

LUTHER'S OTHER MAJOR LITURGICAL REFORMS: 3. THE TRAUBÜCHLEIN

“Many lands, many customs says the proverb.” It was with this common saying that Luther introduced the text of his proposed marriage Rite of 1529, entitled *Ein Traubeuchlin Fuer Die Einfeltigen Pfarherr*.¹ However, as Paul Strodach has aptly commented, it could have been narrowed down to “Many customs in this land”, for local, provincial, and national practices and uses in connection with marriage rites were many.² It would seem that in his marriage rite the Wittenberg Reformer was concerned to respect the many secular customs, and neither intrude upon them, nor sweep them aside. On the other hand, it is quite clear that he was concerned to reform the existing ecclesiastical ceremonies and their accompanying liturgical texts.

The development of marriage rites in the West is far from clear, and remains a neglected field of liturgical study.³ Marriage was basically a domestic affair, and christians followed the same customs and ceremonies as their pagan neighbours with the exception of pagan religious rites and excesses. According to Ignatius of Antioch, the bishop's approval was necessary, and according to Tertullian, a eucharist was celebrated.⁴

According to Strodach,⁵ the marriage rite in Teutonic lands in early Middle Ages was recognised entirely as a family function. After preliminary matters, such as contract payment, dowry arrangement, etc., had been arranged satisfactorily, the contracting parties plighted their troth in the presence of the father of the bride, or her guardian, or another relative. This consisted first in a statement by the groom, that he took N.— to be his wife. The bride on her part replied with similar words. Then a ring was placed on the fourth finger of the bride's left hand by the groom, and thereupon at the word of the father, or guardian, they joined right hands, testifying to their purpose; and with a statement of the fact of their mutual consent the ceremony was completed.

The earliest stratum of the marriage liturgy was the Nuptial Blessing which is found in the Gregorian Sacramentary, and originally it was an exclusively bridal blessing. Gradually the civil ceremonies and family functions came to be presided over by a priest, and blessings together with a Nuptial Mass made up the composite marriage rite. The usual medieval rite consisted of the following:

1. *Introduction*: Vernacular bidding about prohibited degrees, and banns.
2. *Consent*: Vernacular questions about willingness, and vows.
3. *Blessing of ring* with versicles and responses.
4. *Giving of ring* and pronouncement that the marriage was complete.
5. *Concluding Prayers* including *Deus Abraham*.
6. *Nuptial Mass* with Nuptial Blessing after the Canon of the Mass.

However, the provisions actually contained in the medieval books differed considerably, and the rite outlined in the *Sarum Manual* is much more prolific than, for example, those of the German *Agendas* edited by Schönfelder.⁶ In the *Magdeburg Agenda* of 1497, under the heading “The Blessing of the Groom and Bride”, the following items were provided:

Psalm 67
Versicles and responses.
Deus Abraham
The Blessing of the Bride.
The Peace.⁷

The vernacular vows, the blessing of the ring, and the provisions for the Nuptial Mass — all of which formed part of the rite — were not actually given here.

Furthermore, it is important that marriage had come to be regarded as a sacrament.

Luther on Marriage

Although in his writings Luther considered the subject of marriage, his main concern seems to have been to deny its sacramental character, and to attack the Canon Law in which it had become enmeshed. Thus in his *Babylonian Captivity of the Church*, 1520, he asserted:

It is not only without any warrant of Scripture that matrimony is considered a sacrament, but it has been turned into a mere mockery by the very same traditions which vaunt it as a sacrament.⁸

Luther argued that *sacramentum* used in connection with marriage meant simply “mystery”, being an allegory of Christ and the Church, and not sacrament in the technical sense. But in the same work, as in his *Address to the Nobility* of the same year, and *The Estate of Marriage*, 1522, he attacked Canon Law regulations on marriage, in particular prohibited spiritual degrees and clerical celibacy.

With regard to a theology of marriage, it would seem that Luther could have endorsed the theology of the opening exhortation of the marriage rite of the *Book of Common Prayer*.⁹ Marriage is a divine kind of life because it was established by God Himself (*Lectures on Genesis*, 1535, commenting on 2: 22). But the main reason for its institution was for procreation (ibid, commenting on 4: 1; *A Sermon on the Estate of Marriage*, 1519; *Sermon at the Marriage of Sigismund von Lindenau*, 1545), and although men and women marry for many reasons, Luther pointed out that according to 1 Corinthians 7: 1-2, an important reason was to avoid fornication (*Commentary on 1 Corinthians*, 1523). A comment on Genesis 2: 18 suggested that he thought that the sexual side of marriage was to be regarded with some shame. However, essentially marriage was a "covenant of fidelity":

The whole basis and essence of marriage is that each gives himself or herself to the other, and they promise to remain faithful to each other and not give themselves to any other: By binding themselves to each other, and surrendering themselves to each other, the way is barred to the body of anyone else, and they content themselves in the marriage bed with their one companion. (*A Sermon on the Estate of Marriage*, 1519.)

According to Luther the estate of marriage consists in consent having been freely and previously given one to another. The generally accepted formula was "I am thine, thou art mine". Furthermore he defended the German custom of an agreement to marry in the future, followed by intercourse, as constituting the marriage. According to Catholic understanding, the vow should have been in the present tense: *accipio te in uxorem*. Luther pointed out that in Germany the future tense was used to mean and express the present (*On Marriage Matters*, 1530).

From the introduction to the *Traubüchlein*, it is also apparent that for Luther the actual espousals and customs of marriage belonged to the sphere of the State, and not to the Church:

Since marriage and the married estate are worldly matters, it behooves us pastors or ministers of the church not to attempt to order or govern anything connected with it, but to permit every city and land to continue its own use and custom in this connection. Some lead the bride to the church twice, both evening and morning, some only once. Some announce it formally and publish the banns from the pulpit two or three weeks in advance. All such things and the like I leave to the lords and the council to order and arrange as they see fit. It does not concern me.

The basis for providing a marriage rite was quite simply that one was expected:

But when we are requested to bless them before the church or in the church, to pray over them, or also to marry them, we are in duty bound to do this. For this reason I have desired to offer this advice and form to those who do not know anything better, in case they should desire to follow our custom in this matter.

The provisions of the Traubüchlein

Luther's *Traubüchlein* consisted of three parts:

1. The publication of banns, giving chance for any impediment to be alleged.
2. The marriage proper, which took place at the entrance of the church in public. This fulfilled the civil requirements, and consisted of the declaration of consent, the giving of rings, the joining of right hands, and the pronouncement of Matthew 19: 6.¹⁰
3. The Church Blessing. This took place before the altar. No provision was made for a Nuptial Mass, and the traditional blessings were omitted. This section consisted of a reading (Genesis 2: 18, 21-24) and then an exhortation built upon scriptural material concerning marriage — its divine institution, holiness, mutual relations, burdens, comfort and blessing. Luther himself was accustomed to preach a sermon at this point, dwelling more extensively on the christian meaning of marriage. The Church rite concluded with a blessing which seems to have been the Reformer's equivalent to the Nuptial Blessing:

Here he shall spread forth his hands over them and pray thus:

O God, who hast created man and woman and hast ordained them for the married estate, hast blessed them also with fruits of the womb, and hast typified therein the sacramental union of thy dear Son, the Lord Jesus Christ, and the Church, his bride: We beseech thy groundless goodness and mercy that thou wouldst not permit this thy creation, ordinance, and blessing to be disturbed or destroyed, but graciously preserve the same; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

In comparison with the medieval customs and rites, Luther's *Traubüchlein* retained the public declaration of intent to marry (the banns), and the public exchange of vows. However, the

versicles and responses, the blessing of the ring and benedictions were omitted from this part of the ceremony. The Nuptial Mass was replaced by the Word and a prayer. In terms of comparative liturgy, the rite was indeed a radical revision; yet as Strodach has commented:

This Office is wholly evangelical; it is built of Scriptures and prayer . . . the Benediction of the Word and Prayer which Luther in another writing says is the only right benediction.¹¹

Luther as a Liturgical Writer: a concluding note

It has been the purpose of our series of studies on Luther's major liturgical compositions¹² to consider the Reformer's work in the light of his own criteria rather than simply in terms of comparative liturgy or a general theology of worship. The studies have been concerned to test how far Luther can be accused of working recklessly with a pruning knife, and how far he worked with a positive theology. Our studies may be summarised as follows.

In his treatment of the *Taufbüchlein* and the Litany, Luther left much of the traditional medieval rites intact; certain pieces were removed to allow the Gospel to speak for itself. Although in his reform of the Mass much of the traditional material remained, when we turn to the Canon of the Mass — as also the Ordination and Marriage rites, we find a radical revision of the traditional liturgies. However, it would be quite erroneous to suggest that Luther's treatment was simply impatient destruction; he remains Luther, not Karlstadt or Zwingli or Farel. These latter reforms were designed to express a theology of salvation, not simply destroy medieval theology. Only in the Divine Office does Luther seem to have no definite theology to express, other than that "prophesying, teaching and admonition" were the centre of the service.

Certainly Luther had not the expertise of the modern liturgical scholar, and his knowledge of liturgy and his ability in liturgical compilation were less than Archbishop Cranmer's. But Luther was concerned with patristic liturgy, nor with literary ability. He would have been somewhat nonplussed by the plaudits of those who pay tribute to his conservatism, or his apparent cavalier treatment, as though either were the marks of liturgical merits. Our studies suggest that the Wittenberg Reformer's approach to liturgy was from the standpoint of the belief that liturgy is concerned to express the grace of God. We suggest that such a standpoint is correct, and that Luther may rightly be remembered as a competent liturgiologist.

NOTES

1. Text in Vol. 53 of Luther's Works edited by J. Peliken and H. T. Lehmann. Unless otherwise stated, quotations are from this edition.
2. Paul Z. Strodach, in *Works of Martin Luther*, Philadelphia 1915-1943, Vol. 6, p. 219.
3. Part of the work has been undertaken by K. Ritzer, *Le Mariage dans les Eglises Chretiennes du IER au IX^e Siecle*, Paris 1970 (*Les Orandi* 44). Dr Kenneth Stevenson is now undertaking study in this field, and I am indebted to him for his guidance on the basic structure of the rite represented in the medieval books.
4. Ritzer, op. cit., pp. 81-123.
5. P. Z. Strodach, op. cit., p. 220.
6. Ed. A. Jefferies Collins, *Manuale Sarum*, Henry Bradshaw Society 1958; A. Schönfelder, *Liturgische Bibliothek*, Paderbon 1904.
7. I am indebted to the Deutsche Staatsbibliothek, Berlin, for supplying xerox copies of this part of the Magdeburg Agenda.
8. *Luther's Primary Works*, ed. H. Wace and C. A. Buchheim, 1896.
10. A composition reflecting medieval scholastic theology; the same theology is found in *The King's Book*, 1543.
10. Luther did allow that this pronouncement did not imply that all marriages were therefore *a priori* joined by God.
11. Strodach, op. cit., p. 223.
12. *Liturgical Review* III, 1 (1973), pp 34-45; V, 2 (1975), pp. 17-20; VI, 1 (1976), pp. 13-21; VII, 1 (1977), pp. 35-44; IX, 1 (1979), pp. 20-32.

BRYAN D. SPINKS, Churchill College, Cambridge.