, are infected with the errors brought in by the Fathers.³ Christendom, not Scripture, sets the pattern, and has done so for 1800 years.⁴

Take ‘the house of God’. Whereas the assemblies of the early believers were more akin to the synagogue, even to the

¹ See my *Pastor*.

² ‘Sacraments’, for instance (see my *Infant*). The derivation of the word ‘church’ – as a building – is probably pagan, from ‘circle’, hence ‘kirk’. Think of pagan worship circles.

³ In other works, I have commented on the contemporary – alarming – growth of patristic material in Reformed and Baptist circles. John Calvin, who plays such a major role in this, for all the greatness of his contribution to the Reformation, was unable to rid himself of his medieval and, therefore, his patristic, background. See my *Infant*.

⁴ Take the service for the coronation of the British monarch as a graphic case in point. In what is practically a re-run of Solomon’s coronation over Israel by Zadok the priest and Nathan the prophet, titivated by snatches of the new covenant, the anointing with holy oil by a priest (the Archbishop of Canterbury) is supposed to turn a mere mortal into a demigod.

believers' use of the word (Jas. 2:2), the Fathers and Rome drew far more on the temple. Israel, under the old covenant, certainly had a building (the temple, the tabernacle before that) which was rightly called 'God's house' or dwelling (Ps. 42:4; 84:1-2; Matt. 12:4, for instance – there are countless references), but in the new covenant, the phrase is never used of any building. Never! Even in the days of the old covenant, of course, God did not actually dwell in a building, not even the temple – as Solomon confessed (1 Kings 8:27).

Coming to the present age, Christendom has given us the idea of the sacred building, 'the house of God'.

The Fathers not only introduced the idea of a building as 'God's house' into the language of the *ekklēsia*, but they also replaced the priesthood of all believers with the priesthood of the few (the clergy). This meant that believers were reduced largely to the role of 'attending church' as virtual spectators, watching the clergy do 'spiritual' work on their behalf.⁵

Rome developed this out of all recognition, not only reducing *ekklēsia* life to a spectator affair for the majority – 'the laity' – leaving it in the hands of a minority – 'the clergy', but making it sacerdotal;⁶ that is, the laity attended 'the house of God' to watch the clergy performing their religion for them, singing or saying Mass on their behalf.⁷

⁵ Take the word 'vicar' – substitute, deputy (compare 'vice'). A vicar is a virtual Christ, a substitute Christ; then a substitute working on behalf of the rest. Nonconformists might drop the title, but find it much harder to drop the concept – the love of titles being so deeply ingrained in man. See my *Pastor*.

⁶ Sacerdotalists delegate their religious observance into the hands of others, who they feel are better able, more qualified, to carry it out for them. In such a system, worship is a specialised task best left to a special class – priests. Under the old covenant, this was the God-ordained system; under the new, it is anathema. See my *Pastor; The Priesthood; Baptist Sacramentalism*.

⁷ So powerful a grip did this hold on the minds of many, the rich would leave money in their will to pay priests to go on saying Mass

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The laity's part was simply to attend, religiously observe the rites, and in this way receive the so-called 'benefits' of the priestly action of 'the man of God'.⁸ Place, festivals, special days (leading to the formation of a church calendar), vestments, priests, and such like, became vital, even though the new covenant knows nothing of such things.

Although the Reformers, principally John Calvin, recovered much of the new covenant, they stopped short in allowing the laity only token tasks in 'church services'. (They also kept the notion of 'sacraments'). In so-doing, they set in concrete a stilted, organised system, with no room for the Spirit to move believers to participate in mutual edification.⁹

In particular, the Reformers, taking the medieval idea of the 'church service' as something for men to attend in order to watch a priest perform the Mass, tweaked its climax so that the congregation now attended 'the service' in order to listen to a presbyter deliver an uninterrupted monologue. This has remained the basic evangelical pattern for centuries.

for them in specially erected chantries – places where Mass could be repeatedly and regularly chanted (said or sung) for the deceased, even with nobody but the priest present.

⁸ Indeed, the idea of 'the man of God', wearing the right clothes, and 'doing his stuff' is so deeply entrenched that some people think they benefit whether or not they attend his ministrations. However, if a man does not have the appropriate title, does not sport a clerical collar, the committal at a funeral is not 'proper' since he is not a 'proper minister'. The first of these two illustrations comes from a local TV news item; the second was said about me when I was responsible for the burial of a believer. And now, during the lockdown, this from MPs to the Church of England authorities: 'Therefore, we write to ask that you give permission, in line with the law and government guidance, for clergy to enter their church and to officiate at funerals within the church building, while observing necessary safety measures' (BBC website 5th May 2020). Note the double emphasis on clergy and building. It is only careful attention to such details which makes the performance 'right' and effective. So many think.

⁹ See my *The Priesthood; Pastor*.

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Consequently, both before and after the Reformation, believers became – and to this day, largely, remain – spectators not sharers, watchers or listeners not contributors. Spontaneity is considered dangerous; programmed institutionalism is safe.

All thinking people at the end of the 16th century were agreed that the medieval Church needed reform. Donald F.Durnbaugh used a telling illustration. Likening the medieval Church to a tree, Rome thought the removal of a few rotten or cankered branches was all that was needed. Humanists wanted the dead wood pruned to increase fruitfulness. The Reformers argued that the tree should be stripped back to the healthy trunk. The Radicals knew that the tree needed to be cut down to allow new life to shoot from the root.¹⁰

Christendom thus divided into two main branches – Roman (and Greek) and Protestant, leaving the Radicals to say: ‘A plague on all your houses’.¹¹ But, for the overwhelming majority, Christendom maintained its grip. And this meant that misuse of the old covenant continued its toxic influence in the *ekklēsia*. For Christendom (of whichever variety) is far more akin to the old covenant (with a considerable amount of paganism thrown in) than to the new. The Fathers started the ball rolling, Rome gave it considerable downward impetus, and while the Reformers recovered some of the new covenant, they left the *ekklēsia* far short of the new covenant.

As Stuart Murray said:

[The] Reformers rarely planted new churches. Their strategy was to achieve political and popular support to convert Catholic churches into Protestant churches. Reformation [they thought] would be achieved through biblical preaching, purging the churches of superstitious practices and improving the religious life of people and clergy alike. They abolished or reformed practices [which]

¹⁰ See Durnbaugh p213.

¹¹ See my *Battle*.

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earlier [that is, pre-Reformation] dissidents¹² had challenged – the mass, veneration of relics and images, pilgrimages, prayers to the saints and for the dead, and fast days. Scrutiny of traditional teaching also resulted in changes dissidents would have welcomed: reliance on grace rather than works for salvation; assurance of direct access to God without the necessary mediation of Mary or a priest; and rejection of the concept of purgatory. But reforming existing churches generally leads to less radical changes than planting new churches. The Reformers inherited an ecclesiastical system and assumptions about church life they generally chose not to question...

Consequently, many aspects of church life remained unreformed. Although the pope was dethroned as head of the church, the hierarchical and clerical structure that had governed the church throughout [the reign of] Christendom survived intact. They [that is, the Reformers] [certainly] adjusted terminology and organisational arrangements, but the clergy/laity divide persisted – despite talk of ‘the priesthood of all believers’ – and they replaced the monopoly of the priest with the monopoly of the preacher.¹³ Reformers restored preaching to church services... but clerical performances and monologue sermons still dominated services, with congregations participating little more than when their churches were Catholic. As Anabaptist... Hans Hut complained: ‘Our new evangelicals, the tender scribes, have thrown the pope, the monks, and the parsons from their thrones and they establish – God have mercy on us – a worse popery than before over the poor man’...¹⁴

The Reformation caused enormous upheaval and produced lasting divisions in the church and European society. But actually nothing much really changed, at least in relation to Christendom. All the defining structures, attitudes, methods, reflexes and processes were still in place. Those who regard the Reformation as a turning point in European history, restoring true doctrine and order to the church, will find this assessment surprising [if not shocking – DG]. But

¹² See my ‘The Long Night’ in *New-Covenant Articles Volume 6*.

¹³ See my *Pastor*.

¹⁴ Anticipating the depth of feeling in John Milton’s observation that ‘new presbyter’ had replaced ‘old priest’.

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[the] Reformers, despite initially considering more radical changes,¹⁵ rejected this option, validated Christendom and continued to operate within this system. They refined it, fractured it, and shifted the balance of power within it towards the secular authorities. But they were not prepared to dismantle it. And they strenuously and violently opposed Anabaptists for their temerity in disagreeing with them...

Though Anabaptists did not abandon sermons, they were wary of monologues and criticised the lack of participation in Catholic and Protestant churches, arguing from Scripture that this was wrong. An Anabaptist tract, quoting Paul's instruction in 1 Corinthians 14 that when the church gathered all should contribute, complained: 'When someone comes to church and hears only one person speaking, and all the listeners are silent... who can or will regard or confess the same to be a spiritual congregation?' Many congregations moved away from monologue towards a more interactive style... [Sadly], a drift back towards more passive forms of church life is apparent as the movement aged, but there are glimpses later in the 16th century of [a] multi-voiced community.¹⁶

¹⁵ For Martin Luther's problems in this area, see my *Battle*.

¹⁶ Murray pp155-156,159-160,168-169.