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Walther's Pastoral Theology

An Appreciation

By FREDERIC NIEDNER

IT is unfortunate that the pen that is writing this article should be in my hand. It would be vastly more appropriate and of greatly increased value if this could have been written by one of the men who were in the classroom of Concordia Seminary when Walther taught *Pastoraltheologie*. I wish it could have been done by the man who held the position of pastor in Immanuel Lutheran Church in St. Charles, Mo., during the 22 years before I held the same position for 32 years, my very worthy predecessor, Dr. Julius A. Friedrich. He was a student under Walther and was graduated in the year that Walther died. Although Walther was unable to sign the diplomas of that year, young Friedrich, in his great love and admiration for his teacher, went to his home and begged him to append his signature to the diploma. The signature of Walther on his diploma was the last feeble effort that Walther made to write his name.

It was a source of lifelong satisfaction to Friedrich, and he took great delight in telling of the episode. And I am sure that if Friedrich could be writing this article it would be replete with personal reminiscences and revealing quotations.

Still I have a reason for wishing to write the article. After graduating from the University of Leipzig in Germany and after four years of tutoring, young Pastor Walther was assigned to the Lutheran congregation at Braeunsdorf in Saxony in 1837. Thereby he became the successor of Pastor Augustus Theophilus Niedner,

my great-grandfather, who had died there after serving the congregation for just as many years as I served the congregation at St. Charles. He was also a sponsor at the Baptism of little Carl Ferdinand Wilhelm Walther 150 years ago.

The origin of Walther's *Pastorale* is described in the preface to the book. It was really not written as a book at all, but was a compilation of essays that the author wrote and published in *Lehre und Wehre* from 1865 to 1871. In 1872 these articles were embodied in the volume with which we are concerning ourselves.

For what purpose were the essays written, and what was the purpose of the book? It must be remembered that Walther was firmly determined that the Lutheran Church in the New World should not be a copy of the Lutheran Church that he and the other Saxon immigrants had left behind in Germany. He wanted the Lutheran Church in America to be governed and administered according to God's holy Word. That was the reason for the essays on "Materials for Pastoral Theology" and for the publication of the book. For pastoral theology is the practical ability to perform correctly the functions of the holy ministry, such as the preaching of the Word, the administration of Holy Baptism, the celebration of Holy Communion, the practice of church discipline, the private care of souls (*Privatseelsorge*), and the management of a congregation. "It is not something contained in a book but is found in the soul of a Christian" said

Dr. F. Pieper in his lectures in 1908. Somewhere there had to be a source book where the American Lutheran pastor, living and working under altogether different conditions from those in Germany, could find guidance that was in consonance with the Holy Bible. The doctor has his *materia medica*, the chemist his *pharmacopoeia*, the lawyer his *corpus iuris*. The pastor needs a *pastorale*.

Walther's articles about the application of God's Word to the problems and activities of pastors and congregations were not written on the basis of imaginary situations and hypothetical questions, but were the result of deep and devout study of Scripture and of actual experiences in the ministry. He had had a brief pastorate in Saxony; in America he was the pastor of two congregations in Perry County for two years; and for nine years he was the pastor of the four congregations in St. Louis. Even after becoming a professor of theology at Concordia Seminary in 1850 he retained general supervision of these churches in St. Louis. During all this time he had to deal with many problems and give pastoral advice in many pressing situations. And out of this activity there grew the material which he embodied in his articles in *Lehre und Wehre* and which subsequently made up his *Pastorale*.

A factor that has maintained the coherence of the ministry of the Missouri Synod and that has promoted their adherence to the doctrines confessed by the Lutheran Church and that has unified their practice has been the custom of attending "pastoral conferences," where church leaders would read papers on doctrine and practical church work, where questions could be asked, advice solicited, and opin-

ions exchanged. At such conferences Walther would be ready to let his brethren in the ministry have the benefit of his theological acumen. It was customary for the chairman of a conference to begin the session by asking, "Who has a question of casuistry?" The brethren would then submit the questions that were giving them concern and trouble in their churches. And it was a blessed conference that had men in it like Walther, whose Scripturally based dicta would often be accepted as the solution without further discussion. It has also been the practice for years to submit intricate questions in casuistry to the faculty of Concordia Seminary for the purpose of securing an opinion as a guide for proper procedure, and some of our older pastors treasured such opinions written by Walther.

The author of the *Pastorale* exhibits characteristic modesty and concern in the preface to his book. He is somewhat apologetic about applying the high-sounding title "Pastoral Theology" to his book, since it was only a collection of essays. But now that the building stones are assembled into a permanent structure, he thinks that the edifice must have a name. He explains the phrase "American Lutheran" by indicating that from the great mass of material available to him he had culled only such portions as were applicable to the church in this country and valuable for a pastor in America. And he says that he has resisted the temptation to amplify and expand the material of the essays when they were made into the book, so that his fellow pastors, hard-pressed for financial resources as by his own experience he knew them to be, would not be deterred or prohibited from purchasing the book

which they so sorely needed in their work in the church. And finally the sainted author sent out his book with the pious wish "that the Lord of the church might lay His blessing upon this insignificant contribution toward the proper administration of the holy ministry. The author hopes for such a blessing especially because he has not merely produced his own material but also collated material that is found in writings of experienced men of God, material difficult to find and often unobtainable." (Preface to the fifth edition of his *Pastoraltheologie*, 1906)

It is true, of course, that Walther drew considerably upon church conditions in Germany in describing problems and procedures. He quotes voluminously from a vast array of German theologians, homileticians, and biographers and adduces many regulations and decisions made by the governmental consistories and officials whose responsibility and duty it was, under the church-state system in vogue, to render binding decisions on matters of dispute among church members, on matters of church discipline in the congregations, and on matters of proper procedure by the clergy. Yet he does not just import these ecclesiastical laws and regulations and make them the rule of the Lutheran Church in America. Quite carefully he lifts out of the sometimes verbose and complicated opinions the salient points that would apply to conditions in a church carrying on its activities without the regulations or molestation of any governmental bureau. Above all, Walther's undeviating adherence to the Bible as his rule and norm of faith and life and his unyielding stand on the confessions of the Lutheran Church caused him to quote Scripture again and again as

the basis and reason for the directions and opinions that he gives in his *Pastorale*.

It is not saying too much to aver that this book, next to the Bible itself and the confessional writings of the Lutheran Church, has exerted more influence upon the formation of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod and upon the life and work of Lutheran pastors in America than any other similar treatise. In fact, it may be said that the coinage of Lutheran pastors in the mints of our seminaries during many years bears the image and superscription of Walther's *Pastorale*; that the concept of these pastors of their vocation as ministers was influenced greatly, and that their method of work in their churches was guided largely, by the directions given them in the book by American Lutheranism's great teacher.

Look where you will in the thick volume of 429 pages (if you are able to read and relish the fine and involved sentences in Walther's German), and you will find answers to the many questions that the practice of religion and the management of the church bring up. There are times when we may even suspect Walther of peering into the future. With eyes and understanding for the problems of the 19th century he seems to provide principles for the solution of problems for the imminence of which the church would wait till the 20th century.

There is the sweeping assertion, definitely based upon Holy Scripture, that the functions of the holy ministry may be entrusted by the church only to such men as have been made adequate for their tasks of preaching and administering the sacraments by their knowledge of Scripture, and as have been properly called into their

office, and as are certain that they have a divine call to preach. The Biblical concept that the call to the ministry emanates from God and that the minister is an appointee of God for the church leads him to assert that there can be no such thing as a call with a set termination. One cannot break God's contract. In our day, when the ramified and ever-changing activities in the church have made a revised study of the doctrine of the call mandatory, and when we have often reluctantly come to the conclusion that one cannot equate the circumstances under which the church labored in apostolic times with the conditions under which the church is working today, one finds that Walther's *Pastorale* lays down basic principles that for all time, then and now, will decide many of the pressing problems with which congregations, boards of control, and District and synodical officials have to wrestle.

The *Pastorale* devotes many of its pages to the subject of preaching, without becoming a manual on homiletics. The interesting point is made that the pastor, newly entering the field of work to which he has been called, will carefully consider the contents of his inaugural sermon as a statement to his flock of what they may expect of him. The pastor is advised to choose the pericope of the Sunday as the text for this sermon and to teach the lessons of the text, slanting the exposition toward the purpose for which he is preaching the sermon. Such a procedure is worth emulation at many other occasions too; the preacher will be laying a foundation of doctrine from which he can then go over to the practical matter that lies before him.

Rightly the *Pastorale* devotes many

pages to the two sacraments, to their significance, and especially to the methods and procedures connected with their administration by the pastor. The author points out what are the fundamental and necessary acts in administering the sacraments, setting aside some questions as trivial and unneeded complications.

The dissertations concerning marriage occupy 60 pages, giving evidence that the problems of courtship, engagement, marriage, faithfulness, separation and divorce, with which the church must concern itself in very great measure in our day, are not a novelty for our century. The pastor is enjoined to pronounce his benediction only upon such couples as he finds to be without any hindrance to their marriage, either of a civic or a religious nature, and then to watch over the union that he has blessed so that it is not dissolved in a way displeasing to God.

In a day when, as we might surmise, the "youth problem" of the church was not one of great concern because our churches were largely rural, because the family bond was knit very closely, because the opportunities for youthful extravagance in behavior were not so many, and because the money for enjoying many worldly pleasures was often lacking, the *Pastorale* still has a great deal to say about the pastor's concern for the confirmed youth of the church. Indeed the very treatment of the church's custom of confirmation, occupying but three pages of the *Pastorale*, points to the patent fact that what goes on *before* confirmation and what is done *after* confirmation, is of greater moment than what goes on at the day of confirmation. Rightly Walther insists on adequate preparation for church membership

through instruction by means of Luther's Catechism, and rightly he insists on continued attention on the part of the pastor to the young people of the church—as if he had foreseen the problems for whose solution the youth organization was later founded that bears his revered name. The Walther League forms a great part of our concern today, as we gear our church work, our educational institutions, our congregational activities, toward saving the youth for the church. "He who has the young people has the future"—that Walther knew in 1861 and said it.

Very carefully Walther distinguishes between essentials and nonessentials in the activity of the church. Basing his assertions on the episode in the Bible when the question arose as to whether it was permissible for Christians to purchase and eat meat that had been sacrificed to idols and was subsequently offered for sale in the shops, he differentiated carefully between what is sin *per se* and what may become sin *per accidens*. Some things are sin because they are clearly forbidden by God's Law; some things not clearly forbidden by God's Law can become sin through improper use.

And so one may read on and on in this fruitful volume of directions for a blessed ministry, as the writer did 50 years ago in the classrooms of Concordia Seminary, filling the interleaved blank pages of the book with the gems of thought that were dictated by Dr. Francis Pieper or that fell casually from his lips as he lectured to his students out of the treasure store of Wal-

ther's *Pastorale*. There existed a suspicion that Pieper's somewhat brief tenure as a parish pastor might not have been as productive of practical experiences in the ministry as his lectures portrayed; yet the depth of understanding of human nature and the sagacious counsel that was offered to the budding pastor in those lectures was evidence of his great insights into the true nature and work of the church and his clear understanding of the principles of theology that were the heritage derived from his, and our, great teacher. He scooped deeply into the stream of Walther's theology and brought forth nuggets of gold and fashioned them into gems for the spiritual embellishment of the pastors of the Lutheran Church.

It is not likely that there are many pastors today who make use of the book which nearly 100 years ago proved a gold mine of information and guidance for the pastors and congregations of the Lutheran Church, but it is safe to say that later writer of treatises and books on pastoral theology have leaned heavily upon the book that Walther wrote. Thus the influence of this 100-year-old book, though not directly felt today as it was in decades past, may still be discerned in published writings and in classrooms in Lutheran theological seminaries. For this we are grateful, and we give thanks to God for His gift of Dr. Carl Ferdinand Wilhelm Walther and for the books and writings he left us, still known and valued by the church in our day.

St. Charles, Mo.