



THE SPRINGFIELDER

December 1971
Volume 35, Number 3

Walther and Loehe: On the Church

HERMAN SASSE

*Translated and Prepared by Students,
John Sippola and John Drickamer*

ONE OF THE MOST disrupting occurrences in the history of the Lutheran church of the nineteenth century was the parting of the great churchmen Wilhelm Loehe and Ferdinand Walther after the great Missouri Synod leader had had such a promising meeting with Loehe in Neuendettelsau in 1851. It is not important that neither of these men was able to establish a relationship with the Erlangen school. For despite the importance which its theology may have had and despite the human and scientific greatness of its representatives, its theology possessed faults which rendered it impossible for it to be the source of lasting renewal for the Lutheran church. This theology had not been able to keep itself free from the seductive poison of Schleiermacher's subjectivism. Every serious attempt to hold fast to the objective truths of Scripture was doomed to fail when the methodology that began with Schleiermacher became a hermeneutical principle. If my subjective self becomes the proper object of my theologizing, then no earthly power can prevent theology from becoming the science of human piety. Another fault of the Erlangen theology was its restriction to the narrow borders of official German Lutheranism. In comparison, Loehe and Walther viewed the problems of world-wide Lutheranism as opposed to the ecclesiastical bureaucracy, a bureaucracy protected and directed by the German *summi episcopi!* Who would have guessed that out of the troubled congregations then being organized on the border of civilization would one day come the great church in whose hands the fate of Lutheranism rests today, as far as it rests in the hands of men. Neither could anyone foresee what the break between Walther and Loehe, between Missouri and Iowa, would mean for the future. We see its significance today and must answer the question, whether or not the unification which failed then is possible today, a century later.

2

It was by no means only the question of the relationship between the church and the pastoral office that separated Loehe and Walther

Professor Herman Sasse discusses the relationship of the pastor to the congregation against the historical background of the controversy between C. F. W. Walther and Wilhelm Loehe. It may be safely said that each man was a giant of Confessional Lutheranism, Walther in American and Loehe in Germany. Both men were agreed that church organization belonged to the class of adiaphora, things which are directly commanded by God; but, as Professor Sasse contends, both men failed to apply their own principles. Walther insisting upon the primacy of the congregation and Loehe the primacy of the pastoral office. This is also a footnote to the history of the seminary as Loehe was its founder and later Walther one of its presidents. Dr. Sasse is the former professor of theology at the University of Erlangen and the Immanuel Lutheran Seminary. He is now professor emeritus of Luther Seminary of the Lutheran Church of Australia. From time to time he has been guest lecturer and professor at Concordia Theological Seminary. The seminary awarded him an honorary doctor of divinity degree for his contributions to Lutheranism.

and led to the cleavage between Missouri and Iowa, but this question had especially great significance. It separated not only these men and their churches but Lutheranism in general. The widespread divisions caused by this question may at first be surprising. The Lutheran church has always regarded church policy as *adiaphora* or *ritus aut ceremoniae ab hominibus institutae*, because Christ is not the Legislator of a human religious community and the Gospel contains no law concerning church polity. The implications of this position must be clearly understood. Every other church recognizes, in Calvin's familiar words, an *ordo, quo Dominus ecclesiam gubernari voluit* (an order, by which the Lord wants His Church to be governed). This holds true for all catholic churches, eastern and western rites, as well as for the Reformed churches. The differences of opinion concern themselves only with the nature of this *ordo*, whether it is to be the universal monarchy of the papacy, the episcopal-synodical government of the Anglicans and the Eastern Orthodox, the direction of the church through a senate of presbyters all of whom must be equal, or the congregational-autonomy of the Congregationalists and Baptists, to mention only a few of the types of church polity allegedly prescribed in the New Testament. Luther's greatness and the boldness of his basic theological principle of the differentiation of Law and Gospel become clear when one sees how he goes his own lonely way outside of these possibilities: Christ never gave His church a law *de constituenda ecclesia*. Every type of church polity is possible as long as the pure administration of the means of grace is not hindered. To be sure, the Lord has given His Church something which does not belong to her *bene esse* but to her *esse*. In order that we may obtain the faith that justifies, the Gospel must be preached and the Sacraments must be administered, and for this purpose God has ordained the Ministry, through which this comes to pass. Wherever the means of grace are rightly administered, there is, according to the divine promise that the Word shall not return void, the Church, the communion of saints, of justified sinners. There are just a few prescriptions concerning the nature of congregational as there are concerning the form which the *ministerium ecclesiasticum* assumes. The apostles came to the realization that it would be helpful in fulfilling the duties of the spiritual office if they were freed from the tasks of caring for the poor and of financial administration. This was the origin of the auxiliary office of the deacons. Nevertheless the church was the church even before the creation of this office. The church is always free to create specific offices out of necessity, for example, the bishopric or the office of superintendent. All these offices retain their right to exist, however, only as long as they serve the one great office of the preaching of the Gospel and the administration of the Sacraments.

If there is agreement in the entire Lutheran church on this point, how do we explain the divergence of opinion concerning the pastoral office and the congregation and therefore concerning church polity which has time and again divided our church since Loehe

and Walther first disagreed? It seems certain to me that the polity problems of other churches and confessions have influence Lutheranism. In the process Lutherans have not remained completely loyal to the magnificent freedom of the Reformation. When others were concerned with "genuine, Biblical church polity according to the command of Christ," it was dangerous for our church on her part to want to enter the fray. As loyal as they were to the Lutheran confession, neither Walther nor Loehe avoided this pitfall, to mention just their names. This situation is analogous to the time of orthodoxy, when Lutherans often allowed Calvinists or Catholics to ask the questions without recognizing that the questions were not valid in themselves. Here, as in other points, the old orthodoxy was much too dependent on her opponents. Although the theologians of the nineteenth century accepted orthodox dogmatics, they were right when they believed that Christendom would be led to a deeper understanding of the Church in the midst of the immense political and social catastrophes in their time and in the near future. The early Church had already known everything confessed in the Nicene Creed, but it was the titanic struggle with ancient paganism that enabled the church fully to recognize the importance of the true divinity and the true humanity of Jesus Christ and to articulate the doctrine of the *homoousia*. If we are to speak of progress in the confession of faith, it must be understood in the sense of the church meeting new situations and in no other. The parting of the two great schools of Lutheranism in the last century is without doubt related to the failure of the Lutheran church to come to final clarity concerning the implications for church life of the ecclesiastical articles of the Augsburg Confession. And so it happened that the great Lutherans of the previous century, and more specifically those who were concerned not only with the theoretical but also had to build churches, have left us a legacy, far from unexhausted. The task which therefore faces our generation cannot be to repeat the formulations and pick up the discussion where it stopped one hundred years ago. Rather, we must, on the basis of the experience of the church in the past century and with perhaps greater insight into the teaching of Holy Scripture, once more think through what has, since that time, remained an unsolved problem.

+

It is worth noting how modern historical research into the beginnings of church polity has confirmed Luther's deep exegetical insight: The New Testament recognizes no fixed church order and was therefore unable to canonize any such order. The history of church polity is similar to the history of the liturgy. The beginning of each was marked by diversity rather than unity. Therefore it was possible to read the most varied forms of church polity into the New Testament and to find them there again with satisfaction. No one who considers the Biblical statements will readily presume today to find a complete and always binding form of church polity in the

New Testament. Even the Lutherans of the 19th century, who did not escape the temptation to inquire cautiously into the correct Biblical form of the Church and her order, would today simply accept the fact that there were in the Church of the New Testament several possibilities for the ordering both of the spiritual office and of the Church as the communion of saints.

5

The point of disagreement between Loehle and Walther was the relationship between the pastoral office and the congregation. Where does the primacy lie? Does the congregation proceed from the pastoral office or the pastoral office from the congregation? At first this question seems to be related to that question: which comes first? the chicken or the egg? In reality, however, this question conceals a problem of deepest theological significance. The entire concept of the Church depends on it. When Walther and Missouri declared themselves in favor of the primacy of the congregation, they could legitimately look to Luther and the old Lutheran church for support. In his treatise *Letter to the Christian Nobility* Luther illustrates the doctrine of the Universal priesthood with the example of a group of Christians who find themselves in the desert without an ordained priest. They elect one of their number, and through this election he becomes a legitimate office-holder, with all rights and duties which pertain only to the bearer of the *ministerium ecclesiasticum*. One's answer to whether Christians in such solitude are able to ordain a legitimate office-bearer depends on whether or not one is thinking evangelically. There has never been an evangelical theologian who has differed basically with Luther on this point, not even among the most high church among the Lutherans of the previous century, and certainly not Loehle. To be sure, Loehle, in agreement with the Lutheran confessions, considered the ordination of pastors through pastors the normal practice. Here our church has expressed conformity to the practice of the old catholic church. The church of the Lutheran Reformation has never doubted that the conferral of office is possible without traditional ordination through an ordained minister. In this matter even those agree who cannot see the universal priesthood as acting only through the office of the ministry. For offering sacrifice certainly is to the essence of the priesthood; and spiritual sacrifices, in the New Testament sense, are offered by the entire Church. The proclamation of the Gospel and the administration of the Sacraments are a part of spiritual sacrifice but are not in and of themselves the essence of the priestly function.

6

The identity of the great freedom of the Reformation with that of the Gospel becomes clear for the first time in the realization that the *potestas clauium* is entrusted three times in the New Testament: Matt. 16 to Peter, John 20 to all the apostles, and Matt. 18 to the whole Church. These three instances cannot be separated

from one another, nor can there be any differentiation between them with respect to significance. None of them can be considered to be the only proper one. When Jesus gives the Twelve the task of preaching the Gospel to every creature and making disciples of all nations by means of Baptism, when He commands them at the Last Supper, "This do in remembrance of Me."—who are the Twelve? They are the first holders of ecclesiastical office. From them proceeds the *ministerium docendi evangelii et porrigendi sacramenta*. But they are at the same time certainly the Church, the ecclesia, the representatives of the new eschatological people of God. Thus it is plainly impossible to separate the pastoral office and the congregation in the New Testament. What is said to the congregation is said to the pastoral office and vice versa. The pastoral office does not stand above the congregation but always in its midst. How does the congregation at Antioch (Acts 13) happen to send Paul and Barnabas out on mission work? They had already been sent by the Lord long before. What could the laying on of hands by the congregation give Paul in addition to that which he already had through a commission directly given by the exalted Lord Himself? Nevertheless, commissioning and laying on of hands are consciously repeated here. The pastoral office and the congregation belong inseparably together. Church history confirms this. There is a living congregation only where there is a living pastoral office, exercising the full authority of its commission. And there is a living pastoral office only where there is a living congregation. Among all Lutheran churches there is probably none that respects the office of the ministry as much as the Missouri Synod, in which the individual congregations stand so much in the center of all church thought. The pastoral office and the congregation are like reciprocal conduits; the life of the one is the life of the other. The congregation stands or falls with the pastoral office and vice versa. This argument is sufficient to demonstrate that the 19th century alternative, pastoral office or congregation, was falsely posed. At that time no one had the resources to draw the consequences from this relationship, and Loehe and Walther each misunderstood the motives of the other's doctrine. Mundinger has shown in his penetrating study concerning the constitution of the Missouri Synod that this constitution had nothing to do with the democratic inclinations of Americans. Walther and his followers were definitely all anti-democrats! And Hebart has shown that in Loehe's case, at least, no conservative political thoughts specified the form of the church. Instead, both sides overemphasized in support of their position particular Biblical truths to the detriment of others. These truths really belong together in the New Testament. This overemphasis occurred because each elevated one aspect of the New Testament statements as if it were the only proper pronouncement, to which the other was to be subordinated.

7

This problem becomes clearer when one asks how the conferral of the spiritual office occurs. There is a *vocatio immediata*, in which

God quite alone and without human mediation makes the call. This is true in the case of the apostles, prophets, and teachers, if we do not here consider those with healing gifts and other special charismata. Only Christ can make a man an apostle. In the calling of a substitute for Judas He does it through the lot. God has reserved for Himself the calling of men to be prophets. Neither in the Old nor in the New Testament can a human cooperate in this work. Those offices that are created through the *vocatio immediata* belong to the entire Church. In addition there is a *vocatio mediata* for the offices of an individual congregation. The Lord Christ confers these offices also, but He does it through men. According to Philippians 1 there were already in the Pauline congregations bishops and deacons who were chosen by the congregation. There were evidently congregations with episcopal-diaconal polity and congregations with presbyterial polity. Paul did not consider it important to eliminate this diversity, which first begins to grow into unity in the Pastoral Epistles. Nothing is more absurd than to impose the standards of modern political constitutions onto the polity of the New Testament Church. The *ecclesia* is not a democracy in our sense of the word. It is not a pile of individuals each of whom possesses the same rights as the other. Nor can it be characterized as an aristocracy. It rather is a jointed body with gradations in structure and rights. Acceptance into the positions and offices of the congregation generally follows from the laying on of hands accompanied by prayer. And again, it can be an individual, for example, the Apostle Paul (II Timothy 1:6) who performs the laying on of hands, or the presbytery (I Timothy 4:14), or, as in the case of Timothy, both, or a whole congregation through its representatives (Acts 13:1). It is indeed God, it is the Lord Christ, it is the Holy Ghost, Who finally acts through men, through an individual, through a group, or through the entire congregation, or Who sometimes *extra ordinem* gives His gifts directly, and with them an office. Therefore it is impossible, as the Lutheran fathers correctly understood, to make an essential differentiation between vocation and ordination. It is even more impossible to let this differentiation become a divisive conflict in the church. God issues the call into His service, and as a rule He does so through men. But it is not the manner that is decisive. It makes no difference whether it is done through an individual, through a group, or through the entire church, assembled for the service of God. It all happens in the name of the church, the whole church, which is the body of Christ, and therefore it happens in the power of the Holy Spirit.

8

When one becomes aware of this, the differences between the theological theories of the 19th century become quite small. Then one begins to understand the magnificent freedom of the Lutheran church, which knows no law *de constituendis ministris* because Jesus Christ has given no such law, neither directly nor indirectly. Then the *ministerium ecclesiasticum*, standing not above but rather in

the congregation, becomes quite important, for then all of the stress is no longer placed on the question, how did the office come into being, but rather on the question, what is its content. Its apostolicity is then no longer dependent on its more or less questionable apostolic origin, but rather on its apostolic content. The ministry has precisely and only that task to do which was laid upon the apostles, namely to proclaim the pure Gospel, to administer those Sacraments which were instituted by Christ, and nothing more. Only from this deep understanding can the spiritual office be renewed. Many things have become attached to the spiritual office through the modern over-organization of the Church, even down to the ecclesiastical-political tomfoolery with which modern bishops squander their own and other people's time. These amount to no more than ecclesiastical shows with no substance. Every sermon, even those preached in the small parishes, has more worth than the conferences in which great ecclesiastical resolutions about the federal constitution or the atom bomb or Goethe's 200th birthday are discussed. And as always, taking the pastoral office seriously can only lead to taking the Christian congregation seriously. Then there is no longer possible that misunderstanding under which our German state churches so deeply suffer—the misunderstanding which views each city precinct as if it were a congregation in the New Testament sense, which one need only to activate through a few modern methods of *Seelsorge*. This would spell the end to the misunderstanding which views the clever, oh, all too clever, administrative activities of the central ecclesiastical authorities as the church government of the Lutheran confessions. All these must and will fall to pieces just as the church government of the princely *summi episcopi* fell apart overnight. However, the office that preaches reconciliation and the congregation of believing sinners justified in faith will remain—in forms with which we are not yet familiar but which the Lord of the Church is preparing amidst the thousand griefs of the Church today. He is the Saviour of His Body even where we see only ruin. Luther's great word concerning the activity of God in history still holds true: "*Occidendo vivificat.*" "In killing He makes alive." This faith in the activity of God in history does not, to be sure, free us from, but rather holds us to, the responsibility of renouncing everything that would destroy the genuine pastoral office established by Christ and the genuine congregation established by Christ, everything which makes that which Christ has established a playground for the human lust for power, whether clerical or congregational. The pastor is not lord over the congregation (II Corinthians 1:24). The congregation is not lord over the pastor (Galatians 1). Both have rather over them the one Lord in Whom they are one.

These are only a few thoughts about the Church and the pastoral office that may help you read with new attention that which God's Word says to us on this matter.