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“Synodical Address—1848”

C. F. W. WALTHER

(THE 1848 SYNODICAL ADDRESS OF C. F. WALTHER, WHICH IS PRESENTED HERE IN translation, clearly sets forth his views on the relationship between the congregations and The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod. Dr. Walther's views were repeated almost verbatim in a “Brother to Brother” (*Mein theurer Herr Amtsbruder*) letter of Jan. 12, 1875, in which he assured the congregations of their freedom to accept or reject synodical resolutions, and then pleaded with them to “freely” accept a synodical resolution that called for a building fund collection for new construction at three synodical schools. His address appeared in *Zweiter Synodal-Bericht, 1848*. It previously appeared in English in the *Concordia Historical Institute Quarterly*, XXXIII [April 1960], in a translation prepared by Paul F. Koehneke. The present translation was prepared by John Pohanka, a graduate student at Concordia Seminary, St. Louis. Walther's 1875 letter will appear in a volume of his letters being edited by Carl S. Meyer, to be published by Concordia Publishing House in connection with the 125th anniversary of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod.)

In the name of the holy, blessed, triune God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

Honored fellow pastors and brothers in Christ. Comforting and strengthening days have once again descended upon us as members and servants of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in this land during these troubled times. We know now and have known for some time that we are bound in one faith, but until now few of us knew each other personally, and most of us had to work and struggle alone and at great distances from one another. But God has bestowed His grace on us by enabling us to assemble here and to witness openly by our actions to the unity in faith. Also by God's grace we are to be strengthened, to confess together our most holy faith, to build on that faith, and to take our individual burdens and carry them in united prayer before God. During the present time our brothers in the faith in most other lands, especially in Germany, live under the unrest and confusion of a ravishing

disintegration of all existing relationships in church and state. While our brothers elsewhere are banished to merely sighing in the privacy of their bedrooms, we here are able to gather quietly under the shadows of a calm peace to refresh our spirit. Thanks, humble thanks for this be to Him who is eternally so friendly and always full of goodness.

We are not here only for personal reasons; we have come primarily as servants and members of the church, in the name and on behalf of our congregations, to consider in the fear of the Lord the needs of our congregations and the church in general. Therefore, the confessions we make here and the resolutions we draft are a great responsibility. Many eyes are focused on us; some look at our actions in fear, some in hope. In general, however, our assembly is challenged—and we must admit this without reservation—not just to benefit ourselves but to bring a blessing to our congregations and to the entire church.

I do not doubt for a moment that all of

you, my dear brothers in Christ, have come here with the heartfelt petition to God that our labors may bear fruit. As members of this body let us, above all else, firmly focus our eyes on the holy purpose of bearing the kind of fruit that will be of benefit to our congregations and the entire church. The fearful thought that our deliberations can only remain fruitless may be in all of us—in some more than in others; I mean the thought that we, according to the constitution under which we exist as a Synod, only have the power to *advise*, that we possess only the power of the *Word* and *conviction*. Clearly, according to the constitution we have no right to draw up decrees, to issue laws and ordinances, and to pass judgment on any matter that imposes something on the congregation or to which the congregation must unconditionally submit. In no way does our constitution make us a kind of papal senate or a supreme court over our congregations. The constitution allows complete freedom in everything except the Word of God, faith, and love. According to our constitution (*Verfassung*) we do not stand *over* our congregations, but among them and *at their side*. How? Should it not be by seizing the opportunity to exercise a completely wholesome influence on our congregations? Have we not made ourselves into a mere *semblance* of synod by accepting a constitution such as ours? According to the conditions of our constitution, will we not grow weary with lost labors because no one is compelled to submit to our resolutions?

To these questions all of you will certainly answer with me: No! You do not even need my reasoning to arrive at that answer. At the beginning of this year's

assembly I hope that you will gladly lend me your ears as I seek to direct your thoughts to the present subject for a few moments more. Indeed, no one among you realizes more than I do how unfit I am to step before this honorable assembly and teach in the midst of teachers. But even though I am the least among you, I am obligated to speak to you because of the office with which you have charged me. But I also hope that I am able, in the light of the limits of my knowledge and hasty preparation, to stimulate you to reflect further on this most important matter. Such reflection will certainly be for your benefit.

The question which I intend to answer briefly is this:

Why should and can we carry out our work with joy even though we have no power except the power of the Word?

The first and most important motivation is this: Because Christ has given His servants only this power and none other. Even the holy apostles dedicated themselves solely to the power of the Word and have warned the servants of the church against claiming any other power.

Christ has plainly and clearly explained that His church does not resemble an earthly kingdom. To Pilate's question of whether Jesus was King of the Jews, etc., Jesus spoke that most important phrase: "My kingdom is not of this world. If My kingdom were of this world, My servants would fight so that I would not surrender to the Jews; My kingdom is not thence." Jesus shows wherein the true and genuine character of His kingdom and His church exists when He adds: "I am born and came into this world that I might witness

the truth; whoever is of the truth — he hears My voice." It is also pertinent to this point that elsewhere Christ calls His kingdom a *heavenly kingdom*. The holy apostles call His kingdom the house and city of God, the Jerusalem that is above, the *free*, the congregation of the firstborn who are written down in heaven, etc. Christ's kingdom and church, therefore, is a kingdom of truth, a spiritual, heavenly kingdom, a kingdom of God where completely free citizens of heaven dwell, guests of God, prophets, priests, and kings.

Who is it, then, who has the *power* in this kingdom? It is *Jesus Christ* alone. He Himself says, "I am King." "I am the Good Shepherd." "One Man is your Master: Christ." The apostle calls Him "the Head over all of the congregation; which is His body, namely, the fullness of that which fulfills all things in all." Even though He visibly departed from His church and is seated at the right hand of Majesty in heaven, we can still see how Christ exercises power in His church. According to the message He gave His disciples when He left them for the last time, He says, "To Me is given *all* power in heaven and on earth. Therefore go and teach all people, baptizing them in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit; teach them to observe all things that I have commanded you. And see, I am with you always, even to the end of the world." His *Word*, therefore, accompanied and sealed with the holy sacraments, is the means by which Christ exercises the power in His church. The *Word* is the "scepter" with which He rules His people and the "staff and rod" with which He leads His sheep to pasture.

Christ not only declares that He is the

only One who has the power in His church, exercised by His *Word*, but He denies to everyone any other power, rule, or imperative in His church but the *Word*. He not only says, as I mentioned before, "You have only one Master—Christ," but He adds: "*You are all brothers*," i. e., in My church you are all *alike*, you are subject to Me, and no one is lord and master of another. Elsewhere Jesus says to His disciples: "You know the worldly princes rule and the kings have power. *It should not be so among you*; but if one among you wants *to be* powerful, let him be your *servant*. And whoever wants to be distinguished, let him be your *slave*."

What Christ denied to His disciples they never appropriated. They were subservient to Jesus Christ alone and to His *Word*. They said, "We do not associate with rogues or falsify God's *Word*, but we reveal the truth. For we preach not of ourselves but Jesus Christ; that He is the Lord; we, however, are your servants for Jesus' sake" (2 Cor. 4). St. Paul used the expression that he had not come to Corinth because he wanted to "spare" the Corinthians (2 Cor. 1:23). It may have appeared to many that when Paul said this he was setting himself up as a master who had the power to retain or remit, punish or spare, as it pleased him. To clarify what he meant, Paul immediately added: "Not that we are *masters* over your faith, but rather we are assistants of your joy." Furthermore, when the apostle Paul presses this congregation for a collection for the poor, he adds: "I am not saying that I am commanding you; but because others are so diligent, I also am trying your love whether it is of the right kind." Previously, the apostle testified to the Corinthians when

he saw that they were paying more attention to persons than to the proclamation of the Word: "Who is Paul? Who is Apollos? They are *servants*, through whom you have become faithful. No one should boast about a person. Everything belongs to you. Whether it is Paul or Apollos, Cephas or the world, life or death, present or future—everything is yours. You, however, belong to *Christ*, and Christ is of God." The apostles never claimed to be the sole executors of matters such as the election and installation of officers, officers who were to be concerned with the physical care of the congregations. When the almoners were to be chosen in Jerusalem, the apostles addressed the congregation: "Dear brothers, look among yourselves for seven men of good reputation and full of the Holy Spirit and wisdom, whom we may appoint for this necessity. We, however, will continue with prayer and the office of the *Word*." It says, furthermore, that "this message pleased the entire crowd, and they chose Stephen, etc. These they presented to the apostles." When Paul finally came to Jerusalem, as recorded in Acts 21, he had gained the reputation there of being an enemy of the Mosaic law. James and the elders did not want to make a decision concerning the Mosaic law by themselves. They did not want to force the congregation to be content with their judgment. As a result, the entire church council said with one accord, "What now? The crowd must gather, for they will know that you have come." Also, in Acts 15, when a dispute arose among the Christians in Antioch on whether or not heathen converts had to be circumcised, and Paul and Barnabas could not calm the disagreeing crowd, the congregation chose Paul, Barnabas,

and others as their representatives. The congregation sent these representatives to seek counsel in Jerusalem. Not only were Peter and James in Jerusalem, but the largest group of converted and distinguished Jews was also there. What happened? The apostles and elders gathered to consider the matter of the Mosaic law; however, they were not so bold as to exclude the congregation; all came together and different points of view were debated. Finally, Peter and James stepped forward and put the matter in the right perspective. A joint resolution was adopted and put in the form of a synodical letter saying, "We, the apostles, elders, and brothers—we have met together and agreed." It is evident from this incident how far removed the apostles were from presuming any authority over the congregations. Even in the most important church meetings the apostles allowed the so-called laity no less right, position, or vote than themselves.

Therefore, the apostles caution everyone who holds an office in the church to be, above all else, serious and faithful. Peter writes: "So I exhort the elders among you, as a fellow elder: Tend the flock of God that is in your charge, exercising the oversight not by constraint but willingly, not for shameful gain but eagerly, *not as domineering over those in your charge but as examples to the flock*" [1 Peter 5:1-3]. In the same manner Paul exhorts Timothy: "Do not rebuke an older man, but appeal to him as if he were your father. Treat the younger men as your brothers, the older women as mothers, and the younger women as sisters, with all purity" [1 Tim. 5:1-2]. The holy apostles bestow only *one* power on those who serve the church in

a governing capacity, i. e., the power of the Word. Thus the apostle Peter writes: "Whoever speaks, must speak God's Word — so that in all things God be praised in Jesus Christ" [1 Peter 4:11]. And Paul writes to Timothy: "Preach the Word, exhort, whether it is in season or out of season." [2 Tim. 4:2]

The only power we possess, my honorable brothers in the ministry and esteemed congregational representatives, is without a doubt the power of the Word. We are not renouncing our rights when we, as servants of the church and members of an ecclesiastical synod, claim no other power but the power of the Word. In the church, where Christ alone rules, there can be no other power to which everyone must submit. Indeed, there are things which God's Word does not define and which must still be regulated in the church. However, all such things should not be determined by exerting power over the congregation. The congregation itself (teacher and listener) should regulate these matters, free from force, as it seems necessary and beneficial to them.

What about those who demand some kind of power in the church besides the power of the Word? These people are depriving Christ's church of the freedom that He earned for it with His precious blood. They are degrading this free heavenly Jerusalem in which there are only kings, priests, and prophets, this kingdom of God, this heavenly kingdom of truth, to a police state where a person must submit to every human ordinance. They stand by Christ, the only true king, as far as His kingly crown is concerned, but they make themselves kings over His kingdom; they push the only true teacher, Christ, out of

His position and make themselves masters in His church; they seek to depose Christ, the only true head, from His church and set themselves up as heads of His spiritual body. They elevate themselves above the holy apostles and assume a power that is denied to them in God's Word, yes, a power that God grants to no one, to no creature, not even to an angel or an arch-angel.

My brothers, we are entrusted with no power but the power of the Word — not only in our parishes but especially in this assembly. Can we become depressed, then, because no other power is granted to us? Certainly not! The power of the Word must inspire us to carry out our present tasks in this land joyfully; for it is in this way that the church maintains its true character of a heavenly kingdom among us. In this way, also, Christ remains what He truly is, the only Lord, the only King, the only Head, the only Master, and our labor and office retains the correct apostolic form! How could we desire a power which Christ has denied us, which no apostle ever appropriated, and which would rob our congregations of the character of the true church and the true apostolic form?

It cannot be denied that congregations have the freedom to surrender their rights in many things and to delegate persons who will represent their interests to an established representative church government; this was, and is the case in parts of Germany.

Similarly, our own congregations possessed the undeniable freedom of granting our Synod, as gathered here in their name, power beyond the Word. Whether or not it would be wise for them to do so is another question. I do not think that it was

wise for them to do so because, considering the present circumstances, we can confidently hope for glorious success in our work—rather, God's work—using only the power of the Word. That is the second reason why we can and should carry out our work joyfully even though we possess no power except the power of the Word.

It could very well be that there are times and situations when the church would benefit by placing decisive and governing powers into the hands of individuals or representatives. For example, who would dispute that the German consistories in their own time were a blessing to the church, especially since Isaiah's prophecy, "Kings shall be your foster fathers, and their princesses shall be your nurses" (Is. 49:23), has been fulfilled in our German Lutheran Church? Anyone who knows a little history could not possibly deny that the Swedish church under its *episcopal structure* was gloriously edifying—especially when such men as Laurentius Petri, the famous Swedish Bible translator and Luther's pupil, was a bishop and the two Gustavuses were kings? However, if we take a look at the situation *here*, we would be hard pressed to find an organizational structure better than that in which congregations freely rule themselves and yet join together to form a synod for the purpose of mutual brotherly advice, care, support, and of furthering the work of the church in general—a synod such as we have formed with the help of God.

If our congregations had given us full power to decide and direct in their name, it seems that it would have been very easy for us to give all of our member congregations the proper Lutheran form since all of the members would be bound by our

organization. But that only seems to be true.

There may always be congregations who use their freedom to reject our proposals, even when these proposals are beneficial to them. In doing so they are freely depriving themselves of a blessing. But what would be the result if these very congregations by joining our Synod would have been bound to submit to all our regulations? In this case the use of our power would result in constant discontent and continual fear of hierarchical efforts. In a word, it would cause endless friction. In a republic such as the United States a sense of freedom and independence is strongly cherished by persons of all ages. It is inevitable, then, that even a well-intentioned limit that goes beyond the limits set by God would appear as an ordinance and evoke opposition from many who would have accepted the limit if they had the *freedom* to accept or reject it. Suppose that all congregations submitted to synodical ordinances, even those concerning matters that are not commanded or forbidden by God, because they were made binding, but did so with inner uncertainty and displeasure—what would be accomplished? In following this path many congregations would take on the *form* of Lutheran congregations without the Lutheran *essence*. Our Synod would become a huge multi-membered *machine*, but it would not be a living *organism*; the more the *external structure* would succeed, the more the *internal life* would disappear. We would care for trees that are rotten to the root and cultivate plants that the Father did not sow and that, therefore, must be uprooted. We would often imagine that we accomplished great things while, in fact,

our works would be really empty vessels in God's eyes, and our apparent growth would actually be nothing more than growth toward numbness that would eventually result in death and a large mass of lifeless forms. Our main concern would soon become discharging our own human ordinances and arrangements; this would consume the blessed struggle for the true treasure of the church—the *purity and unity of teaching*. In short, we would lose sight of our glorious goal—to build the true church which has no external form but which is God's kingdom in the hearts of people—and we ourselves, at the very best, would soon dissolve. In our free country there are religious bodies with strict representative organization, and they prosper via their organization. Why? Because the congregations are never allowed to recognize their freedom and their *consciences* are bound to the organization. In our Evangelical Lutheran Church, however, where we must proclaim to our congregations that the choice of church structure is an inalienable part of their Christian freedom and that Christians, as members of the church, are subject to no power except the clear Word of the living God, the horrible results of limiting congregational freedom are truly to be feared, especially in a free country such as ours.

However, we can hope for entirely different results if the only unconditional demand we make of our congregations is subjection to the Word, a demand to which we are also subject. That hope is further established if we grant our congregations autonomy and stand beside them in an advisory capacity. We must not worry that if we follow this course of action the worldly elements of a political democracy

will intrude upon the church, that an enslaving democracy, a papacy will develop, or that we who are servants of Christ will become the slaves of men. How can this kind of democracy be an ungodly democracy when the people use their God-given rights? How can such a democracy be a papacy when priestly Christians do not tolerate human laws that God has neither commanded nor forbidden, but unconditionally obey only the preacher of the Word as Christ Himself speaks through him when he proclaims Christ's Word? No, a democracy is disgraceful when people prescribe exactly what the preacher of God's Word may or may not proclaim; when people choose for themselves to contradict God's Word and in any way hinder the performance of the ministerial office according to the Word. A democracy is disgraceful when people claim for themselves to make ordinances in the church and exclude the pastor from this power and demand that he submit to their ordinances. The preacher who fears men or desires to please men does not serve Christ. Such a preacher is a slave of men and diverges from God's Word and says what his listeners want to hear. However, where the preacher is given *only* the power of the Word—the *full* power—and where the congregation hears Christ's Word preached and receives it as God's Word, then the preacher stands in the right relationship to his congregation; not as a hired hand but as one sent by God; not as a slave to men but as a servant of Christ who teaches, admonishes, and corrects in Christ's stead. This complies with the apostolic admonition, "*Obey your teachers and follow them, for they are caring for your souls and must give an accounting; in order that they*

work joyfully, not sadly, for that would not help you" [Heb. 13:17]. The more a congregation sees that its spiritual leader wants it to submit only to Christ and His Word, and the more it realizes that its pastor does not desire to rule it—yes, that he even zealously guards the congregation's freedom—the more willing the congregation will become to listen to the pastor's beneficial proposals, even in those areas which God has left open. Thus, the people will gladly follow the pastor as their father in Christ for their own welfare and not because a taskmaster is commanding them.

Our synodical organization can also exert such a beneficial influence if it attempts to work with the Word of God and only the Word of God. There will certainly be struggles, but they will not be those disheartening conflicts which require obedience to human rules. Rather, they will be sacred struggles for God's Word, for His honor and kingdom. The more congregations realize that we desire the power of God's Word which sanctifies all believers, and no other power, the more open they will be to our advice. Those who do not want the Word will separate from us; those who love the Word will find refuge in our fellowship. If people accept our resolutions, they will do so not because they are strange, externally imposed burdens but because they are seen as beneficial gifts of brotherly love. They will defend and preserve these resolutions as their own property.

It is true that we have no power but the power of the Word, but we should still perform our work joyfully. Therefore, my esteemed brothers, let us *exercise* this power correctly. Let us be intent above all else and in every matter on proclaiming the pure teaching of our Evangelical Lutheran Church among us. Let us make this pure teaching familiar to all our congregations and preserve it from falsification, treating it as a precious possession. Let us not compromise one iota of what the Word requires. Let us make the Word the controlling power in our congregations—on this point let us be firm and unbending. If we do this, we do not have to be concerned about the success of our work. Even if the work *appears* to be fruitless, it cannot be, for the Word does not return void, but accomplishes the thing to which the Lord sends it. The church was established by the Word, without any other power, and has been preserved to this very hour by the Word alone, in spite of Satan's fury and madness. Throughout her history all of the great actions of the church have been accomplished by the Word. Through the Word alone the church will stand, even in these confusing times. The church will stand until the end of time, and even the gates of hell will not prevail against it. "For all flesh is like grass, and all human beauty is like the flower. The grass withers and the flower falls off, but the Lord's Word remains forever." [Is. 40:6-8; 1 Peter 1:24] Amen.