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Walther's Ecclesiology

John M. Drickamer
and
C. George Fry

In a recent issue of the *Lexington Theological Quarterly* Professor Loren Broadus asked, "what in the world does theology have to do with leadership?"¹ If we were to answer that question from Lutheran history, we would have to say, "almost everything!" A survey of the Lutheran story in the United States suggests that theological insight and synodical leadership are closely related. Four of America's great Lutheran theologians—Henry Melchior Muhlenberg, Mattias Loy, Charles Porterfield Krauth, and C. F. W. Walther—were also Lutheran synodical leaders. Muhlenberg, for example, convened the first Lutheran synod ever held in North America in 1748 for the purpose of establishing proper procedures for the ordination of men to the ministry, to select a standard liturgy for the congregations, and to create an agency whereby there could be ongoing consultation and cooperation between the churches. Loy, the leading Ohio Lutheran theologian, author, and editor, was President of the Evangelical Lutheran Joint Synod of Ohio for a significant portion of its history (1812-1930). Krauth, the eminent historian and theologian who was intimately associated with the resurgence of confessionalism among English-speaking Lutherans in the mid-nineteenth century, and who was instrumental in the founding of an orthodox seminary at Mt. Airy, Pennsylvania, was also the leading light of the General Council of the Evangelical Lutheran Church (1867-1918). It was in the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod, as the most confessional and theologically-minded of all the Lutheran bodies in North America, that one finds the closest connection between the two roles of theologian and church president. This is the situation at present, with the Synod led by a churchman who is also a classicist and specialist in the study of the Age of Orthodoxy. But it was also the case at the very inception of the Synod more than one hundred and thirty years ago. C. F. W. Walther was a leader and a theologian.

C. F. W. Walther (1811-1887) was a long-time pastor and professor in St. Louis. For most of his career he was the leading theologian of the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod. Concurrently he was an ecclesiastical statesman, bringing his theological insight to bear on the immediate problems facing the rapidly developing Synod. For that reason Walther was almost constantly involved in practical applications of the

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doctrine of the church. Walther's ecclesiology was based on the Bible, faithful to the Confessions, and was tested repeatedly in the arena of everyday church-life - as during the turmoil among the Saxon Lutherans in Perry County, Missouri, 1839-1841; the founding of the Missioui Synod, 1847; the controversies with J. A. A. Grabau and J. K. Wilhelm Loehe in the 1840's and 1850's; fellowship with parts of the Buffalo Synod, 1866; the organization and maturation of the Synodical Conference, 1872; the failure of fellowship with the Ohio Synod and others as a result of the Predestination Controversy of the 1880's; and the necessity of overseeing the expansion of the Lutheran congregations in the United States and Canada, as they ministered to the needs of thousands of immigrant Europeans and migrant Americans. During these busy years Walther produced several scholarly works on the church. It is the purpose of this article to introduce some of the cardinal points in Walther's ecclesiology.²

The Church in General

C.F.W. Walther defined the church as follows:

The church in the proper sense of the word is the congregation of the saints (*die Gemeinde der Heiligen*), that is, the totality (*Gesamtheit*) of all those who have been called by the Holy Ghost through the Gospel out of the lost, damned human race, who truly believe in Christ and through this faith have been sanctified and incorporated into Christ.³

As the "communion of saints," the universal church is the body outside of which there is no salvation.

Walther taught that this church is invisible. Surely this is indicated by the fact that the doctrine of the church appears in the Third Article of the Apostle's Creed, where we confess our faith in things hoped for—"the resurrection of the body, and the life everlasting." Faith, as "the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen" (Hebrews 11:1), trusts that there is a "holy Christian Church, the communion of saints." To this invisible church Christ committed all the spiritual benefits, rights, offices, and powers, including the keys of the Kingdom. For salvation it is necessary to be in fellowship with this invisible church. By this Walther was saying that it is fellowship (*Gemeinschaft*) with Christ through faith that is, in fact, necessary for eternal salvation and, therefore, for membership in the universal, invisible church.

Walther further taught that the presence of this invisible church can be unmistakably perceived in the pure teaching and preaching of God's Work (the Bible) and the administration of the Sacraments (Baptism and the Lord's Supper) according to

Christ's institution. Because of these signs, one can also use the name "church" of the visible totality (*sichtbare Gesamtheit*) of those who confess the true faith, who hold to the Word of God, and who properly administer the Sacraments. Local groups of this character are also called churches.

Walther recognized that good and evil people are mixed in the visible church. This was made clear by the Lord Jesus Christ in the Parable of the Wheat and the Tares, where the Master said that the wheat and the weeds would abide in the same field until the Great Harvest (see Matthew 13:24-31). Unlike the Calvinists and the Sectarians, who felt it was possible somehow to separate the elect from the lost (perhaps by such "fruits of faith" as church attendance, participation in the Sacraments, performance of good works, public profession of faith) in this life, Walther, along with Luther, admitted that Satan and his disciples can skillfully copy the outward appearance of true Christianity without the inward gift of saving faith. To us, such folk may seem to be good Christians, when, in fact, like the Pharisees of old, they are merely "whitened sepulchres". Conversely, there may be those whose outward life leaves much to be desired (as the woman at the well, or the penitent thief on the cross, or little Zacchaeus) who have, in truth, been summoned by Christ, have been washed by His blood, and have received the gift of faith. For this reason, Walther, like Luther, rejected the notion of an earthly congregation made up only of the elect or regenerate (the sectarian notion), and taught the Biblical reality of the mixed church.

While there can be many non-Christians in a true visible church, there cannot fail to be some true Christians in that church. That was the promise of the Lord through Isaiah the prophet (55:10, 11):

For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven,
and return not thither but water the earth,
making it bring forth and sprout,
giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater,
so shall my word be that goes forth from my mouth;
it shall not return to me empty,
but it shall accomplish that which I purpose,
and prosper in the thing for which I sent it.

Where the Word is purely preached and the Sacraments are rightly administered, there will be some members of the invisible church.

Walther then discussed categories for visible fellowships (*Gemeinschaften*) where the conditions for a true visible church are not fully met. Groups that have fallen from the truth only in part and still hold essentially to the Word can also be called

churches. Fellowships which have interrupted the unity of the true visible church for non-doctrinal reasons are schisms (*Spaltungen*). In this class fall all the non-theological sources of denominationalism, such as language, rites, customs, ethnic conflicts, traditions, and personal disagreement. But groups involved in fundamental doctrinal error are sects (*Rotten*) or heretical fellowships (*ketzerische Gemeinschaften*). This category includes all those given to theological perversions and aberrations—the realm of heresy. Those who do not recognize the authority and teachings of the Word of God deny the Holy Trinity and have transformed their churches into “schools of Satan and temples of idols.” If something of the Word and the Sacraments remain in an erring group, there can still be members of the invisible church in that company. But this possibility does not constitute permission to remain. Christians were commanded by Jesus and the Apostles to flee all false preaching and erroneous teachers.

Walther then drew the pastoral implication of this distinction between the visible and invisible church. While Walter taught, as do the Scriptures, that the invisible church will never perish, he did observe that there can be times when there is no true visible church in a locality (as has occurred in Anatolia, the land of Paul and the Patristic Fathers, where today in Turkey there are fewer than two hundred native Christians; or in North Africa, the home of Tertullian, Cyprian, and Augustine, where there are now no Christians, “the Church that Disappeared”; or, worse still, in Medieval Europe, where there was a visible institutional church, thriving under the leadership of one who, according to Luther and Walther, is the Anti-Christ). In these and similar circumstances a Christian who might stand alone or be unjustly excommunicated, can still have the comfort of being in communion with the one true church (as was the case with John Wycliffe, John Hus, and Martin Luther).

Walther also taught that the Evangelical Lutheran Church was the true visible church, and he wrote a book to prove it.⁴ This church meets the requirements of total subjection to the Word of God, correct administration of the Sacraments, unconditional subscription to the Book of Concord as the correct interpretation and presentation of revealed truth, and the public confession with purity, vitality, and sincerity of the Law and Gospel.

The Membership of the Individual

For C. F. W. Walther, fellowship with the true visible church was not optional. As a Christian is to shun fellowship with those in error, he is to seek, establish, and sustain fellowship with those in the truth. One in a heterodox church

can be a member of the invisible church—but consciously to remain in such an association is not a sin of weakness (*Schwachheitssuende*) but real disobedience to the commands of Christ.

The basic means of admission to fellowship is by baptism. Two kinds of people are to be baptized and thus admitted to the church. First, there are unbaptized adults who desire baptism, who have the knowledge and necessary understanding of the faith, and who confess it publicly in word and deed. Second, there are unbaptized infants who are brought to baptism by those who have parental authority over them.

Walther asserted that a Christian congregation can accept as members those baptized persons who, if adults, confess faith that the Bible is God's Word and is correctly interpreted in the Augsburg Confession and Luther's Small Catechism, and who do not have an offensive way of life. The decision to admit a person to church membership does not belong to the pastor but to the entire congregation. Walther also recognized that congregational membership is not specifically church fellowship. Full church fellowship involves communicant membership.

For that reason Walther addressed himself to the issue of who is to be admitted to the Lord's Supper. Only those are to receive the Sacrament, who are already baptized and who are able to examine themselves with respect to their faith (this provision excludes those who are too young to do so, or not well enough instructed in the Christian faith); who cannot be proven to be non-Christians or to be involved in doctrinal error (since it cannot be positively proven that an individual is a true believer), and who cannot be shown to have the necessity of first being reconciled to another person or of first making restitution for something wrongly acquired. It is easily understandable that Walther spoke strongly in favor of individual announcement before Communion and private confession at least occasionally.

Walther taught that the full power of the keys - to remit or to retain sins - and, therefore, the authority to excommunicate, has been given to the local congregation. The authority must be exercised according to the procedure described in Matthew 18:17-20. It is to be hoped that the individual in error can be won back, absolved, and reconciled to the congregation. In order to be excommunicated a person has to be rational, to have had or to have sought the name of Christian, to have been a communicant member of the congregation, to have committed a manifest and offensive sin against God or to have embraced a fundamental doctrinal error, to have been clearly proven guilty or either or both those offenses, to have shown himself an incorrigible sinner by persisting in his immorality or heresy in

spite of all admonition, to be unanimously declared deserving of excommunication by those involved in the proceedings, and to be publicly declared severed from the fellowship of the Lord's Table. The congregation is not to recognize an excommunicated person as a Christian brother. He is to be denied all the rights and privileges of full church membership, and there is to be no communication or conversation with him as if he were a true brother in the faith. Throughout the process, however, the longing is that the erring brother will repent and return to the congregation. Upon such action, he is to be publicly absolved and to receive the Sacrament with his fellow believers.

Status and Action of the Congregation

Walther defined a Lutheran congregation in these words:

An evangelical-Lutheran local congregation (*Orts-gemeinde*) is an assembly of believing Christians in a definite place, among whom God's Word is purely preached according to the confession of the evangelical Lutheran church and the holy sacraments are administered according to Christ's institution in accordance with the Gospel, mixed among whom, however, there will always also be false Christians and hypocrites, sometimes also manifest sinners.⁵

The preaching of pure doctrine is integral to Walther's understanding of an Evangelical Lutheran congregation, which is a true, visible local church. Such a congregation holds not only to all the doctrines explicitly mentioned in the Confessions, but to everything contained in the written Word of God, the Bible, plus everything which necessarily follows from the words of Scripture. A Lutheran candidate can in good conscience accept a call to a congregation only if that congregation declares itself willing to be served as an Evangelical Lutheran congregation, to hold the Bible to be God's Word, and to accept the Book of Concord as its public confession. The preacher is not only to promote pure doctrine in his teaching and preaching; he is also to refute errors in his lectures and sermons. The congregation is to be sure that the books used in the parish services and in the parochial school were "pure and recognized by the orthodox church."

The congregation's doctrinal stance has implications for the Sacraments. Baptism, even using the proper words, is not efficacious if the congregation publicly denies the Holy Trinity. A congregation that denies the Real Presence distributes only bread and wine, not the Body and Blood of Christ, no matter what words are used.

To preserve doctrinal unity, the congregation is to permit no

conventicles, which Walther defined as assemblies for prayer, praise, and teaching led by persons who have not been properly called to the pastoral office. The congregation, furthermore, is to prevent ecclesiastical union with unbelievers or errorists. The congregation is also to work against any division in non-doctrinal matters. In adiaphora (*Mitteldinge*, neutral matters, things neither commanded nor forbidden in Scripture) decisions are to be made on the basis of love, after discussion, and by majority vote. Should the majority try to decide something contrary to God's Word, such a decision is totally null and void. In the deliberations of the congregation, all should be done with honor and in order, with due reverence for God and proper respect for members of the congregation. During congregational assemblies the president is to make sure that every man present has an opportunity to express his opinion. Quarrels are to be avoided. A majority decision is to stand unless its execution causes serious division in the congregation because of the weakness of some of the members. At such times the majority (the strong) should yield to the minority (the weak) in the interests of love and harmony. It is to be noted that Dr. Walther was referring to the conscience, not the stubbornness, of the minority.

Relationships Between Congregations

Dr. Walther taught that just as it is the duty of each individual Christian to seek out the fellowship of an orthodox assembly of believers, so it is the obligation of each Lutheran congregation to seek consultation and cooperation with sister churches. Christ's command to the local church was to search for every possible way, in purity of confession, to walk in harmony with neighboring congregations. The members of the parish church - people and pastor - are to pray fervently on a regular basis for all fellow Christians. Each congregation is to hold the same public confession of faith as the whole orthodox Evangelical Lutheran Church on earth. For this reason the congregation is to spare no effort to be one with the rest of the Lutheran family in life and speech, including the same sense and opinion. Such doctrinal unity will express itself institutionally - as synodical patterns appear regionally, nationally, and globally. Believers in each locality ought to realize that the Lord Jesus Christ has given them a command (not just a suggestion) to evangelize and teach all men on Planet Earth. This work is accomplished through combined work in a Synod.

Sister Lutheran congregations in a locality are to agree on their parochial boundaries, not to transgress one another's territory, and not to accept in an irregular fashion members from a sister parish. Assemblies of believers should be able and

willing to share joyfully the services of their pastor with those churches without ministerial leadership. In every possible way a congregation is to minister to the needs of its sister churches. When problems arise between neighboring churches, the congregations are to seek advice, and, if necessary, arbitration, from one or more other Lutheran parishes. This direction surely finds its basis in Acts 15:54.

Cooperation between congregations should certainly be evident in all matters relating to the pastoral office. Each congregation should diligently direct talented and gifted men to the office of public ministry of Word and Sacrament. Prayer should be made for them. Encouragement - both moral and financial - ought to be offered as well. Congregations are to cooperate to provide opportunities for ministerial education in colleges, universities, and theological seminaries. Concerning those already in the pastoral office, congregations should not engender strife in the manner by which they call a minister from one parish to another. The calling congregation is to seek agreement with the parish currently served by the pastor concerning the Lord's will in this matter. A congregation ought to be willing to let its pastor leave when the call proves to be divine (*als goettlich sich erweist*). A pastor is to maintain fraternal fellowship (*bruederliche Gemeinschaft*) with all his colleagues and neighboring pastors (*Amtsnachbarn*). Needless to say, the minister is to join a Synod as soon as possible. As a participant in such a Synod, the pastor is to be involved intelligently and loyally on the local, district, and national levels. On the matter of the pastor's standing in Synod, Dr. Walther spoke as follows:

Indeed, neither the examination, to which one who is called to the pastoral office submits himself before a commission appointed for this purpose outside of the calling congregation and which he passes, nor the ordination received from persons likewise appointed for that purpose outside of the congregation, makes the call valid (*gültig*). But both procedures are among the most salutary (*heilsamst*) ordinances of the church and have, especially the latter, among other things, the important purpose of publicly confirming that the call has been recognized as legitimate (*rechtmässig*) and divine. Therefore, he who omits one or the other, except in a case of necessity, is acting schismatically and announces that he belongs to those whom the congregations heap up for themselves, having itching ears.⁶

Living in an age of great mobility (the population of the United States more than doubled in his lifetime), Walther also

discussed the matter of travelling and of transferring membership. When someone comes to a congregation from another orthodox parish, a written testimonial from his former assembly is to be brought and to be honored upon presentation. When a member in good standing leaves a congregation, he is to be given such a document. Those who have been properly excommunicated are never to be honored with such credentials, and they are not to be received as members in good standing elsewhere. Such discipline, however, does not apply in the case of those who have been unjustly excommunicated. These are to be received and treated as brothers.

Conclusion

From the life and literary labors of the sainted Dr. C. F. W. Walther it is evident that theology cannot be separated from church leadership - be it on the local, district, or national level. Certainly the classic Lutheran principle has been that *Agenda* (those things to be done) flow from *Credenda* (those things to be believed). Nowhere is this truth more evident than in the matter of ecclesiology. A careful re-reading of Walther's doctrine of the church can be extremely beneficial to the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod at the current point in its history.

FOOTNOTES

1. Loren Broadus, "What in the World Does Theology Have to do with Leadership?" *Lexington Theological Quarterly*, XI (July 1976), pp. 73-84.
2. For material on C. F. W. Walther's life and thought see the following: Carl S. Meyer and James J. Michael, "Walther Bibliography," *Concordia Theological Monthly*, XXXII (October 1961) pp. 658-663; W. Gustave Polack, *The Story of C. F. W. Walther* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1935, 1947); Lewis W. Spitz, Sr., *The Life of Dr. C. F. W. Walther* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1961); D. H. Stefens, *Doctor Carl Ferdinand Wilhelm Walther* (Philadelphia: The Lutheran Publication Society, 1917); William Dallmann, et al., editors, *Walther and the Church* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1938); and Ludwig E. Fuerbringer, editor, *Briefe von C. F. W. Walther an seine Freunde, Synodalgenossen und Familienglieder* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1915-1916).
3. C. F. W. Walther, *Die Stimme unserer Kirche in der Frage von Kirche und Amt: Eine Sammlung von Zeugnissen ueber diese Frage aus den Bekenntnisschriften der evangelisch-lutherischen Kirche und aus den Privatschriften rechtglaebiger Lehrer derselben*, fourth edition (Zwickau i. S.: Verlas des Schriftvereins der Sep. evang.-luth. Gemeinden in Sachsen, 1894), p. 1.
4. C. F. W. Walther, *Die Evangelisch-Lutherische Kirche die wahre sichtbare Kirche Gottes auf Erden* (St. Louis: Druck von Aug. Wiebusch u. Sohn, 1867).
5. C. F. W. Walther, *Die rechte Gestalt einer vom Staate unabhaengigen Evangelisch-Lutherischen Ortsgemeinde: Eine Sammlung von Zeugnissen aus den Bekenntnisschriften der evang. luth. Kirch und aus den Privatschriften rechtglaebiger Lehrer derselben*, (St. Louis: Lutherischer Concordia-Verlag, 1890), p. 1.
6. C. F. W. Walther, *Amerikanisch-Lutherische Pastoral-Theologie*, fifth edition, (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1906), p. 62.