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Walther the Preacher

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Satan: "It is written," you will be fit leaders of the Church in her fight for her dearest treasures.¹⁰⁾

One great treasure of the Church which Walther faithfully guarded is the inspired Word of God. Just as faithfully he guarded the other great treasure of the Church: the Gospel of the grace of God in Christ.

(To be concluded.)

TH. ENGELDER.

Walther the Preacher.

One hundred twenty-five years ago, October 25, 1811, Carl Ferdinand Wilhelm Walther was born at Langenchursdorf, Saxony. His father was a minister. His grandfather and great-grandfather also had been ministers in the Lutheran Church. According to his own confession, Walther, living in a rationalistic age, did not learn to know his Savior until he was eighteen years of age. He studied theology at the University of Leipzig, was graduated there in 1833 and, after having been a private tutor, was ordained in 1837 at Braeunsdorf. Joining the Saxon emigrants under Stephan, Walther arrived in St. Louis in 1839. Shortly afterwards he became the pastor of the congregations at Dresden and Johannisberg in Perry County, Mo. In April, 1841, he became the successor of his older brother, Otto Hermann, as pastor of Trinity Church in St. Louis. From 1850 until his death in 1887 he was a member of the faculty of Concordia Seminary and president of the institution. In the mean time Walther retained his office in the congregation and subsequently in three other congregations, which four churches constituted one parish, with Walther as their *Hauptpastor* and four ministers as associate pastors taking care of all the parish work in their respective districts.

During this time Walther did not preach every Sunday, but, as a rule, only on the church-festival days. Walther was not only an eminent theologian, but also a very forceful and successful preacher. Dr. Broemel said, "Walther is a model preacher in the Lutheran Church." (See *Concordia Cyclopaedia*; article "Walther.")

In judging Walther as a preacher, we are very fortunate in having some of the fundamental laws of sermonizing set forth by

10) "How gloriously would the American Lutheran Church fulfil its mission here in America, standing like an unshaken rock in the midst of the billows of sectarianism, if it took its stand as one man on the clear Word and bore witness to the clear Word! There Luther's strength lay. There must remain the strength of Lutheranism over against all sectarian formations, until Judgment Day." (F. Pieper, *Conversion and Election*, p. 103.)

Walther himself. In his *Pastoraltheologie*, Walther says: "The most important work of all pastoral duties is preaching." Walther devotes more than thirty-three pages to the work of preaching, pp. 76—109.

All that Walther says in reference to preaching deserves careful reading and study. We shall do well to quote some of his statements: "A pastor cannot become guilty of greater unfaithfulness in the performance of his official duties, as also in no other way will his high and holy office bring greater damnation upon him, than when he does not most diligently meditate and read and pray in order to give to his congregation the very best he is able to give." "The first requirement is that the sermon contain nothing but the Word of God in all its truth and purity." In order that this may be so, it is also absolutely necessary, says Walther, that the preacher understand rightly to preach the Law and the Gospel. "The second requirement is that the Word of God be properly applied in the sermon." Walther at some length treats the fivefold use of Scripture, according to 2 Tim. 3, 16. 17 and Rom. 15, 4. "The *usus didascalicus*, the doctrinal use of Scripture, is mentioned first by the apostle; this use of Scripture is the most important, for it forms the basis for the others." Walther insisted, first of all, on the preaching of doctrine, but also on the refutation of false doctrine, the correction of a sinful life and encouragement towards a godly life. By means of the Gospel, Walther said, Christians should be encouraged to do good works. "Many preachers, when trying to persuade the Christian people to do good works or to abstain from evil works, accomplish very little because they demand, command, threaten, and reprove rather than admonish. They are not aware of the powerful weapon they have, but are not using." "The third requirement is that the sermon present the whole counsel of God for man's salvation." Walther therefore advises that the preacher, prior to the beginning of a new church-year, outline his sermon program, making sure that in the course of the year all the fundamental doctrines are presented. "A defect of preaching is that a preacher diligently preaches *that* people should believe, but fails to tell them *how they may become* believers." "It is also a defect when a preacher constantly preaches on repentance and faith, but fails to insist on good works and sanctification." Walther warns against the preaching of more Law than Gospel and reminds the Christian preacher that, after all, the doctrine of justification, the sinners' salvation by the grace of God through Jesus Christ, must be "the golden thread running through all his sermons." "The fourth requirement is that the sermon take care of the *special needs* of the hearers." "The fifth requirement is that the sermon be timely (*zeitgemaess*); for," says Walther, "the general corruption of mankind manifests itself at different times in different ways." Walther therefore warns against the preaching of old sermons, either one's own or those of

others. "The sixth and seventh requirements are that the sermon be well arranged and not too long."

Finally, Walther adds a special paragraph in which he stresses *the kind of preaching that grips the heart*. He says: "There is one more thing in reference to preaching which should not escape our attention. Of much preaching it can be said that it does not contain any false doctrine nor that it has failed to observe any one of the aforementioned necessary requirements, and yet, in spite of it all, it lacks one of the chief characteristics of good preaching: it fails to grip the heart and conscience of the hearer. Such sermons are perhaps quite logically arranged, but their entire make-up is not in accordance with Biblico-psychological laws (*nicht biblisch-psychologisch angelegt und geordnet*). Such sermons shoot their arrows over the heads of their hearers, or if they at all take hold of the hearer, they do not hold him, but, like a broken net, let the fish that have been caught escape again; such sermons arouse the hearer in a way and bring forth a certain feeling of satisfaction and some pleasant sentiments, yes, they may even cause wholesome doubts to arise in the mind of a hearer and may persuade him to admire the preacher; but they do not persuade the hearer to form any definite resolutions. To produce such, requires heavenly wisdom and a kind of preaching that cannot be learned from any course in homiletics, but must be learned as a result of one's own personal experience and of sincere, earnest prayer imploring the blessings of the Spirit of God. . . . After a well-prepared sermon that has been well preached, no one will perhaps exclaim, 'What a grand sermon this has been!' But those not yet hardened in their sins will quietly leave the house of God and, while they speak to no other person about the sermon, will so much more feel compelled to speak about it to God. Let no one therefore imagine that such an effect has not been powerful; it is the very best effect that a sermon can produce. Great praise bestowed upon a preacher is often a suspicious sign, for too often it all amounts to — nil."

Happily, Walther did not merely set forth some good fundamental laws of sermonizing for the guidance of other preachers, but his own preaching measured up well to his standard. In order to do justice to the subject under consideration, we ought not merely to point out this or that feature of Walther's sermons, but ought to show by copious quotations from his many sermons published (*Evangelienpostille, Epistelpostille, Brosamen, Gnadenjahr, Festklaenge, Kasualpredigten, Predigentwuerfe*) and perhaps from some unpublished manuscripts still extant, how Walther excels as a preacher. However, the limitation set by the editorial board for this article makes this but a sketchy presentation.

Any one who knows the history of Walther's life — his spiritual struggles in the days of his youth and his conversion, the part he

played among the Saxon immigrants and in the organization and building of our Missouri Synod, his leadership in our doctrinal battles and his connection with Concordia Seminary — will expect that the supremacy of the verbally inspired Word of God is an outstanding feature of Walther's sermons. In a sermon preached on the festival of the Epiphany we hear him bring his sermon to a close in the following words: "My beloved, let us all learn this chief article of believing Christians, to wit, that we give ear only to the Word of God. That is a lamp unto our feet and the right and only light on the way to heaven. 'We have a true prophetic Word,' etc. Learn to know the real trick of the devil, who loves nothing better than to lead us away from the Word; for he knows that, if he can do that, he has won, and we have lost. If we do not put our entire confidence in the Word of God, our faith will avail us nothing; for then it is no true faith, all our praying and sighing and doing will then be useless; yea, we are without Christ, who lets Himself be found only in the Word." (*Gnadenjahr*, p. 73 ff.)

Since all Scripture is given to "make us wise unto salvation through faith which is in Christ Jesus," the Christian sermon must present Christ, the God-man, the Savior. Examining Walther's sermons from this viewpoint, we find that they were Christocentric.

Many a sermon that is preached does not offer to the hearer a good, substantial spiritual meal. The preachers of such sermons may be clever enough to *delight* their hearers, but they do not *edify* them. Those who read Walther's sermons will at once be impressed with the wealth and depth of Scriptural thought presented. Walther's sermons do not abound in platitudes. The preaching of such sermons required much study and labor, especially a good knowledge of the Scriptures. Walther also diligently studied the writings of eminent men in the Church whom the Lord had endowed with a large measure of spiritual wisdom and understanding, especially the works of Luther. At the same time Walther's sermons do not make the impression that he simply "took over" or even copied the thoughts and words of others; Walther thought the matter through and presented it in his own language, thus preserving his own originality and putting to use the natural gifts with which God had endowed him.

The application of the Word of God, says Walther, is a chief requisite of good preaching. That, in fact, is the real purpose of the *viva vox* of the Christian preacher in the pulpit. It is the purpose of the living ministry. The Christian preacher should diligently study the conditions of his time and the social, intellectual, cultural, and spiritual life of his congregation, especially also the peculiar dangers in reference to doctrine and life that are threatening the spiritual welfare of the people entrusted to his care. Accordingly, the Christian preacher should select and apply the Word of God. Walther did

this. Walther cannot be accused either of side-stepping or of failing in an evangelical way to direct his hearers on the right path. In a sermon on Gal. 5, 7 Walther chose as his theme "*Wir sind nicht mehr, die wir waren*" (We are no longer what we formerly were). He divided his theme into three parts, saying: "We shall consider first what change has taken place among us; secondly, the reason for such change; thirdly, what our present condition requires of us today." (*Kasualpredigten*, pp. 172 ff.) In this sermon Walther does not mince words in depicting the deplorable condition existing in his congregation; but he also does not fail to make an evangelical plea for repentance and faith and to direct his people to the never-ending mercy of God and the gracious forgiveness of sin promised in Christ, the Savior.

Many a sermon lacks color and freshness because the preacher presents merely a general topic; he did not dig down into the text for its specific theme. When we study the themes of Walther's sermons, we find that Walther, as a rule, was not guilty of this fault. A few examples of Walther's themes may suffice: "That only is the true faith which clings to the Word of God"; "Why even now many do not know the grace and saving power of the sufferings of Christ"; "The unbelief of believers"; "How shall Christians justify their faith before the world?" "The Christian battles against his invisible enemies"; "In what respect a Christian must be careful in using his Christian liberty"; "Why war is the greatest of God's temporal punishments"; "How one may know that the Holy Spirit has begun His work in one's heart and is continuing it"; "Three chief indications showing that a Christian is in the state of grace"; "How it becomes evident that a Christian is not an unbeliever, but merely weak in his faith."

Only two things can be done with a text. Either we must preach what the text says in so many words (analytic method) or what we have derived from the text (synthetic method). The indirect application of the chief thought of the text is made the theme of the synthetic sermon. Those who would learn how Walther treated a text synthetically will find a good sample in the three sermons which he preached on 1 Cor. 15, 1—10 as these are printed in his *Epistelpostille*, pp. 337—354. We present the theme and parts of the third sermon: "What must a Christian Do in Order that He may Not be Led Astray and be Eternally Lost because of the Good Appearance of Prevailing Errors? 1. He must, above all, hold fast to the fundamental truths as he has learned them from the Gospel. 2. He must always abide by the correct teachings of the Scripture. 3. He must let the testimony of approved teachers of the Church strengthen his faith. 4. He must in deep humility despair of his own unworthiness and wisdom."

An otherwise good sermon may be marred by its language or its faulty presentation. An outstanding feature of Walther's sermons are the beauty of his language, his good diction, and his logical and clear presentation. In order fully to appreciate Walther's language and diction, one must read his sermons in the original German.

Walther very carefully wrote his sermons, making many corrections and additions, as his manuscripts show, in order to make his sermons a well-finished product. He went to the extreme in insisting, at least as far as he himself was concerned, that a preacher must write every word of his sermon, even to good old age. While the young preacher should carefully write his sermons, all of them for about ten years, it is well that after that he write some of his sermons in full and preach others from a well-prepared sketch. The latter method may require even more painstaking labor, but will, in the course of time, make for better pulpit efficiency.

Walther was a preacher who commanded attention. He had a good carrying voice and no pulpit eccentricities.

No preacher has been perfect and beyond improvement, neither was Walther. A fault that must be found with Walther's preaching is that his sermons were not always textual. The overemphasis placed on adhering to the old pericopal system may partly explain this. For instance, in a sermon on the pericope for the Second Sunday after Epiphany, John 2, 1—11, Walther treats the doctrine of marriage in its various aspects, which, of course, the text does not do. He should have chosen another text.

Barring the defect just mentioned, which is found in *some* of Walther's sermons, Walther may well serve as a model for all preachers. We could count ourselves happy and blessed if all our preachers to-day were preachers such as Walther was. The great need of the Church to-day is good preaching. May God, who gave to our Church Walther, the preacher, give us many more preachers like him, preachers who are conscious of their opportunities and responsibilities and who conscientiously consecrate themselves to their God and Savior in their work of preaching, remembering the words of Paul to the young preacher Timothy: "I charge thee therefore before God and the Lord Jesus Christ, who shall judge the quick and the dead at His appearing and His kingdom: Preach the Word; be instant in season, out of season; reprove, rebuke, exhort, with all long-suffering and doctrine; for the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine, but after their own lusts shall they heap to themselves teachers, having itching ears; and they shall turn away their ears from the truth and shall be turned unto fables. But watch thou in all things, endure afflictions, do the work of an evangelist, make full proof of thy ministry," 2 Tim. 4, 1—5.

J. H. C. FRITZ.