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On Change in Theology

MARTIN H. FRANZMANN

The word "change" tends to have an ominous sound for many in the church who have long sung:

Change and decay in all around I see.

O Thou, who changest not, abide with me!

This holds with special force for a confessional-conservative church which is, with good reason, appreciative of and jealous for its heritage; and such The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod is, thank God. The question "have we changed?" is charged with emotion, and at least one component of that emotion is one that must be honored and taken seriously: the element of holy fear lest that one talent which is death to hide be lodged with us useless.

Yet change is inevitable. It is as inevitable as history. "You cannot dip your foot into the same river twice." And in the divinely purposed history of the church, change is doubly inevitable. Wherever there is genuine church, there is life, growth, and ministry. And these all necessarily involve change. Life is mobile; only death is definitive in this age. Growth involves change; only the inert is stable. And the ministry of love involves change;

This essay discusses and evaluates various "changes" observable in the theology and life of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod. While not a "faculty paper," the essay has had the benefit of discussion by the faculty of Concordia Seminary, St. Louis, to which it was originally presented in October 1966. The author, Martin H. Franzmann, is chairman of the department of exegetical theology at Concordia Seminary.

only the completely selfish man remains inflexibly constant. The life of the church has a built-in forward tension, a forgetting what lies behind and a straining forward to what lies ahead. The Letter to the Hebrews pictures the perils of nongrowth and non-change in such terrifying terms that Martin Luther was moved to question its canonicity.

Change is not only inevitable; it is desirable. One cannot avoid it; one can and must analyze and control it. Our church has taken an astonishing number and variety of changes in its stride. Linguistic, cultural, liturgical, architectural, administrative, homiletical, evangelistic, journalistic changes have been accepted and approved with a virile aplomb remarkable in so traditional-conservative a body as ours. It is specifically *theological* change that is causing anxiety and with good reason. For here the One who changes not, the One on whose abiding with us our life depends, is directly and patently involved; here the hazard of change is greatest and most obvious. The anxiety is intensified by the fact that men are uncertain about the nature of the change that is going on. What *is* happening theologically? Where will this lead? What is implicit in a single seemingly innocent change? What greater, and perhaps harmful, changes will follow in its train? Then, too, the unevenness of the change adds to the tension; if we were all undergoing this same change at the same rate, we should probably not even notice that there is a change going on. That would be a bad thing; for then the

change would go unchallenged and unexamined, which is always a dangerous business.

If one examines the present theological changes in our church, one thing is obvious immediately: the changes are taking place within well-defined limits. Those limits are defined by a common commitment to the Scriptures and the Lutheran Confessions. The statement of purpose in the catalog of Concordia Seminary, Saint Louis, for example, affords evidence of this. Over the years 1932 to 1966 the statement grows more detailed and more explicit (the 1932—33 catalog has only: "Its purpose is to prepare men for the ministry in the Evangelical Lutheran Church."), but the Lutheran commitment remains constant, whether implicit as in 1932—33, or explicit as from 1938—39 onward. Even the four traditional disciplines hold their traditional place; if anything, the organic interrelationship of the four is more carefully explicated in the more recent statements. That this commitment has not become a formality is clear from the character and substance of current theological discussion: Scripture, Exegesis, Hermeneutics, the witness of the Confessions themselves—these constitute the axes around which discussion and debate revolve. The exact character and the total implications of the commitment in given cases are subject to debate; the commitment itself is not. Athletic metaphors may claim the precedent of Paul: Not even the most charitable observer could deny that we have some erratic and inaccurate tennis-playing on our courts or that the umpires are sometimes distracted or myopic; but the court is the same as in years gone by, and the rules have not been changed.

We should, then, be able to inquire into the nature of the change with some degree of composure. Indeed, we must do so if such an examination is to have any value for the church. The scream is an inaccurate form of communication. What is the nature of current theological change in our circles? A knowledgeable and perceptive observer within our church (not a member of a theological faculty) has analyzed the "shifts since the early fifties" and the "possible dangers" attendant upon them. He sees a shift from an accent on systematics to an accent on exegesis, with the possible danger that the clarity and force of our doctrinal formulations may be replaced by more ambiguous, open-ended formulations that make our doctrinal stand more flexible and negotiable. He sees a shift in accent from that on the divine side of Scripture to that on its human side, which may constitute a threat to the recognition of the divine authority of the Bible. He sees a shift from asserting the Scripture as absolute truth to an accent on the "conditioned" character of truth as communicated in history through human language, with the concomitant danger that the truth of the Scriptural witness may be relativized. He sees a shift from emphasis on the rejection of error to an openness toward diversity and creative tensions within confessional bounds, with the associated danger that the genuinely Lutheran confessional forthrightness may be lost. He sees a shift from the accent on theology as supreme ("queen of the sciences") to an accent on the "relative worth" of theology, with the attendant danger that theology and the natural sciences come to be viewed as equal partners.

This listing is not complete but it will

serve to illustrate the major concerns. Whether one agrees with this observer's analysis in detail or not, one must admit that it does reflect adequately the concerns of many of those in our church who are apprehensive about the changes that are taking place. In general it would seem to be true that our theology is today more directly and explicitly "exegetical" than formerly; there is today a larger sense of the historical qualification in both exegesis and dogma; our asseverations are more frequently qualified and our polemics less sweeping than they tended to be in the past; a greater ecumenical openness is so obvious that it hardly needs mentioning. Whether this "change" amounts to "change and decay," that is the question that needs to be raised and answered.

A part of the answer will have to be a genetic analysis of the shift or change; our historians might well concern themselves with this aspect of the question. Even one who is not a professional historian will note that this theological change is part of a larger change in our church and in our seminaries and must be evaluated in this larger setting: the Americanization of our church, our increasing ecumenical contacts through theological conversations, the military chaplaincy, interchurch cooperation, campus ministries, and so on. For all its solid worth and inalienable values, our 17th-century-oriented dogmatic theology was not at every point big enough or flexible enough to meet all the new demands put upon it. Many of us found this needed extra greatness and pliancy in the Lutheran Confessions and thus in the Scriptures themselves. The growth of our seminary faculties brought together a more variegated array of talents, men from vari-

ous synodical backgrounds, men who had received advanced training in schools of varied traditions. This growth made possible a higher degree of specialization, with greater scholarly depth, sometimes purchased at the cost of the lopsidedness characteristic of the specialist. The ideal of the solid-front faculty underwent some modification; the ideal of unity in diversity, after the manner of Ephesians 4, replaced an earlier more monolithic ideal.

Another genetic factor to be reckoned with might be termed the Shrinking Dogmatic Hump. Early in the transition from German to English, the three-volume Pieper became a one-volume compendium (excellent, but still a reduction). And this is in a way symbolic of what happened to dogmatics. There was a shrinkage (one that the church eventually recognized when it called for the translation of the complete Pieper); and as the dogmatic map grew less detailed, the Biblical and historical landscape inevitably exercised a stronger attraction.

The third genetic factor is therefore closely connected with the second, namely the reemergence of the venerated Bible. The Bible was known, venerated, and used in the "catechism church," as one of our older pastors called The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod (with no intention to criticize). But as the recent history of the Roman Catholic Church has again demonstrated, give the Bible an inch and it will sooner or later take a thousand ells. The catechism church will sooner or later almost inevitably become a Scriptural-exegetical church. (The growing importance of history represents a parallel phenomenon.)

This rough-and-ready analysis of the

genesis of the change no doubt needs refinement and is subject to modification. But whatever its genesis, the change is there. Exegesis as an historically-oriented discipline is very much in the center of things. It is there, no longer merely as the handmaiden of dogmatics (to put it very crudely) but with a life and a direction of its own. To illustrate sketchily: Exegesis is conscious of the embeddedness of Scripture in the history and *worship* of the people of God. "Biblical theology" (a relatively new discipline among us) takes this embeddedness seriously; it sets out to do consciously and systematically what the worshiping church has always done "instinctively" when it unites the Psalter, the Old Testament Lesson, the Gospel, and the Epistle in one act of teaching and worship. Historical exegesis is more directly oriented to worship than to dogmatics.

It is therefore more directly oriented toward proclamation also. Exegetical study in our tradition was, in general, oriented toward dogmatics; the Hermeneutics Study authorized by the Detroit Convention is expressly oriented toward proclamation. The difference is not so slight as it might seem at first glance, for the proclaimer comes to the text with a question that differs from that of the systematician. He does not ask, "What does the text prove?" but "What is God up to here? What is being *proclaimed* here?" For example, the dogmatician may not make much of the fact that the Apocalypse of John is, both in form and intent, a *letter*; for the exegete-proclaimer this fact is of major importance and will color his interpretation of the whole and of its parts.

Is this change *and decay*? A theological trend that has a nose for the smell of

history (genuine history, in which God is Lord with tyrannous exclusiveness), alive to the doxological-worshipful function of theology, tensed toward proclamation—if "church in mission" concerns us as much as we say it does, we cannot call this trend decay. It has given many of us a new and deepened appreciation of our Confessions; we find them so in tune with the vibrations of the Scriptures, so provocatively forthright in setting up an evangelical scale of values, so discriminating in their hermeneutical decisions that they seem to us more modern than today's gaudy paperback. This trend has certainly not led us to a depreciation of systematic theology; we have found that systematics has its roots in the New Testament itself, in the Old Testament for that matter; and we are convinced that systematics has an indispensable function and a bright future. The historical discipline has grown steadily more prestigious and influential as this trend has asserted itself; indeed, it is difficult to determine what is cause and what is effect here. And a theological trend that sees in the Word a "practical," get-things-done power of God is bound to create a holy alliance between exegesis and the practical discipline. It is not accidental that some of the first experiments in team-teaching at Concordia Seminary, St. Louis, have teamed up exegetes and homileticians.

Every change involves a risk, man being what he is in this time where the aeons overlap. And there are dangers in this trend. There are those that are endemic in the shaded domains of exegetical scholarship: the one-sidedness of the specialists, misplaced or perverse ingenuity, parallelomania, pegomania (a mad passion for non-extant sources), behind-the-beyond histori-

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cal thinking (explaining the obscure by means of the unknown), and so on. These are not to be underrated; but the Bible has a way of arising every so often and shaking them off, as a damp dog shakes off water. The paths of exegetical scholarship are inevitably wet with the drip of discarded hypotheses. There is one major threat, however, insidiously pervasive. That is the secularization of historical thought and

historical inquiry. Our God is more than Aristotle's First Cause Uncaused; but if we lose sight of Him amid our carefully collected clutter of subordinate causalities, we shall have regressed to a point somewhere behind Aristotle. To this problem theology must address itself with all the vigor and acumen of which it is capable.

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