

A Mark of Grandfather's Church: Occasional Repentance

C.F.W. Walther (1811-1887) (Referred to, endearingly, in the title and below as 'Grandfather') is still a name accorded much honor in American Lutheranism, especially among his theological sons in the church body he most influenced, the Lutheran Church - Missouri Synod. As such, I have tasted, as honey, his occasional sermons and addresses, preserved a few years after his death, in the work just translated and now being offered. Just perusing the table of its contents might whet a reader's appetite to sample the wide variety of circumstances and churchly milestones to which Walther most fittingly proclaims the Gospel.

For preachers in formation, which I hope still applies to me and all who practice this art, Walther's wedding and funeral sermons in this volume are beautiful examples of thoughtful and profound applications of the LORD's Gospel blessings during major transitions common in life. Walther does not spare his listeners the discomfort of the law and the realities of life, but masterfully turns sinners to life in Christ; turning their real tears of sorrow or joy to real life in Christ, their Savior. Standard wedding and funeral texts make these sermons classics for us to appreciate and emulate.

This collection also gives the reader an opportunity to see doctrine well and aptly applied to the variety of milestones that mark a congregation's or a Church body's march to eternity. Preaching is applied theology. This collection, with the far flung contexts represented in it, therefore, gives a somewhat wider scope of Christology and Ecclesiology than one might encounter in a collection of sermons on, for instance, the standard Gospels and Epistles. The collection of Church dedication sermons and even a sermon on the dedication of church bells, treat both the mandates and the freedoms that God has given his church on earth. Walther carefully threads the needle in his sermons between the extremes of worshiping things instead of God and despising the things of God but always finds Christ in the middle, where he has promised to be found in the means of grace and, so, he binds the hearts of his hearers to Christ. His constant reference to the children and children's children for whom they were building gives us permission, I hope, to call him 'Grandfather.' He and his generation built not only for themselves but also for us.

Most heartening in this series of sermons is the exhaustive teaching on the nature of faith. Some who read these sermons may see Walther as a 'pietist' when

they observe that, to our modern sensibilities, he is overly concerned with 'examining one's self' and asking his listeners to test their own conversion. Pietists (in the pejorative sense) can certainly talk that way to a poor soul's harm. Yet if anyone knew the evils of pietism and would recognize and avoid the same, must it not be Walther, who suffered so severely at the hands of the pietist movement in his university years? Walther's emphasis is, I believe, not at all pietistic, but pious. His concern is actually to warn against a 'fideism' which pietism can foster, that is, putting faith in faith; claiming some virtue in faith which short circuits repentance, that is, a self-satisfied virtue which can keep people who are, yet, weak and sinful (as are we all) from turning to Christ. It is this idol that he would dismember and topple prostrate at Christ's feet.

As truly, in reaction to pietism, Lutherans must point sinners, so long as they are sinners, to Christ "outside of us," in Word and Sacrament, it is falling off the other side of the horse of orthodox theology to teach people to never look deeply into themselves. Walther calls this the 'true science' (p. 196f) which every person needs to learn above any other earthly science. Why? We cannot know the problem or our need for a Savior without looking at the problem. As that great philosopher Pogo was wont to say, "We have met the enemy and he is us." The pietist looks inside himself for the answer (faith). The Christian must also look inside himself, but only to concretely see the problem (sin) and to see if faith has engaged that problem by the Spirit's power or if we have given ourselves to the enemy and, thus shipwrecked our faith. Chosen, intentional, willful sin is forfeited grace; shipwrecked faith. It is thus a dangerous mark of an antinomian church that will not teach people to look inside themselves under God's law to see the problem. This is not a mark of the church that Walther preaches. It is the reason that salvation by faith means exactly the same as salvation by grace (see sermon on p. 147f).

There are two collections of sermons/addresses in this volume that may seem foreign to the liturgical life of most pastors and congregations of the 21st century. The first section is entitled "Sermons for Days of Repentance", containing 7 sermons (plus one in the Addendum), two of which were occasioned by national or local calamities (one of them called for by the President of the United States) and five that were preached on the "annual day of repentance." In the 1856 Agenda (the first Agenda published by Walther's Church in America) service orders are given for a morning and afternoon service on the Friday after the Last Sunday of the Church Year. Thus, a Day of Repentance was hard-wired into the liturgical calendar as a transition from old to new church year. Remnants of this in the modern liturgy are found in the propers of a "Day of Humiliation and Prayer," TLH p. 84, and, more remotely, "Day of

Supplication and Prayer,” LW p. 121. The outline of the Service Orders from the 1856 Agenda of the LCMS are translated and presented in the appendix that follows this one. It is interesting to note that the earliest Walther sermon in this collection (1831 - two years before he was ordained and 8 years before coming to America) is for the Day of Repentance, indicating that this was carried over from the practice held in Germany at the time.

Some of the early sermons in this collection recount the corporate disgrace of the Saxon immigrants over the circumstances of their coming to America and the scandal that must have been common knowledge among their new neighbors in America as well as those they left behind. Yet, an 1870 sermon looks back at those early days fondly and is a stinging indictment of complacency in the Gospel which Walther sees in his church in America just 30 some years after arriving. That sermon (p.85) is, in my opinion, a must read for the church of every age. The sermon title sounds contemporary. “We Are No Longer What We Were.”

The second set of sermons that may seem foreign to the modern reader is the section entitled “ConfessionalAddresses” (beginning on page 161). This collection of 25 short sermonettes (plus 2 in the Addendum) is organized by the liturgical calendar. These addresses belong in the setting of “The Order of the Confessional Service,” TLH p. 47, or the setting of the “Service of Corporate Confession and Absolution,” LW, p. 308. These services were held on the morning or evening before a person would partake of communion. Attendance was mandatory for those who would commune. The mandatory nature of the service was in keeping with the proprium that Scriptures attribute to the Lord’s Supper. It is not a converting means of grace, but a sustaining means for those who already have faith. Walther cites this proprium and applies it to the church’s practice in his 1837 Confessional Address before the Feast of Pentecost (p. 177), “every time I consider what I might say to those who have come for confession on the day they will receive holy Communion, this passage of the apostle Paul invariably comes to mind: ‘Let a man examine himself and so let him eat of this bread and drink of this cup. For whoever eats and drinks unworthily eats and drinks judgement with it for he does not discern the body of the LORD.’ It is this passage, and none other, which I must preach every time someone comes for confession.”

In modern discussions or debates about congregational practice over weekly Holy Communion, we tend to ridicule older members who give as reason for restraint in communion frequency, “Communion would not be ‘special’ anymore.” Some immediately see a fallacy in such a statement and some even chuckle. But you can’t laugh at something unless there is some bit of truth in it. And it would be good for the modern church to try to understand what memories linger in our older

members that lends some ring of truth to what they say.

Something is ‘special’ when careful preparations are brought to bear. Thus, no matter how frequently Communion is celebrated, it is ‘special’ because it is prepared by Christ who carefully carried out the plan of salvation and sacrificed the body and blood we are given in Communion for our sins and for our forgiveness. It is his means of grace he has prepared for us. But these folks are, perhaps, remembering that communion was also ‘special’ because, when they were brought up, there were things that they themselves were taught to do and to care about before they came to Communion, like the Confessional Service, and the self-examination called for in that Service.

Walther says in his Confessional Address for *Misericordias Domini*, 1882 (p. 174), “Specifically, quite a few people have the idea that the necessary conversion happens when a person begins to go to church regularly to hear God’s Word and even reads the Word of God at home and occasionally goes to Holy Communion.

“But that is a great error.

“First, going to church and hearing and reading God’s Word are good and necessary but that is not what constitutes conversion. That is merely the means for conversion to take place. But what good is an instrument, be it ever so good as it might be, if it is not properly used? The fact that thousands of so-called Christians have this instrument of God’s Word does them no good at all when they do not use it in the right way.”

You may also read a Confessional Address on p. 191 that applies this line of thought to communion frequency, itself.

Walther is saying that frequency, even regularity, will not make up for a misuse or abuse of the means of grace by an individual. To believe so would be to fall into an ‘*ex opera operato*’ view of God’s Word. Walther and his church, as a mark that distinguishes it as a true church, is teaching the right use of the Sacrament of the Altar according to the Gospel. If our LORD says, ‘this do in remembrance of me,’ and Paul says, ‘let a man examine himself,’ the church, following the Words of Christ and his Apostles teaches and practices Communion in exactly this way, lest Christ be forgotten and salvation lost by abuse (unfaithfulness). Such examination is practicing Communion according to the Gospel.

Walther’s church is marked and set apart as unique and truly catholic as she invites doubt concerning faith in a person and promotes this testing of faith instead of placing our reliance on some ‘assumed’ faith. She invited those gathered to put themselves to the test and see their weakness of faith or lack of faith in order to turn weak sinners from their weakness to their sure, strong, unassailable source of holiness and strength in the holy One who comes in Word and Sacraments. This church stands apart as one that doesn’t need sinners, but a church that sinners (and only sinners) need. This is a

church with Christ in the center that no sinner, who knows himself as such, would dream of being without as their only source of remedy. This church teaches faith, not as a virtue, but as our only means of receiving grace from Christ. Walther's occasional sermons and addresses are occasions for repentance and receiving the assurance of Christ's grace.

I would submit that this mark of the church is being erased in the American Lutheran church in our end times. Teaching, care and preparation (catechesis/self-examination) for the faithful towards Holy Communion is no longer written indelibly into our practice. Have you ever heard a pastor give a Confessional Address in the liturgy? Have you ever been warned that only converted people receive benefit instead of judgment at the LORD's Supper? Have you been taught to routinely use the Ten Commandments to judge your thoughts, words and deed? Have you been taught that wanting to remain in a sin (intentional sin) and being in faith are mutually exclusive? Have you been taught that if you don't want to be holy (though this is never finished in our life) you are not a converted Christian? Have you ever been taught that your faith, in and of itself, is never strong enough just as your works are never good enough, in and of themselves, to save you, so that your dependance on Christ alone for salvation, even for faith itself, is proven to you? Communion, by nature of our having been taught its gifts, demands this of the faithful. It is written. Let a man examine himself and so let him eat. It is, indeed, only the hungry who most rejoice when called to a meal! God's Law must give us the appetite. His Gospel and Christ must satisfy us in even surpassing abundance.

I would submit (affirming Walther's preaching in his Confessional Addresses) that this lack of willingness or ability to examine ourselves and, thus, to use the sacrament rightly, according to the Gospel, contributes to the feeling of many that something is lacking in regard to Communion. This deficiency is in part doctrinal, since it involves Scriptural guidance on the right use of the Sacrament and, in part, practice in the case of pastors that may know better but want to take what they may see as an easier road (can they be saved?) than using the Sacrament according to the Gospel. This deficiency may lead some to conclude (perhaps, in some cases, erroneously) that our problem is frequency. It may rather be our not caring enough to examine our sin problem that God alone can fix and that God through Christ has promised to fix in grace and forgiveness in the Sacrament. This can, therefore, thwart our sanctification by abusing the Sacrament rather than our enjoying its God-given use of sanctifying us by its use according to the Gospel. If we carelessly receive Communion more often we will merely be abusing Communion more frequently. And if we ourselves refuse to examine our faith and life under the rule of faith

(creed and confession) and God's Word of law, and refuse to exhort and train church members to do so before communing, then, certainly, we cannot in good conscience care about examining any stranger's confession of faith and life (I would call that the 'lead rule' - as opposed to the 'golden rule'). Thus we will practice open communion. Communion, indeed, will no longer be 'special' (sacred, set apart for God's use) but common (desecrated). It is holy in and of itself, in God's Name, but we pray that it may be holy among us also!

So maybe there is a sense in which our older members were right, but we should let Grandfather explain the reason to them and to us!

Our twenty-first century church may not exactly be our grandfather's church any longer, but we can use God's Word of Gospel as grandfather taught us (even in collections of his writings like this) and pray that it would be that again by God's grace.

For that is, indeed, the nature of the church, that is, always bearing in its flesh the death of Christ so that the life of Christ may be revealed in it.
