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Editorial ✠

FORGIVE US OUR CHANGELESSNESS

A Blessed New "Change" to You!

It is interesting to reflect on the fact that the Old Testament word for "year" is traceable to a root word (*shanab*) involving the idea of "change." Entering a new year may validly be viewed as entering a period of change, a time of renewal. *Tempora mutantur et nos mutamur in illis!*

One alone dare lay claim to the attribute of changelessness: "I the Lord do not change!" (Mal. 3:6). With Him "there is no variation or shadow due to change" (Jas. 1:17). For anyone else to boast of changelessness would be a repetition of the basic sin of the Garden of Eden: the sin of the creature wanting to exchange roles with his Creator, the sin of finite man daring to aspire to be like the infinite God, the sin of usurping attributes that belong alone to God.

True, the changeless God invites us frail men to become like Him. But within the context of time and space this invitation points us to an ideal which for us finite creatures is incapable of full attainment. Indeed, in Jesus Christ the God of grace has accomplished that radical change in us which makes us His own sons and daughters. His indwelling Spirit empowers us to live the changed life: the life in which we "are being changed into His likeness from one degree of glory to another" (2 Cor. 3:18). He has implanted in us the hope by which we look forward with longing to the day when "the dead will be raised imperishable, and we shall be changed," the day when the Lord Jesus Christ "will change our lowly body to be like His glorious body" (1 Cor. 15:52; Phil. 3:21). But until that great day of change, the changes that now characterize our lives are only imperfect, inchoate, incipient. All too often we cling changelessly to the old in disregard of the voice of our God who is calling us to change and renewal. At the change of the year we have reason to pray in penitence: "Forgive us our changelessness!"

Openness to change is admittedly not an unqualified desideratum. There are areas in which our changeless God asks us to remain unchanged and unchanging. When it comes to our loyalty to Him, our allegiance to His Son, our holding fast to the pure doctrine of the Gospel, our steadfast witnessing to our Savior, our faithful adherence to His Word of revelation, our unswerving fidelity to our confessional commitment—here He appeals to us: Change not! "Be steadfast, immovable!" "Hold fast what you have!" "Be faithful unto death!" And where we, individually or collectively, have swerved from such loyalties, our prayer at the change of the year can only be: "Forgive us our changeableness! Strengthen us for undeviating loyalty amid all the changing scenes of life!"

But the laudable and necessary determination to resist changes in those areas where change involves compromise and disloyalty dare not be allowed to develop into a mind-

set that opposes all change or mistrusts all proposals for change because it automatically equates change with deviation. Humanly speaking, had that kind of mind-set prevailed among the theologians of Germany in the 16th century, we would not be privileged this year to celebrate the 450th anniversary of the Lutheran Reformation. And to this day it remains true that to rule out all change in the church is to stifle Christian faith and life. What Mr. Franzmann writes in the lead essay in this issue about the inevitability of change in a living church is pertinent here. Equally pertinent and important is his assertion that for Lutherans the limits within which allowable changes may occur are established by the Scriptures and the Lutheran Symbols. His essay at this point may be seen as a reflection of the approach of the Lutheran confessors at Augsburg. They frankly admitted their introduction of changes in churchly teaching and practice. But they stated clearly that they were doing this in a way that introduces "nothing, either in doctrine or ceremonies, that is contrary to Holy Scripture or the universal Christian church." (Augsburg Confession, Prolog to Part II, par. 1; also Conclusion, par. 5)

The beginning of the year affords an opportune occasion for determining, with the aid of the Holy Spirit who continues to guide the church through all its changing days, to recognize anew both the inevitability of ongoing change in the church as well as the necessity of continuing evaluation of all changes that develop within the church or clamor for adoption. Such a Spirit-wrought determination, faithfully put into practice in this new year of change, will do much to diminish the number of items about which we shall need to pray at year's end: "Forgive us our changelessness!"

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