

American-Lutheran Pastoral Theology
by C.F. W. Walther, trans. Christian
C. Tiews, ed. David Loy. Saint Louis:
Concordia Publishing House, 2017.

“IT IS ALWAYS A SIGN OF A DEEP SPIRITUAL SICKNESS when a church forgets its fathers,” observed Hermann Sasse (see “Fathers of the Church” in *The Lonely Way*, Vol. II:229). Conversely, it is a sign of spiritual vitality that Concordia Publishing House is making the writings of one of our fathers, C.F.W. Walther (1811-1887), available to a new generation of pastors. Walther’s convention essays, sermons, writings on church fellowship, his work on church and office, and his acclaimed book on the proper distinction of the law from the gospel have recently been published in fresh and contemporary English dress by Concordia Publishing House. It is perhaps his pastoral theology along with the book on law and gospel that will have the most enduring significance for confessional Lutheran pastors.

The *American-Lutheran Pastoral Theology* is striking for at least two reasons. First, it is a carefully executed attempt to provide a classical Lutheran pastoral theology drawing on Luther and the orthodox Lutheran fathers. Second, we may not overlook the fact that it is also *American*. Walther recognized and addressed the needs of largely immigrant pastors serving in North America. He brings Luther’s legacy focused through the lens of Lutheran Orthodoxy to bear on the life and work of pastors serving in villages and cities that were remote from the German homeland with its territorial churches and established ecclesiastical practices.

Walther is sometimes accused of being a repristination theologian as he collects citations from the fathers and, in large part, uses them to address cases of pastoral practice. This accusation overlooks the fact that Walther was intimately familiar with his sources and uses them creatively to address contemporary concerns. The criticism also fails to take into account the fact that Walther prepared the *American-Lutheran Pastoral Theology* for clergymen who lacked access to many of the books he references. This accounts for the fact that Walther’s book is something of a compendium punctuated by his own observations gleaned from pastoral experience in the new world.

The structure of the *American-Lutheran Pastoral Theology* is systematic and practical. Walther defines pastoral theology as “disposition of the soul” and not merely as a theoretical discipline or science in order to demonstrate that the minister’s sufficiency is ultimately from the triune God (see II Cor. 2:16; 3:5-6).

Standing squarely within the legacy of Luther, Walther provides a succinct yet potent commentary on the Reformer's *oratio, meditatio, tentatio*. Walther also demonstrates his indebtedness to Contra Porta's *Pastorale Lutheri*, the first Lutheran pastoral theology, which he lauds as a gathering up of practical import for the care of souls from Luther's writings. Walther also provides his readers with a survey of pastoral literature produced by Lutherans since the Reformation, especially recommending the writings of Johann Ludwig Hartmann (1640-1684).

Before turning to specific pastoral acts, Walther treats the nature and necessity of the Call proceeding from the assertion of Article 14 of the Augsburg Confession that no one is to publicly teach, preach, or administer the sacraments unless he is rightly called. No one puts himself into the office, a man is put there by God acting through the instrumentality of the church. For Walther this is more than a matter of good order for it is the call that gives the minister the certainty that his work is pleasing to God and blessed by Him. Temporary calls are rejected as illegitimate as they make of the office a job assignment that can be established and terminated by the will of the congregation. Walther sees a legitimate Call as binding both pastor and congregation to the Word of God and the Lutheran Confessions. Candidates for the ministry are examined, called, and ordained. On the other hand Walther resolutely rejects a system of "licensing" as "unbiblical, unconscionable, and spiritually corrupting" (77). While the "laying on of hands" is by apostolic custom rather than divine mandate, Walther concludes that only an enemy of peace and good order would despise the practice (79-80).

Walther provides thoughtful advice to pastors who are beginning their work in a new place, especially urging evangelical visitation in the homes, warning the new pastor not to listen to gossip and hearsay. The new pastor is wisely advised to show respect for his predecessor in office.

Of all the pastoral acts, Walther gives primacy to preaching. Comfort and hope must be the goal of every sermon: "Sermons with no encouragement for one who bears a cross and is afflicted with tribulations are not true evangelical sermons. However, they must not contain comfort only for *fear because of sin* pangs of conscience, but also for all the miseries of *this life*" (107). Walther is critical of the antinomian tendency to preach as though only the new man exists. The forgiveness of sins carries with it the power of the resurrection. Reproof has its place in the sermon, but Walther warns that the preacher must take great care lest he "easily make hypocrites rather than repentant sinners" (122).

The *American-Lutheran Pastoral Theology* includes extensive treatments of Baptism and the Lord's Supper. Walther takes up a discussion of the legitimate formula for Baptism while also distinguishing what Christ has mandated and human ceremonies or customs. Numerous issues of casuistry are treated in-

cluding the question of who has authority to bring a child to Baptism, criteria for baptismal sponsors, uncertain baptisms, and emergency baptism. Walther's treatment of the Lord's Supper is even more extensive as he deals with both liturgical and pastoral issues, including the relationship of individual confession and absolution to the Sacrament of the Altar as well as closed communion. The consecrated bread and wine are not to be reserved and then sent to the sick and shut in. Consecration, distribution, and reception "must be complete and uninterrupted" (219).

Significant space is devoted to marriage. Walther notes that the pastor has a threefold obligation: (1) to join in marriage only those whose marital union does not conflict with human or divine law; (2) to carry out the marriage ceremony in a proper way; and (3) to watch that the marital bond is not dissolved contrary to God's will (235).

Walther insists on the necessity of home visits and individual pastoral care. The shepherd is to go to the sheep to ascertain their spiritual condition and to exhort, admonish, teach, encourage, and comfort as needed. He is especially to be present at the bedside of the sick and the dying with God's Word as every illness is a "messenger of death" (339). The spiritual care of the flock does not exclude the pastor's responsibility to look out for the physical well-being of those under his care. Walther recognizes that the care of the poor and destitute are part of the pastor's calling.

The dead are to be buried, Walther asserts, in a dignified way, giving testimony to the Christian faith. Walther distinguishes between "honorable" and "dishonorable" burials. Honorable burials are given to those who depart this life in the Christian faith.

Without naming it as such, Walther deals with ministerial ethics. Pastors should not, except in cases of emergency, provide pastoral services for those who are members of another's parish (365). Church discipline is to be exercised evangelically with the aim to win the impenitent back to faith in Christ. But discipline is to be administered carefully and only after the congregation has been instructed and come to maturity: "And would it not be great folly to prefer risking a congregation, to prefer permitting it to lose the pure Gospel, over omitting something that belongs not to the essence but only the well-being of a proper congregation" (375). Walther recognized, contrary to the Reformed, that church discipline is not a mark of the church.

Church government in the congregation, including the congregation's constitution, is discussed by Walther as well as the procedures for reception of new members.

While the bulk of the *American-Lutheran Pastoral Theology* attends to the outward work of the pastoral office, Walther does not neglect the interior life of the

minister. The minister is to pay attention to the flock entrusted to his care but also his own life (Acts 20:28; I Tim. 4:16). Noting that the pastor is to be an example to the flock, Walther calls attention to the pastor's care for his wife and family, his reputation in the community, and his relationship to brother pastors. In the last century, Ulrich Asendorf would refer to the pastoral office at the "brotherly office." The fraternal dimensions of this office are clearly accented by Walther as he demonstrates that pastors have a confessional responsibility one to another.

The *American-Lutheran Pastoral Theology* is a treasury of citations from Luther and a host of Lutheran church fathers and theologians on the nature of the preaching office, pastoral care in a variety of situations that might confront a minister, and sage advice from a man who himself remained a pastor. There is a danger that a book like this might be used as "case law" where one decision of casuistry becomes the precedent for all future cases. That would run counter to Walther's own intention. Each case is unique and must be approached with theological integrity as the law is distinguished from the gospel and both applied accordingly. To that end, Walther's pastoral theology is best read hand in hand with his later lectures on law and gospel. In both books, Walther remains a worthy and reliable guide for contemporary pastors for pastors who seek to give all glory to God alone and the full consolation of the Gospel to broken sinners. Obviously, Walther is writing in and for a context that in many ways is very different from our own. Not all of the solutions that he suggested will be applicable today. That does not detract from the usefulness of Walther's pastoral theology for all pastoral theology is by its very nature contextual. The outstanding feature of Walther's work is that he demonstrates that doctrine shapes practice. Nothing is practically expedient if it contradicts God's Word. This Word is to be used with faithfulness and integrity in contexts that are always shifting. ❏

- *Professor John T. Pless*

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