

Reformation ... How it affected people

3. Communion

5.11.2006

Today, in our series on the Reformation, we come to the topic of the Lord's Supper, or as it was then known, the Mass.

Most books about the reformation and Communion, focus on the theological issue of "in what way is Jesus present in the bread and wine, if at all?" It was very significant, and many sermons and tracts at the time taught various views. Yet other changes were also extremely significant for the people in church.

Have you ever been in a church service where you could not understand a word? Some find it exciting, others find it frustrating.

I have been to services in Korean, Armenian and Mandarin. I did not know what was said or sung, and I tried to guess what was happening.

Imagine going to church and not being able to understand a word every wk. Imagine if the leader rattled through the service as fast as he could in a foreign language. Would you keep going?

From 400 to 1500AD, western Christians had a Latin Bible, and everything in church was said in Latin. Any translation to another language was thoroughly discouraged and met with brutal opposition. Eventually it was popularly believed that Latin was THE language of Christianity, and the Bible was written in Latin, and God spoke Latin. It did not matter what language you spoke, every church allied to the pope, was in Latin.

Because they did not understand the language, most people amused themselves in church. The more devout would read a devotional booklet they brought, or stared at the windows or at the colours and statues if they could not read or afford the manuals. If the church had a monastery, choirs of monks sang the appropriate plain songs. Special festivals were popular. Many people would buy or trade goods during the services. Many churches and cathedrals were treated as markets.

But during each Mass a sanctuary bell would

ring up the front. Everyone stopped what they were doing, and all eyes focused on the priest.

He would raise the bread and say some special words. In Latin he would say "This is my body given for you." They believed that as he said it, the bread changed into the body of Christ, and Jesus was re sacrificed on the altar.

So he said the words as fast as possible, lest he die half way through, and it not be a proper mass. To the parishioner, the rapid Latin sounded a bit like "hocus corpus". In several protestant plays in the 1520s-1530s mocked the idea of the bread and wine turning physically into the body and blood of Christ, by calling it 'hocus pocus' ... the magicians' word.

Once the priest was ready, those who had survived a gruelling confession during the week, could move to the front, stay standing, open their mouth, poke out their tongue and received a wafer, but no wine.

For the bulk of the parishioners, it did not matter if they received the wafer. For to them, the important issue was that the priest offered the mass. To them, it meant that the benefits of the mass could be applied to them, or to the person who had paid for it, or their dead relative.

But in the 1520's, things changed. The Reformation swept through Europe and England with extreme changes for people in the pews.

In the mid 1970's, some of you may have experienced a small taste of the enormous changes they faced in the 1500s. In the Church of England in Australia we got a new Prayer Book, new translations of the Bible, and new styles of church music. Many who did not like change were threatened, alarmed and hurt. Maybe you were (or someone you know). I still remember a Sydney news headline "Leave our prayer alone!" when the new version of the Lord's Prayer was introduced.

If that occurred after 300 years, imagine the cry about change after 1100 years!

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The service was now in their local language. People understood what was said. They did not have to amuse themselves in services because they could understand. Another benefit flowed, namely that people began to believe that God could understand them and hear their prayers without a special religious language.

As they understood the way God forgives, which I spoke about 2 weeks ago, the need for attending the confessional before communion was replaced with a general confession which the whole congregation said together. So more people began to go forward for communion.

When they went forward, they were given real bread, not special religious wafers, AND they were given wine.

How they received the bread and wine varied. Some churches had people stand, others sat down and some knelt. In some, the minister gave it, in others the elders did, in others they passed it to each other.

Where they received the bread and wine also varied. Most Protestant churches replaced the marble altar with a wooden table, because no sacrifice was being made. In Zurich and England, the table was placed in the middle of the nave. In Zurich, males sat on one side facing females on the other. In England, the table returned to the wall of the chancel, and a communion rail was introduced in the 1600s.

The given reason was to stop people using the table as a hat and cloak stand when they came into church.

In 1662, the new Book of Common Prayer introduced a new rubric or rule, called the black rubric. It required to kneel at the rail for communion. Many hated it because they saw it as a sign of adoring the bread and wine. Yet the given reason for railing off the table was because on one Christmas Eve, a dog grabbed the bread and ran off. So the Table was railed to prevent dogs from coming to the table.

The Reformation occurred as people discovered what the Bible taught, and they then applied the changes they saw as necessary to what they did in their Christian lives. This also meant that teaching and applying the word of God in preaching became a more important focus than the communion service. Prayer and preaching services grew in popularity, so that in some churches, communion was only held four times a year.

As the Biblical view of saints was understood more, there was no need to vary services to appeal to various "saints". Forms of service became more predictable. In England the prayer book was introduced to bring change, but also to help teach people what God intends for them.

And as people understood the priesthood of all believers, clergy became teaching elders, Communion was no longer something that a priest did on behalf of the dead, or that people merely watched. It became a service for people to share together in.

The massive change that occurred in Christian practice and beliefs in the early 1500s was enormous. Yet the changes helped them to understand more and to benefit more for their daily living.

When things change, or when you see differences in other churches, ask questions. We need to keep thinking about how and why we do things. We are not to change simply for change's sake. We need to consider whether there are good reasons for the differences. We also need to take care that what we do does not deny what we believe.