

Overview of C. F. W. Walther's

The Right Form Of A Lutheran Local Congregation

“The Present and Future State of Our District.” That is what we will be hearing about and discussing in our afternoon session today. But in order to do that, it is necessary that we first go back to the past in light of the biblical admonition of which we read in Hebrews, chapter 13, these words: “Remember your leaders, those who spoke to you the Word of God. Consider the outcome of their way of life, and imitate their faith” (Hebrews 13:7). And one of these leaders from our past at whose feet we would do well to sit and listen to for a few minutes is the founding father of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, C.F.W. Walther.

Now, as some of you might recall, it was back at our 2009 district convention in Windsor that the following resolution was adopted: “that the East District of Lutheran Church—Canada encourage our pastors, deacons and congregations to study Church and Ministry by C.F.W. Walther to better understand our practice and polity.” This was done the following year at our district’s Pastors & Deacons Conference when three papers on various aspects of Walther’s writings on church and ministry were presented.

Since the resolution that was adopted back in 2009 also mentioned that congregations, as well as pastors, study this matter; what I intend, therefore, is to share with you today a “Reader’s Digest” version of the paper that I presented at the pastors’ conference on Walther’s The Right Form Of An Evangelical Lutheran Local Congregation Independent Of The State. In addition, I have also prepared a study guide that could be used by congregations in Bible Class; and which can be downloaded from our district’s website.

Now, when we hear this expression, “*the right form of an Evangelical Lutheran local congregation*,” we probably think of such things like church government, polity, organization, and the like. Or we think of the 21st century popular ‘buzz words’ like strategic planning, visions statements, core values, short-term and long-term goals, where nearly every incorporated entity – from Research In Motion to the Toronto Maple Leafs – has developed its own mission statement and right form. Strategic planning, however, can never guarantee success or effectiveness. Just ask RIM stockholders or Toronto Maple Leaf fans! And this is also true when it comes to the church; after all, as Article V of the Augsburg Confession states: “The Holy Spirit works faith when and where He pleases in those who hear the Gospel.” Organizing our congregations around the Great Commission or implementing visions and strategies for church growth is not going to be a panacea for the current ills and problems in our congregations, district, and synod. Nor, in fact, is a vision or goal like that of being a vibrant, growing, friendly congregation something that is uniquely Lutheran or even Christian for that matter.

No, this is not what Walther is talking about here. And at a time when aging and declining congregations have become the norm in our district, when many of our congregations are struggling financially, and when many are tempted to adopt non-Lutheran practices and worship forms in a vain attempt to stem this tide; perhaps we would be better served by hearing and heeding what Walther has set forth in his The Right Form Of An Evangelical Lutheran Local Congregation Independent Of The State.

He begins with a definition of a Lutheran local congregation: ***“An Evangelical Lutheran local congregation is an assembly of believing Christians at a certain place among whom God’s Word is preached purely according to the Confession of the Evangelical Lutheran Church and the holy sacraments are administered according to Christ’s institution as stated in the Gospel, in the midst of whom, however, there is always also an admixture of spurious Christians and hypocrites, and at times even public sinners.”***

In spite of the presence in its midst of non-Christians and hypocrites, or even manifest sinners, such an assembly of people at a certain place is really and truly church because the Holy Spirit is working through the Word and the Sacraments in that place to create and sustain faith in Christ in the hearts of people. What makes it a Lutheran congregation is that these means of grace are administered according to the Lutheran Confessions.

On this last point Walther says: *“The Confessions must be made familiar to congregations, as well as to pastors. It is not enough that the Lutheran Confessions be on paper in a congregation’s constitution or that pastors are pledged to them when they are installed into their office. No, this Confession must also be faithfully practiced. A church may have sworn to be faithful to the Lutheran Confessions and yet be a vile sect; for the Confession of the church must also sound forth from the pulpit.”* And then he adds these words which, sadly, are still applicable to us today: *“When we see how little most of our congregations know about the Confessions, it must on the one hand humble us deeply, and on the other hand become for us a mighty incentive to familiarize the people with them.”*

Walther continues: ***“All the rights of an Evangelical Lutheran local congregation are embraced in the keys of the kingdom of heaven, which the Lord gave to His whole church originally and immediately and in such a way that they belong to every congregation in equal measure, the smallest as well as the largest.”***

This, of course, is catechism stuff. So we recall these words from the Small Catechism: “The Office of the Keys is that special authority which Christ has given to His church on earth to forgive the sins of repentant sinners, but to withhold forgiveness from the unrepentant as long as they do not repent” (SC V). When Walther speaks

about power and authority of the church, he is not, as such, talking about such things like “Whose in charge – the lay people or the pastors?”; but, rather, about the power and the authority to forgive sins. The power and the authority that is given to the church, not by some denominational structure or by an external ministerium or by a voters assembly, but by the Head of the church, our Lord Jesus Himself. Moreover, this power and authority to forgive sins is given to every congregation regardless of its external circumstances.

What, as such, makes for a vibrant, healthy congregation? Not the physical size of its building, not the number of members it has, not the variety of activities that might be going on in its midst, not the number of programs it has; but, rather, the proper exercise of the Office of the Keys, the pure preaching of God’s Word and the right administration of the Sacraments. And this is so whether that congregation is the 250 or so members at St. Peter’s, Stratford; the 125 or so members at Christ, Petawawa; the 100 or so members at Risen Christ, Mississauga; or even only the dozen or so members at First, Palmer Rapids or St. Andrew’s, Halifax. (I mention these five congregations, by the way, since they happen to be the ones I have had the privilege of serving over the years here in our district.)

Some more Walther in this regard: *“What a blessing it is when Christians can freely assemble in a church where God’s Word is purely and clearly proclaimed and where the holy sacraments are administered according to Christ’s institution. Such a church, no matter how small and poor it may appear, is of more value than all of the splendid palaces of the world.”* And again: *“Let everyone who is in a tiny little congregation take note and know that church matters are not like worldly matters. The smallest congregation is just as important as the largest one, and the largest is no more important than the smallest, because every congregation is great only because Christ is present in it.”*

Having set forth the definition and rights of a Lutheran local congregation, Walther now proceeds to speak about its duties that are derived from this fundamental right and power and authority. After all, as our Lord says, “Everyone to whom much was given, of him much will be required” (Luke 12:48).

So Walther begins: **“In the first place the congregation should see to it that the Word of God dwells richly and has free course in its midst.”**

Elaborating on this duty he mentions the following: ***“The congregation exercises this duty especially by establishing and maintaining the public ministry in its midst.”***

Now, in the minds of many people there are a whole host of things that should be going on in a congregation – the preaching and teaching of God’s Word, to

be sure, but also social and charitable work in the community, activities for young and old, women's organizations, men's clubs, church suppers, and the list goes on and on. The proclamation of the Word of God by the pastor, however, is not just one thing among many, but the "one thing necessary" (Luke 10:42). The establishment and maintenance of the public ministry, as such, is not an option for a congregation, but is commanded in God's Word and is clearly attested to in our Lutheran Confessions. And how exactly does a congregation go about establishing and maintaining the public ministry in its midst so that the voice of the Gospel and the sacraments are in evidence?

Walther continues: ***"The first step in the appropriate care for the establishment and maintenance of the public ministry in a congregation is the election and calling of a pastor."***

A couple things that Walther mentions in this regard. First: *"There is no question that every member has the right to nominate and that the whole congregation has the right to call; but the congregation should not trust its own judgment, but should use the holy office of the ministry as a gift of God also in order to get sound advice in matters pertaining to the call process. For that reason the congregation should invite a faithful and insightful pastor to its meetings and tell him: 'We want you to lead us in prayer and to instruct us as to how we should proceed in this sacred task, which men have the suitable gifts for our needs, and which men we could choose without causing harm to the church as a whole'."*

And second, *"The eligibility of every proposed candidate is discussed on the basis of 1 Timothy 3; Titus 1; and 2 Timothy 2."* Is this, however, actually being done anymore? Or, does the discussion at call meetings revolve around such questions as: Is he good with the youth? Does he have a heart for outreach? Is he a good administrator? How much will we have to pay him? Can his wife teach Sunday School, play the organ, or head up the ladies' group?

But how do, how can, congregations establish and maintain the office of the public ministry in accordance with the Scriptures and the Lutheran Confessions at a time of declining numbers and declining dollars? That is an issue facing us at present time and which we will be discussing this afternoon.

Walther continues: ***"In order that the Word of God may dwell richly in a congregation it is necessary, moreover, to introduce, not legalistically, but earnestly, the observance of regular services on Sunday and the customary festive days as also of certain weekday services, especially during Advent and Lent, annual days of humiliation and prayer, harvest festivals, general or special thanksgiving, and other sacred feasts."***

Why does Walther state here what might seem to be the obvious? Because this is the chief duty of the pastor – to “devote yourself to the public reading of Scripture, to exhortation, to teaching,” to “preach the word; be ready in season and out of season; reprove, rebuke, and exhort, with complete patience and teaching”; as St. Paul tells Timothy. In his Pastoral Theology Walther writes: *“The most important of all official functions of every pastor is public preaching. He should devote the greatest diligence to it.”* And if the pastor is going to do this, then it is incumbent upon the members of the congregation to earnestly observe and attend as often as possible *“services on Sunday and the customary festive days as also of certain weekday services, especially during Advent and Lent.”* On the other hand, when church meetings or church suppers or other church-related activities and functions have more people in attendance than at the Divine Service, this is not an indication of a congregation’s vitality and strength; but, rather, of its weakness – of neglecting and even despising preaching and the Word of God.

To be sure, pastors have other duties entrusted to them, as Walther continues: ***“In order that the Word of God may dwell richly in a congregation it is necessary also that the members permit their pastor, as the steward of the mysteries of God, to baptize their newborn infants without delay; that they allow him to prepare them for the full appreciation of the means of grace and in due time to confirm them publicly; that they often desire and receive the comfort of absolution and of the sacrament of the body and blood of Jesus Christ; and this indeed after a preceding examination and confession; that they permit their betrothed publicly to be blessed by God’s Word and prayer at their marriage; that in sickness, death, and other tribulations and trials they let themselves be instructed and comforted by the pastor from God’s Word; and finally that they permit him to give their dead a Christian burial.”***

What is rather interesting here is that Walther phrases all this in terms of the duties of the members of the congregation, not the pastor – namely, that they permit their pastor to baptize their newborn infants without delay; that they allow him to prepare them for reception of the Lord’s Supper through instruction *“in the doctrine of the church according to a definite and intelligible Catechism”*; that they avail themselves of the opportunity to go to private confession; that they commune frequently; that they inform the pastor when sickness and other tribulations come upon them so that he can bring them the comfort of God’s Word; and that they permit him to conduct Christian funeral services.

In addition to all this, Walther continues: ***“In order that the Word of God may dwell richly in a congregation it is necessary, moreover, that, if possible, the congregation establish an Evangelical Lutheran parish school and call and appoint for this purpose orthodox, pious, and competent teachers.”*** Even though this has not been possible for most of our congregations here in our district, any Christian education agency established by the congregation is also included in this

duty. At the same time, however, Walther makes the point, quoting Luther, that this is necessary only because parents neglect this important matter. The reason being – they “*are not so pious and upright,*” they “*are unskilled and do not know how to rear and bring up children,*” and “*they have neither the place nor time to do it.*”

The second duty: **“The congregation should see to it that purity of doctrine and life is preserved in its midst, and therefore it is to exercise church discipline in regard to both.”**

Elaborating on this duty Walther says: ***“All members of a congregation shall strive to grow and become enriched in all doctrine and all knowledge that they may not remain children, tossed to and fro and carried about with every wind of doctrine, but that they may examine and judge the doctrine proclaimed to them, according to God’s Word.”***

Although the constitution of our synod provides a mechanism for preserving the purity of doctrine and life in our congregations – regular visitations by the District President and Circuit Counsellor; it is the people of God, the members of the congregation, who have the ultimate responsibility in examining and judging the pastor’s preaching and teaching. Not, however, on the basis of a majority vote; but only on the basis of God’s Word. “*I bow to the humblest member coming with Scripture,*” Walther once said.

A few more items related to this second duty: ***“A congregation shall also establish the office of such elders or overseers as do not labor in the Word and doctrine, but assist the incumbent of the office of the divine Word in ruling, disciplining, and keeping order in the congregation.”*** Notice, contrary to the understanding and practice in many of our congregations, that the role and function of elders or more-properly deacons is not to exercise supervision over the pastor or to be some kind of oversight board to which he must give an account; but, rather, to “*assist the incumbent of the office of the divine Word.*”

Walther then adds: ***“The congregation shall see to it that only doctrinally pure books, approved by the orthodox church, are introduced and tolerated in church and school and that confessional ceremonies are not discontinued.”***

Let’s go back to the 19th century when many Lutheran immigrants arrived in North America, bringing with them a variety of hymn books, many of which reflected the theological and liturgical poverty of pietism and rationalism. Under the leadership of Walther, Trinity congregation in St. Louis published a hymnal in 1847 that was received that same year at the Missouri Synod’s founding convention, to be followed in 1856 by an agenda or service book.

The synod's 1854 constitution stated, as such, as one of the "conditions under which union with the synod may take place and fellowship with it can continue," the following: "The exclusive use of doctrinally pure church and school books (agendas, hymnbooks, catechisms, text books, etc.)." Walther's efforts in this matter, however, were not appreciated by all, especially by those who were not all that serious in using an orthodox hymnbook, by those who masked their pietistic leanings under the guise of the freedom of the congregation, and by those who had come to rather like singing those non-Lutheran hymns and songs from the Reformed hymnbooks of their day. To which he responded in an 1853 issue of Der Lutheraner – the predecessor, as it were, of The Lutheran Witness:

"Whenever the Divine Service once again follows the old Evangelical-Lutheran agendas, many raise a great cry that it is 'Roman Catholic' – 'Roman Catholic' when the pastor chants "The Lord be with you" and the congregation responds by chanting "And with thy spirit"; 'Roman Catholic' when the pastor chants the Collect and the Blessing and the people respond with a chanted "Amen." Even the simplest Christian can respond to this outcry: 'Prove to me that this chanting is contrary to the Word of God, then I too will call it 'Roman Catholic' and have nothing more to do with it. However, you cannot prove this to me.' If you insist upon rejecting every element in the Divine Service that has been used by the Roman Catholic Church, then you must also reject the reading of the Epistle and Gospel. Indeed, it is then wrong to sing or preach in church, for the Roman Church does this also. Those who cry out like this should remember that such has been the practice in the Christian Church since the beginning. For more than 1,500 years orthodox Christians have participated joyfully in the Divine Service in this way. Should we, today, however, respond by saying that such is 'Roman Catholic'? God forbid! Therefore, as we continue to hold on to and seek to restore our wonderful Divine Services in places where they have been forgotten, let us boldly confess that our worship forms do not tie us with the modern sects or with the church of Rome; rather, they join us to the one, holy Christian Church that is as old as the world and is built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets."

Walther then concludes this second duty with the following: "***The congregation shall in public assembly, according to God's Word, in Christian order, and with the employment of witnesses, examine those of its members who are reported as disobedient to God's Word in doctrine or life, and have already been reprovved in vain according Matt. 18:15,16, privately as well as before witnesses, or whose false doctrine or sin is manifest and known to all.***"

"Congregations shall not be so presumptuous as arbitrarily to depose their pastors and others who administer an ecclesiastical office. But if they fall into pernicious errors and are found guilty by lawful procedure and refuse to accept instruction from God's Word either by the congregation or by the pastors called in for this purpose; or if they have become manifest as impenitent

sinners; or if they have committed an offense by which they have lost their good report among those who are without and by which they cause the enemies of the Lord to blaspheme, then Christian congregations in Christian order must remove them from office as such as God Himself has put out.”

In connection with the above two matters relating to church discipline, here is some sound advice from Walther’s 1879 convention essay:

“You pastors, see to it that you don’t expect too much from your people. You can’t turn every piece of wood into a dowel. It simply can’t be done; not all wood is suitable for dowels. Not every indiscretion is of the sort that necessitates the procedures of church discipline. But once the devil has created dislike and animosity in you toward a particular member, he sees to it that you deal far more sternly with his transgression than you do with a member who has always treated you with love and goodwill. ‘Divisions will also easily develop if the people immediately want to master and nitpick everything in the life and conduct of the bishops or pastors,’ says the Apology. Also our dear congregations should note this carefully. When a pastor makes an occasional mistake, they should not be too harsh in their judgment but should consider, ‘Did he do that out of weakness? Is it really serious enough to sound the alarm or not?’ And if you determine that it was done in weakness and is a matter of little importance, then you should either ignore it or tell him in a friendly way, ‘You did not handle that correctly.’ Otherwise, if the congregation insists on nitpicking about every little thing, then the beautiful relationship of the spiritual father and his spiritual children will come to an end. Then the devil laughs up his sleeve, when the people no longer heed the pastor’s word; then he has torn the members from their orthodox pastor. We must support one another! The pastor should not expect the members of his congregation to be nothing but angels, and the members should not demand that their pastor be an angel either, for that he cannot be. . . . We cannot avoid offending one another, but we can let ourselves be reconciled, and then we can forget the whole incident.”

The third duty: **“The congregation must make it its concern that all its members are well taken care of in their bodily needs and do not suffer want or are forsaken in any need.”**

Under which Walther mentions especially: ***“In the first place, the congregation should do everything in its power to see to it that its pastor has food, clothing, and a home for himself and his family.”*** In our present-day church environment this has become an increasingly critical matter. There are a few congregations, I suppose, who use money, or the supposed lack of it, as Walther said in the previous section, to *“arbitrarily depose their pastors.”* Many more congregations, however, are facing real financial shortfalls what with increased costs of the pastor’s salary, housing, and benefits. And with the result that more and more congregations are listed as non-calling vacancies and are being served on a part-time basis by “contract workers” –

which, quite frankly, calls into question what Walther mentioned earlier about the establishment and maintenance of the office of the holy ministry in its midst. This is another issue that will be on the table this afternoon.

The fourth duty: **“The congregation must see to it that all things are done decently and in order, and this not only before the Lord but also before men.”**

Under this duty Walther lists a variety of things – church record books, a treasurer and other officers of the congregation, the church building and its upkeep, procurement of necessary supplies for Divine Services, congregational meetings, a church constitution, financial contributions for the maintenance of the church, and the like. While today we take all this for granted, this was a rather novel thing for those Lutherans in the 19th century who had grown up in the consistory system in the various German states. That is why Walther goes to great lengths on these matters.

All these organizational things, it should be noted, are set in place only for this reason – that the congregation can be and remain, as Walther says at the very beginning of this work, *“an assembly of believing Christians at a certain place among whom God’s Word is preached purely according to the Confession of the Evangelical Lutheran Church and the holy sacraments are administered according to Christ’s institution as stated in the Gospel.”* The various things he mentions here, as such, are not to be regarded as some kind of “law of the Medes and the Persians” as to how congregations must be structured and ordered. While Walther’s own congregation in St. Louis had adopted a constitution in 1843 and was organized in this manner, many of the congregations which had recently joined the Missouri Synod had no organization at all, or a very minimum one at best.

In his first presidential address at the Missouri Synod convention in 1848, Walther makes the point that there is no one divinely instituted way for a congregation or a church body to govern itself. *“In our Evangelical Lutheran Church,”* he says, *“we must preach to our congregations that the choice of the form of government for a church is an inalienable part of their Christian liberty and that Christians as members of the church are subject to no power in the world except the clear Word of the living God. Otherwise, our chief battle would soon center about the execution of manufactured, external human ordinances and institutions and would swallow up the true blessed battle for the real treasure of the church, for the purity and unity of doctrine.”* Some words of wisdom from Walther in this whole matter: *“A written church order (constitution) shall contain only what is most necessary and has been tried out in the practice of the congregation; and nothing in it that concerns what God’s Word has neither commanded nor forbidden (adiaphora) shall be regarded as unchangeable.”*

Walther is not, as some claim, promoting here a kind of autonomy where the congregation is a law unto itself and where “everyone did what was right in his own eyes” (Judges 21:25). While the constitution of Trinity Lutheran Church in St. Louis

emphasized that the “congregation in its entirety has the highest authority in the administration of the external and internal affairs of the church and the congregation,” it also went on to state that “the congregation, however, has no authority to order or decide anything against God’s Word and the Symbols of the pure Evangelical Lutheran Church. If it does that, then all such decisions and transactions are null and void.”

In addition, we already heard Walther state that in matters pertaining to the call process “*the congregation should invite a faithful and insightful pastor to its meetings*” and that “*only doctrinally pure books, approved by the orthodox church, are introduced and tolerated in church and school.*” But where do these “faithful and insightful pastors” come from? What exactly is this “orthodox church”? In another of his works, The Evangelical Lutheran Church, The True Visible Church Of God Upon Earth, Walther gives this answer: “*The Evangelical Lutheran Church is the sum total of all who without reservation profess the doctrine which was restored by the Reformation of Luther and was summarily submitted in writing at Augsburg in 1530 to the emperor and the realm, and was treated and expounded in the other so-called Lutheran symbols, as the pure doctrine of the divine Word.*”

The last two duties of a congregation pertain to this reality; as Walther continues: **“The congregation has the duty to devote itself to the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace and love also with the orthodox church beyond its area.”**

Since a local Lutheran congregation is not the only place in the world “*among whom God’s Word is preached purely according to the Confession of the Evangelical Lutheran Church and the holy sacraments are administered according to Christ’s institution as stated in the Gospel,*” this means that it also has a relationship with other local congregations who believe, teach, and confess the same. Besides the congregation offering joint prayer – such as we do, or should be doing, in the Divine Service for sister congregations and their pastors in our district and synod and for our partner churches around the world; the orderly transferring of members in good standing to congregations within our confessional fellowship; the refraining to accept as members those who have been “*rightly excommunicated by orthodox congregations*”; and the relationship that is to be expressed between congregations at the time of the calling of one of its pastors; there are three things in particular that Walther mentions in connection with this duty that I would draw to your attention.

First: ***“As every true Evangelical Lutheran local congregation has the same official confessions as the true Evangelical Lutheran Church, it should also diligently seek to be united with the latter in life and with it to speak the same thing, in the same mind and in the same judgment.”*** So Walther elaborates in an 1859 editorial from Lehre und Wehre, a theological journal for pastors much like the Lutheran Theological Review that is published by our two seminaries:

“There are mainly two reasons why an orthodox Christian should not only believe together with the orthodox church but also choose to speak the same language. The first reason is that also in this way he might demonstrate his sincere oneness with his spiritual mother and also manifest his loyalty to her thereby, and conversely renounce all heretics, schismatics, and conceited eccentrics and withdraw from them. In truth, if there were no other reasons, this alone should be enough to move every orthodox Christian to conform to the church also in this respect. . . . The second reason why an orthodox Christian should not only believe together with the orthodox church but also speak the same language, is that he has the duty not to impede but to help advance, for his part, the important goals which the church is trying to achieve with its way of speaking about the revealed truths.”

Second: **“Every congregation shall agree with its neighboring sister congregation on their mutual local boundaries.”** This duty, by the way, happens to also be in the bylaws of our synod’s constitution which gives, among others, this reason why parish lines should be established: “Schisms and sects in a congregation should be avoided, and church members should not be given occasion to attach themselves to the person of one pastor in preference to that of another. This in itself is a sectarian tendency, which Paul condemns, 1 Cor. 1:12; 3:3-7.” Quoting an opinion of the 17th century Wittenberg theological faculty, Walther elaborates: *“The pastor is not permitted privately to perform official pastoral functions in another diocese without the permission of the regular pastor, for the call is limited not only to a certain number of parishioners but also to a definite place.”* And then he also adds: *“No one is permitted to roam about as he chooses and frivolously to change his pastor, which commonly stems from hatred or animosity and is very offensive, especially when a person seeks a pastor outside his parish.”*

But is this really going on in our midst today? Oh, yes it is; and in a number of different ways. It happens when pastors on the clergy roster roam about as they please, conducting baptisms of family members, officiating at funerals or weddings of former members. “Intrusion” this is called and a matter that seems to be regularly discussed at meetings of the Circuit Counsellors. In fact, a paper was received and adopted by the Circuit Counsellors on this issue and included in the 2012 district convention workbook. It also happens when members leave one congregation for another because of the personality of the pastor – the one down the road being an outgoing, personable, friendly chap; while our pastor is rather cold, aloof, and rigid. It happens when a person leaves his or her congregation for a neighboring one because there women are permitted to read the Scriptures in the worship services, because there my non-Lutheran relatives are allowed to go to communion when they come to visit, because there they serve grape juice for those who don’t like to drink wine, because there they sing praise songs and not those old, stuffy hymns. These are not hypothetical scenarios, but actual things that some of you have probably witnessed and experienced.

And why are things like these going on? Well, to use Walther's words from his previous point, because some congregations and pastors in our synod are no longer united with one another *"in life and speak the same thing, in the same mind and in the same judgment"*, because some people have little, if any, understanding of what constitutes *"the right form of an Evangelical Lutheran local congregation"*; and, yes, and if we would be honest about it, because synod and district officials – like myself – are somewhat negligent in exercising ecclesiastical supervision over these matters.

And third: ***"A congregation shall regard the need of its sister churches as its own and help them as much as it can."*** There are a number of questions that come to mind in connection with this duty in our modern day context. Such as: How are we doing here in our East District in assisting congregations in need? With seemingly ever more and more congregations struggling financially, are the people in our congregations being made aware of the needs of their sister congregations? How, if at all, are these needs being met? Is the district using responsibly the funds they receive from congregations that have been given for this purpose – to help sister congregations maintain Word and Sacrament ministry in their midst? Is financial support to congregations reduced, not only because of declining revenue, but also because of bureaucratic expenses? Do we make congregations grovel in the dust like beggars and jump through all kinds of administrative hoops before handing over to them a few loonies and toonies? Are congregations and pastors cognizant of the additional thing Walther mentions in this regard: ***"Wherever possible, a congregation should be willing to let its pastor serve as an affiliate or daughter church a neighboring congregation which alone cannot establish the ministry of the Word for itself or become a self-sustaining congregation"***? Again, these are some of the questions that are to be discussed this afternoon.

The sixth duty: ***"It is also the duty of the congregation to do what it can in order that the whole church may be built up and promoted."***

Here Walther moves beyond the duties one congregation has to another because they confess one and the same faith to the duty it has toward the whole church and toward the world. But should not this, some would question, be the first and primary duty of the congregation – missions and outreach? It would seem so when one peruses church periodicals and considers the preponderance of essays at district and synod conventions on this subject. We will let Walther himself answer that:

"It is true, brethren, as you well know, that in our day it is common for people to say, 'Emphasizing doctrine so much only harms and hinders the kingdom of God, yes, even destroys it.' Many say, 'Instead of disputing over doctrine so much, we should much rather be concerned with souls and with leading them to Christ.' But all who speak in this way do not really know what they are saying or what they are doing. As foolish as it would be to scold a farmer for being concerned about sowing good seed and to demand of him simply to be concerned about a good harvest, so foolish it is to

scold those who are concerned first and foremost with the doctrine, and to demand of them that they should rather seek to rescue souls. For just as the farmer who wants a good crop must first of all be concerned about good seed, so the church must above all be concerned about right doctrine if it would save souls.”

Included in this last duty Walther proceeds to mention such things as: **“A congregation shall see to it that gifted boys and young men are dedicated to the service of the church and that it is made possible for them to prepare themselves for this work”**; that is, sending young men to the seminary and supporting financially the training of future pastors. Instead of financial contributions for the seminary coming primarily from individual members of our congregations; would it not, as such, be in order for every congregation to include a yearly or monthly goal for seminary support and/or designate a portion of mission offerings received for the seminary?

In addition: **“A congregation should be zealous to spread the written Word of God. . . . A congregation should do its share that the Gospel may be brought to those sitting in darkness and the shadow of death, namely to the wretched heathen and Jews.”** Included in these duties are such things as: prayers ‘For the mission of the Church,’ ‘For those outside the Church,’ ‘For our enemies,’ ‘Return of the wayward and erring’ (LSB, pp. 305-306); financial support of the missions of our district – such as the intercultural work in Toronto and Hamilton, among the French-speaking people in Quebec, or in Atlantic Canada; financial support of our synod’s work in Ukraine and Thailand, Cambodia and Nicaragua; the sending of mission teams from our congregations to some of these places; and the work that the various auxiliaries and listed service organizations of our synod are engaged in – such as, Lutheran Hour Ministries, Lutheran Bible Translators, Concordia Lutheran Mission Society, Haiti Lutheran Mission Society, the LWML, etc. And especially, and above all, as Walther says in an 1842 sermon:

“All Christians are to shine as lights among the world. The Christian Church is a great mission-house. Each Christian is a missionary, sent out by God into his own circle of activity to convert others to Christ and to call them to the kingdom of God. . . . The whole congregation shall be a holy people, a royal priesthood. Each Christian should bear the needs of the soul of his neighbor in his heart and do his part that the saving Gospel may win ever more victories and that the kingdom of God may be advanced. . . . When we are with unbelievers, let us remember that as spiritual priests we are to confess Christ before them by word and deed that they also may come to the knowledge of the truth.”

And finally: **“A congregation should be ready to unite with other Evangelical Lutheran churches in the land if it has opportunity to do so and the union serves and promotes the glory of God and the spread of His kingdom.”**

To be sure, Walther and the Missouri Synod, from its earliest constitution, ascribed a large degree of self-government to the local congregation, stating in the words of Article VII of our present synodical constitution: “The Synod is not an ecclesiastical government exercising legislative or coercive powers, and with respect to an individual congregation’s right of self-government, the Synod is advisory. Accordingly, no resolution of the Synod imposing anything upon the individual congregation is of binding force if it is not in accordance with the Word of God or if it appears to be inexpedient as far as the condition of a congregation is concerned.”

On the other hand, a congregation’s self-government did not mean for Walther that it was simply free to do its own thing apart from and without any consideration of other congregations which share the same orthodox confession of faith. No, in order to carry out its duties – the education of pastors, the spreading of the Word of God, the sharing of the Gospel with unbelievers, the support of fellow believers who are in need, the use of doctrinally pure hymn books and agendas, and so forth; the local congregation must join together with other like-minded congregations in this endeavor. In his 1848 presidential address at the synodical convention, Walther told the assembled delegates that they had come *“as servants and members of the church in the name and on behalf of our congregations in order to deliberate in the fear of God on matters necessary for them and the church as a whole.”*

By working together to accomplish the task of the church – Office of the Keys remember, local congregations do not become something other than the church when they join and act together to do those things mandated of the church: conserve and promote the unity of the true faith, provide for a united defence against schism, sectarianism, and heresy; extend the Gospel witness into all the world; recruit and train pastors; establish agencies of Christian education; provide for the welfare of pastors; and the like. There is not even the slightest indication of a congregation’s sovereignty in any of these matters. No, in doctrine and practice and worship there is to be uniformity and conformity by and among all the congregations of the synod. So Article VI of our synod’s constitution states:

“Conditions for acquiring and holding membership in Lutheran Church-Canada are: 1. Acceptance of the confessional basis of Article II. 2. Renunciation of unionism and syncretism of every description, such as: a. serving congregations of mixed confession, as such, by pastors; b. taking part in the services and sacramental rites of heterodox congregations or of congregations of mixed confession; c. participating in heterodox tract and missionary activities. 3. Regular call of pastors and deacons and regular election of lay delegates by the congregations, as also the blamelessness of the life of such. 4. Exclusive use of doctrinally pure agenda, hymn books, and catechisms in church and school. 5. Service of congregations by pastors who are members of Lutheran Church-Canada.”

This does not mean, however, that the synod itself, or more precisely, the way the synod is organized and structured, is divinely instituted; after all, in his 1848 presidential address Walther makes it clear that the Lutheran Church has been organized very differently and profitably in the past. The best form of the church's organization depends upon the historical, geographical, political, and social circumstances in which it finds itself and lacks a "Thus says the Lord."

This is another matter that we will be discussing this afternoon; namely, the structure of our synod and some of the possible changes that were presented at the All-Canada Church Workers Conference in Calgary last year by our synod's Commission on Constitutional Matters and Structure.

In closing I would leave you with this word from Walther – this one from a letter dated February 11, 1856 to an unidentified pastor in Canada; and, in sense, also to us pastors and people here in Canada some 158 years later:

"Grace, mercy, and peace from God the Father and from the Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of the Father, in truth and in love.

I am very happy to see that also in the far north in your area the Lord is beginning to arouse souls and that the pure Gospel, as God permitted it to be preached again through His precious servant Luther, is finding a place there. May God bless and further these God-pleasing undertakings. For it is certain that anyone who thinks only about having a church, without also asking and inquiring whether the unfalsified Gospel will be preached therein, will only help in the building up of the tower of Babel which here in America is being constructed so eagerly by a hundred different sects. All sects come and go like comets, but the star of our true orthodox church of the Unaltered Augsburg Confession will continue to shine forth, even if the star here and there is clouded over somewhat. For 'God's Word and Luther's doctrine pure shall now and evermore endure.' As much as our small Lutheran Catechism is despised, yet it is a fortress that cannot be conquered no matter how much the world assails the Bible fortification. For in all other catechisms of the sects there are all kinds of rationalistic propositions, yet in the treasury of our precious catechism there is nothing but pure gold. May God strengthen you to raise up high the pennant of our church there so that all the misled children of our church may again be gathered under this banner and many others also be attracted into the one faith confessed in one love and one hope.

Do not tire of planting the church of our pious fathers in your midst and do not fail to do what you can towards this purpose. For since this matter is most important and obviously displeasing to Satan, but pleasing only to God, therefore the flesh, the world, and the devil will thoroughly oppose it and will seek to weaken you in your undertaking and make you discouraged.

The enthusiasts and the religious syncretists have an easy go of it, for they yield here and there to the devil, the world, and the flesh. For such people to make a beginning in church work is therefore usually not very difficult. But they build on sand, and when the rainstorms come, the whole structure will collapse. The orthodox however have a difficult beginning, for they usually have only a few people, and sparse resources, and are despised by the proud children of the world and by the false saints. But pursue the right course, and your structure will stand firm, which no storm can blow down, because it is built on the rock, namely the rock of Jesus Christ and His eternal, pure, divine Word.

The Lord be with you and yours and all those in your church. Please greet everyone for me in a fraternal manner, those who love the Lord and love His undiluted Word.

Your friend and brother in the Lord,

C. F. W. Walther”

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