

C. F. W. Walther:

The True Visible Church and Holy Communion

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It happens in LCMS congregations every Sunday. A few minutes before the start of the worship service, a visitor approaches the pastor with a question, “May I commune here today?” For some pastors, fear and panic set in. For others, the question is irrelevant. For all, it is indeed a moment of truth. As difficult as it is for high pastoral care in the narthex a few minutes before the Divine Service is to begin, this is precisely what is needed. Sadly, in far too many instances, high pastoral care is jettisoned in the name and for the sake of time, mission, popularity, pragmatism, expediency, or simply lack of courage and conviction. What often passes for high pastoral care is what I like to refer to as “institutional communion” or “country club communion.” If people are a member of the club or institution, they get in; no questions asked. “I’m Missouri Synod pastor, and I’ll be communing today.” We have taught our people, by what we say and by what we left unsaid, that if you are a card carrying member¹ of the LCMS, you have a right to commune at any LCMS altar, any time.

So what constitutes high pastoral care regarding The Lord’s Supper and where does it begin? We must begin with the Lord’s Word and not our own. The Verba, (the Word’s of Institution), are our starting point as our Lutheran Confessions clearly teach.² God’s Word and the Lutheran Confessions also teach that no one is to commune unless they are properly examined.³ So a conscientious and faithful pastor will examine the flock entrusted to him. Generally this is done in confirmation class or when a person requests a transfer into membership. But what about the visitor? High pastoral care would demand that the pastor would certainly ask more than questions of church membership. “Who is your pastor?” “What do you expect to receive at the altar?” “Are you under any church discipline?” “Will you be confessing the Nicene Creed with us?” “What brings you to our congregation today?” These are all examples of questions I have been asked by faithful pastors as they examined me.

Based on God’s Word and the Lutheran Confessions, we practice “closed Communion.”⁴ Our church body is certainly not united in this practice and it is the cause of anxiety and embarrassment for many pastors and congregational members. If we truly believe that there are true Christians in other Christian fellowships, why are those true Christians not allowed to commune at our altar? By not allowing members of other fellowships to commune at our altars, are we not saying that they are less than true Christians, damning them, judging them, excommunicating them, etc.? These are real questions among us and questions that deserve a serious answer. It is a seeming contradiction to say that we believe that there are true Christians in other fellowships and at the same time not allow them to commune at our altars. In this short presentation I would like to direct us to a specific writing and teaching of C. F. W. Walther. These questions are not new and have been addressed since the very beginning of our beloved synod.

Stereotypes abound regarding the LCMS and they are especially painful when they come from one of our own members. We are often labeled as unloving, uncaring, and out of touch. We “don’t play well with others” and our official positions on church fellowship and Communion practice are the cause of much embarrassment for some, perhaps many. Is it any wonder then, that the material before us today, “*The Evangelical Lutheran Church*

¹ A former member once showed me the card he was issued before he joined the Navy in 1941. This card stated that he was a member in good standing of a specific LCMS congregation and gave pastoral permission for him to commune at a sister LCMS congregation. Until that day, I thought the idea of a “card carrying LCMS member” was a myth!

² Preface to the Book of Concord, 18.

³ 1 Corinthians 11:27-32; Augsburg Confession (AC) XXIV, 6; AC XXV, 1; Apology XXIV, 1.

⁴ For a concise treatment and discussion of the terms “close” and “closed” see the tract, “Fellowship in the Lord’s Supper,” CPH, 1998.

“*The True Visible Church of God on Earth*” is perhaps one of the least read and least studied of C. F. W. Walther’s major works? Even the title itself seemingly betrays the condescending attitude of Missouri toward other Christian denominations, right? I would humbly submit that if we can get past the title and our sinful stereotypes, we may be pleasantly surprised at what we find.⁵

Carl Ferdinand Wilhelm Walther was born on October 25, 1811, in Langenchursdorf, Saxony, Germany.⁶ The son of a Lutheran pastor, his early years were concerned by his chief love, music. His father encouraged him to pursue a more economically stable vocation, theology. He enrolled in the University of Leipzig, surrounded by teachers who unbeknownst to his father were unbelieving rationalists. His physical health was never strong and during this time he suffered severe bouts of depression. Questioning his faith and doubting his salvation, he immersed himself in his father’s library, especially the writings of Luther. Encouraged by the clear teaching of Law and Gospel in Luther and confident once again in the grace of God, he shared his discoveries with some of his fellow students. Together they studied and grew in God’s Word, in spite of the educational environment.

Upon graduation in 1833 he served as a private tutor for a time, receiving his licence to preach and waiting for a call to serve as a parish pastor.⁷ In January of 1837 he was ordained into the Lutheran ministerium and served the parish in Braensdorf, Saxony. The tension was immediate. As a student of Luther and the Lutheran Confessions, he insisted on using worship forms that were orthodox, criticizing the official Agenda, which included doctrinal errors, unscriptural prayers and rationalistic hymns. When he used the traditional Lutheran form of the general confession and absolution instead of the Agenda form, he was publicly penalized. Walther and other Lutherans who loved the Lutheran confession were belittled and ostracized. The choice was clear; conform or leave.

In the fall of 1838 five ships carrying 700 souls, including Walther and his older brother, left Saxony for America.⁸ They arrived in New Orleans on January 5, 1839, and traveled up the Mississippi with the majority settling in Perry County, Missouri. He served as pastor at the settlements of Dresden and Johannisberg, and when his older brother died, he moved to St. Louis and succeeded him as pastor of Trinity Church. In 1847 he began publication of *Der Lutheraner* with the goal of uniting faithful Lutherans around God’s Word and the Lutheran Confessions. The German Evangelical Lutheran Synod of Missouri, Ohio, and Other States was formed later that year, with Walther serving as its first president.⁹ He continued to serve as the chief pastor of Trinity and three congregations that branched from it. In 1855 he started a second periodical, *Lehre und Wehre*, a theological monthly. His desire was to unite all Lutheran churches in America, based on an agreement of doctrine and practice. He had the reputation as “the best loved and best hated defender of the truth.”¹⁰ He died on May 7, 1887, with the words of “Jesus, Thy Blood and Righteousness” on his lips.

⁵ See also Walther’s “Theses on Communion Fellowship with Those Who Believe Differently,” translated by Laurence White, edited by Paul T. McCain, revised October 1990, and placed in the public domain by the translator.

⁶ Much of this brief biographical sketch is from the Introduction to *The Word of His Grace, Occasional and Festival Sermons* by C. F. W. Walther, Translated and Edited by the Evangelical Lutheran Synod Translation Committee, (Lake Mills, Iowa: Graphic Publishing Company, Inc.), 1978, iv. See also Daniel Waldschmidt, C. F. W. Walther, <http://www.studiumexcitare.com/content/64>

⁷ The following account is from Dennis W. Marzolf, C. F. W. Walther: The Musician and Liturgiologist, in C. F. W. Walther: The American Luther, Essays in Commemoration of the 100th Anniversary of Carl Walther’s Death, Edited by Arthur H. Drevlow, (Mankato, MN: Walther Press), 1987, 84-85.

⁸ For the fascinating account of the Saxon Emigration see Walter O. Forster, *Zion on the Mississippi*, (St. Louis: CPH), 1953. For an historical fiction account see the novel by Robert J. Koenig, *Except The Corn Die*, published by the author, 1975.

⁹ Calling him “the most influential figure in nineteenth-century Lutheranism in America” see Sydney E. Ahlstrom, *A Religious History of the American People*, (New Haven and London: Yale University Press), 757-758, 761.

¹⁰ *The Word of His Grace*, v.

Walter was a prolific writer. Sadly, many of his writings have not been translated into English. He is sometimes criticized as being nothing more than a repositioning theologian. Such comments are born of those who fail to understand the depth of his theology and his method of presentation. At the young age of 30, he was called upon to hold together the fledgling band of Lutherans who had become disheartened and disillusioned. His Altenburg Theses of April 1841 held the group together and led to the publication of Walther's three great works on the church: *The Voice of Our Church on the Question of Church and Office* (1852); *The Proper Form of a Local Congregation Independent of the State* (1863); and *The True Visible Church*, which appeared in book form in 1867 and the topic for our study today.¹¹

In August 1866, the Theses and Scriptural references were published in *Der Lutheraner*. In October of that same year, Walther began a series of lectures on the Theses at the Synodical Convention in St. Louis. These "running commentaries" continued until 1871, granting us a unique view into the theological mind and pastoral heart of Walther. While these lectures are at times difficult to plow through, they provide a wealth of insight into his doctrine and practice that are amazingly applicable to our current milieu. May God grant His blessings upon us as we study Walter's Theses and sit at his feet.

First, a general overview of the theses themselves:

The Evangelical Lutheran Church the True Visible Church of God on Earth¹²

THESIS I

The one holy Christian Church on earth, or the Church in the proper sense of the word, outside of which there is no salvation, is, according to God's Word, the total of all that truly believe in Christ and are sanctified through this faith.

THESIS II

Though the one holy Christian Church, as a spiritual temple, cannot be seen but only believed, yet there are infallible outward marks by which its presence is known; which marks are the pure preaching of God's Word and the unadulterated administration of the holy Sacraments.

THESIS III

Scripture in an improper sense calls churches also all visible congregations which have hypocrites and wicked among the believers but preach the Gospel right and administer the Sacraments according to the Gospel.

THESIS IV

Scripture calls churches even the visible congregations guilty of a partial lapse from the true doctrine, as long as they hold God's Word essentially.

THESIS V

Communities still holding God's Word essentially but erring obstinately in fundamentals, IN SO FAR as they do so, are, according to God's Word, not churches but schisms or sects, i. e., heretical communities.

THESIS VI

Communities destroying the unity of the Church for non-fundamental errors or personalities or ceremonies or wicked life, according to God's Word are schismatic or separatistic communities.

THESIS VII

¹¹ I will be using the John Theodore Mueller translation, (St. Louis: CPH), combined edition, 1989.

¹² These Theses are available online from the William Dallmann translation, (St. Louis: CPH), 1938, <http://www.reclaimingwalther.org/articles/cfw00006.htm>

Communions calling themselves Christian but not accepting God's Word as God's Word and therefore denying the Triune God, according to God's Word are no churches but synagogues of Satan and temples of idols.

THESIS VIII

Though church-writers sometimes call communions holding God's Word essentially true, i. e., real, churches over against non-churches, yet over against erring churches, or sects, a true visible Church in the absolute sense is that only in which God's Word is preached right and the holy Sacraments are administered in accordance with the Gospel.

THESIS IX

Though according to the divine promises it is not possible for the one holy Christian Church ever to perish, it is yet possible, and at times it has really happened, that there did not exist a true VISIBLE Church in the absolute sense, in which through an uncorrupted public ministry the preaching of the pure Word of God and the administration of the unadulterated Sacraments held sway.

THESIS X

The Ev. Lutheran Church is the total of all unreservedly confessing agreement with the pure Word of God, of the teaching brought again to light through Luther's reformation and delivered summarily in writing to Kaiser and Reich at Augsburg in 1530 and repeated and expanded in the other so-called Lutheran symbols.

THESIS XI

The Ev. Lutheran Church is not the one holy Christian Church outside of which there is no salvation, though it has never separated from the same but acknowledges it alone.

THESIS XII

If the Ev. Lutheran Church has the marks of pure Gospel-preaching and unadulterated administration of the holy Sacraments, then it is the true visible Church of God on earth.

THESIS XIII

The Ev. Lutheran Church recognizes the written Word of the apostles and prophets as the only and perfect source, rule, norm, and judge of all teaching, a. not reason, b. not tradition, c. not new revelations.

THESIS XIV

The Ev. Lutheran Church holds fast to the clearness of Scripture. (There are no "views" and "open questions.")

THESIS XV

The Ev. Lutheran Church acknowledges no HUMAN interpreter of Scripture whose interpretation must be received as infallible and binding on account of his office; 1. not an individual, 2. not an order, 3. not a particular or general council, 4. not a whole Church (nicht eine ganze Kirche).

THESIS XVI

The Ev. Lutheran Church accepts God's Word as it interprets itself.

- A. The Ev. Lutheran Church lets the original text alone decide.
- B. The Ev. Lutheran Church, in the interpretation of the words and sentences, holds fast to the usage of language.
- C. The Ev. Lutheran Church acknowledges only the literal sense as the true sense.
- D. The Ev. Lutheran Church holds the literal sense has but one sense.
- E. The Ev. Lutheran Church, in interpreting, is guided by the context and the intention. Otherwise the Scripture is garbled.

- F. The Ev. Lutheran Church acknowledges the literal sense may be the improper sense as well as the proper; but it does not depart from the proper sense unless forced by Scripture itself either the circumstances of the text itself or a parallel passage or the analogy of faith.
- G. The Ev. Lutheran Church interprets the dark passages by the clear ones.
- H. The Ev. Lutheran Church takes the articles of faith from the texts constituting the seat of doctrine and judges all obiter dicta accordingly.
- I. The Ev. Lutheran Church rejects out of hand every interpretation not in harmony with the analogy of faith, Rom. 12:7.

THESIS XVII

The Ev. Lutheran Church accepts the whole written Word of God (as God's Word), deems nothing in it superfluous or of little worth but everything needful and important, and also accepts all teaching deduced of necessity from the word of Scripture.

THESIS XVIII

The Ev. Lutheran Church gives to each teaching of God's Word the place and importance it has in God's Word itself.

- A. It makes the teaching concerning Christ, or justification, the foundation and marrow and guiding star of all teaching.
- B. The Ev. Lutheran Church distinguishes sharply between the Law and the Gospel.
- C. The Ev. Lutheran Church distinguishes sharply between the fundamental and the non-fundamental articles of doctrine contained in Scripture.
- D. The Ev. Lutheran Church distinguishes sharply between what God's Word commands and what it leaves free. (Things indifferent [adiaphora], church government.)
- E. The Ev. Lutheran Church distinguishes as sharply as cautiously between the Old and the New Testament.

THESIS XIX

The Ev. Lutheran Church accepts no teaching as an article of faith which is not contained in God's Word and is therefore not absolutely sure and certain.

THESIS XX

The Ev. Lutheran Church prizes the gift of interpreting Scripture as given by God to individuals, 1 Cor. 12:4, 7, 8, 10, 30; 14:32; 1 Thess. 5:20.

THESIS XXI

- A. The Ev. Lutheran Church is sure that the teaching contained in its Symbols is the pure God's truth because it agrees with the written Word of God in all points.
- B. The Ev. Lutheran Church requires its members and especially its teachers unreservedly to confess and vow fidelity to its symbols.
- C. The Ev. Lutheran Church rejects all fraternal and churchly fellowship with those who reject its Confessions in whole or in part.

THESIS XXII

The Ev. Lutheran Church administers the holy Sacraments after the institution of Christ.

THESIS XXIII

True Ev. Lutheran churches are those only in which the teaching of the Ev. Lutheran Church, as laid down in its Symbols, is not only acknowledged officially but is also in vogue in the public preaching, Jer. 8:8; Matt. 10:32 f.

THESIS XXIV

The Ev. Lutheran Church holds fellowship in confession and charity with all at one with it in faith, Eph. 4:3.

THESIS XXV

The Ev. Lutheran Church has thus all the essential marks of the true visible Church of God on earth as they are found in no other known communion, and therefore it needs no reformation in doctrine.

These Theses and their supporting Scripture references were printed in *Der Lutheraner* in August of 1866. This was in preparation for the upcoming synodical convention to be held in October. Walther never completed his plan to deliver lectures on all 25 Theses. But over eight years and at various synodical and district conventions, he covered well over half in great detail. In 1992 Concordia Publishing House made these lectures available in English for the first time.¹³

Walther gives his goal and desire for these Theses in his introductory remarks, Friday, November 2, 1866:

So we should now, in order to counteract the misunderstanding that we do not care about the true visible church, as though all church bodies were equally valid for us, joyfully go to work as we together examine the doctrine of the Evangelical Lutheran Church as the true visible church of God on earth on the basis of holy Scripture and the confessional writings of our church. Let us hold to the purpose of not only being certain of this but also of becoming glad that we are not members and servants of a false church but of the true one, building the right Zion.¹⁴

Walther shows his mastery of Law and Gospel in these essays. He clearly commands people to avoid all false doctrine, and the best way to do so is to remain in the Lutheran church. But he also shows that at times a person sins unknowingly or from an erring conscience. Here the Gospel absolves all sin and error.¹⁵ “Whether one contradicts the truth against better knowledge- everything depends on this.” “A willful sinner or one willfully remaining in error is lost.” This article of Law and Gospel is no mere theory, it must be practiced correctly in congregational life.

Walther now moves to the Confessional witnesses in support of Thesis I. He spends much time in AC VII and VIII, as one would expect, but also quotes the Apology, The Large Catechism, and The Smalcald Articles. Here he clearly distinguishes between the essence of the church and false definitions and ideas. The means of grace are the marks of the church, “marks given by which one can recognize, not *what* the church is, but *where* it is.”¹⁶

As long as believers are present, the church is there, also in Turkey or wherever there is no public office of the ministry. Believers make the church. Therefore only this belongs to the definition of the church: It is the assembly of believers. Nevermore are the means of grace, Word and sacrament, the essential parts of the church, nor do they therefore belong to the definition of the same. The means of grace are only the means through which the church comes into existence and endures. The church is a number of people who believe in Jesus Christ- nothing more belongs to the definition of the church’s essence or in answer to the question as to what the church is.”¹⁷

¹³ C. F. W. Walther, *Essays For The Church*, Volume I, 1857-1879, (St. Louis:CPH), 1992, 88-201.

¹⁴ *Essays I*, 90.

¹⁵ *Ibid*, 92.

¹⁶ *Ibid*, 93. Emphasis in the original.

¹⁷ *Ibid*.

With this understanding, Walther states that there are not two different churches, one visible and one invisible. Whenever a church is spoken of, God is always describing the orthodox, visible church.¹⁸

These comments are not to be misunderstood, because “where there is no longer any Word of God and no sacrament; there is also no church.”¹⁹ Just because there are believers in heterodox fellowships, it does not follow that one should join such fellowships! We contend for the children of God hidden in such erring groups, not the false teachers and deceivers.²⁰ “You see, those modern false teachers always bring the marks and presuppositions of the church into the description of the essence of the church. But this procedure is just as foolish as if I, because a human being needs bread for nourishment, would want to include bread in the definition of the essence of man.”²¹ “No true Lutheran teacher has ever maintained that one could really see the church; they only maintain that one can recognize it by certain marks.”²²

At this point Walther teaches God’s purpose for the faithful preaching of the Word and false marks that often arise in the church. Citing 2 Corinthians 2:15-16²³ he reminds us that God clearly teaches that His Word has a double effect; a savor of life to life and a savor of death to death. God gives His Word for life, not death. Life is God’s goal, death is incidental and the fault of human beings. “God does not send His Word so that people will go to hell, but so they will go to heaven.”²⁴

False marks abound in the church and one must beware of them. The Roman church will often site marks that are at times marks of the church, but not infallible²⁵ ones. Among these are unity, durability, holiness, age, the name “Catholic” and even purported miracles performed by holy men in the Roman Church. According to the Nicene Creed the church is indeed one, holy and catholic, but these attributes are not infallible marks because they are also found in other things. “We humans have love in common with God; therefore one cannot cite love as a decisive mark of God.”²⁶ But it is not only the papists that can play the “love” card, but the Methodists as well. In addition to this false mark of love, the Methodists also cite purity of life, zeal for missions, zeal for prayer, and other human actions as signs that theirs is the true church. These may be outward signs and they may be sheer hypocrisy; they are fallible. “The Word, on the other hand, is an infallible sign. Where the Word is preached there must be children of God according to the divine promise... the only infallible signs²⁷ are the Word and the holy sacraments.”²⁸ The Lutheran Confessions, Walter states, clearly teach that the Word and sacraments are infallible signs, “It is also taught among us that one holy Christian church will be and remain forever. This is the assembly of all believers among who the Gospel is preached in its purity and the holy sacraments are administered according to the Gospel.”²⁹

¹⁸ Ibid, 94; 95-96.

¹⁹ Ibid, 93.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ibid, 96.

²² Ibid, 95.

²³ For we are the aroma of Christ to God among those who are being saved and among those who are perishing, to one a fragrance from death to death, to the other a fragrance from life to life. Who is sufficient for these things? ESV

²⁴ Ibid., p. 101.

²⁵ German, “Kennzeichen.”

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ To say that a religious institution, the office of the ministry, is a part of the essence of the church “is an entirely un-Lutheran concept.” P. 101.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ AC VI, 1, Tappert, p. 32.

“Outside the church there is no salvation” is true, as long as it is properly understood. It must refer to the invisible church and cannot be applied to any visible communion in such a way as to say, “If you don’t belong to us, you cannot be saved.”³⁰ This Thesis must be maintained against both Rome and the Anabaptists who make the same claim from opposite directions. Rome claims that belonging to the visible communion saves and the Anabaptists point to their “sinless” communions and total sanctification.

But how is one to judge the orthodoxy of a congregation? Some would point to the life of the members and especially the pastor. Others would point to the official teachings of the church. Paul called the Galatian church a church and also a sect; but this was no error or contradiction. Because of the few true believers they are called church. Because of the apostasy of the majority they are called a sect.

This is what happens to many of the Reformed, who in their simplicity believe God’s Word, but their church or communion still clings to error and by its maintenance of that error makes itself a sect. To the degree that it does the latter, we are fully justified in calling it a sect; however, to the extent that there are still children of God in that group and so long as the basic articles of the faith are confessed, to that extent, according to Biblical terminology, we call it a church. In judging such a communion with regard to its orthodoxy, we must judge on the basis of its public doctrine. Whatever doctrine is preached in a congregation and is tolerated as proclaimed doctrine, that is, the doctrine and confession of that congregation. It is in accordance with its publicly proclaimed false doctrine that a congregation gets the name sect, even though it remains true that children of God are hidden among them, people who say to themselves, “Our pastor’s doctrine is not right.”³¹

How important are these distinctions between division and sect? Walther maintains that they are very important on a number of levels, especially with regards to fellowship and church discipline. When a member, because they are weak and/or ill informed, separates themselves from an orthodox Lutheran congregation, they are not to be excommunicated or condemned as heretics.

People often say that we Lutherans condemn all other people. That happens because such people think that a declaration that someone has excluded himself from the congregation is the same thing as excommunicating that person and saying that he is damned. After all, only someone who stubbornly clings to an error despite his better knowledge and in spite of his own conscience is a condemned heretic.³²

Walther also warns how easily one can draw false conclusions from such a stance, as happened in his day and still happens among us today. Just because there are true Christians among the sects (Methodists, Presbyterians, Roman Catholics, etc.) it does not mean that we should commune with them or practice other types of church fellowship with them. “Those who do not join me in professing pure doctrine are not my brothers in faith.”³³ A proper understanding of this paradox makes us truly Lutheran and even “broad minded,”³⁴ liberal, and “moderate!”³⁵

While our Lutheran church is adamantly opposed to all unionism with false doctrine, yet it is so broad-minded, liberal, moderate that it recognizes God’s children to be present wherever the basic articles of the faith are confessed and taught. No true Lutheran considers himself any better than any other person who still confesses that Jesus is his Savior. What a fine distinction the Lutheran church draws by distinguishing between the Roman Church and the papacy, recognizing the latter as a papistic, antichristian sect, but at the same time recognizing that there are still children of God in the former under the papacy! As mild as our

³⁰ Walther, Essays I, 105.

³¹ Ibid., 127.

³² Ibid., 128.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ “Weitherzig.”

³⁵ “Wenig fanatisch.”

church's judgment of persons, so adamant is it in rejecting false doctrine. Leaving heterodox communions is simply obedience to God, who hates the mixing of religious beliefs.³⁶ But in the process one must not pass judgment on the hearts of those who remain behind.³⁷

I would like to direct our attention to Walther's treatment of Thesis VIII:

While ecclesiastical writers at times call those communions true or real churches that retain God's Word essentially, in distinction from those that are not churches, nevertheless a true visible church in the full (uneingeschränkten) sense of this term, in opposition to heterodox churches or sects, is only that in which God's Word is proclaimed in its purity and the sacraments are administered according to the Gospel.³⁸

In some ways, Thesis VIII is a restatement of Theses II and III, but his comments here once again show Walther at his best. His zeal for pure doctrine shows itself as he covers a wide variety of topics from mission to Confessional subscription to open questions. By using the term "true" he is not offering some subjective and therefore unmeasurable evaluation, rather true here is actually a synonym for "orthodox" (rechtgaläubig) teaching. This is not for the purpose of extolling an individual or denomination, but for extolling Christ,

Heterodox communions do indeed have distinguishing marks which identify them as "churches," but they also have their (doctrinal) shortcomings, which the Lutheran Church does not have. The distinguishing marks of heterodox churches are not as bright and pure. The clearest, brightest mark of a true church is loyalty to all of Christ's words, faithfulness to His entire Word. In that regard, this is the situation: With superstitious additions the Roman Church goes beyond what Christ says, while the Reformed Church, because of its unbelieving diminutions, falls short of what Christ says, and only the Lutheran Church in all simplicity remains strictly with the words of Christ.³⁹

Walther then points out the danger for any who would remain in a heterodox church. True, bits and pieces of the Truth are present there, but Christ does not say "Hear some of my voice" or "Continue somewhat in My Word." Rather He says "Flee the voice of a stranger."

Those who have recognized the error of a church, but stay where they are in spite of that, fall from grace, because they are sinning against their own better knowledge and their own conscience. For Christ bids them to continue in His Word, and He forbids them to go on listening to the voice of a stranger. Renouncing error is similar to renouncing any other sin. It is possible that I may not realize that a certain activity is sin and therefore keep on doing it and yet remain in grace. But later on I discover that it is sin. If I then nevertheless continue to do it, I will fall from grace, will be sinning against my conscience and can no longer be saved. The same is true of anyone who abides in a heterodox communion in defiance of his better knowledge; he cannot be saved; that would be deliberately continuing in false doctrine.⁴⁰

As bad as it is for the individual to lose his or her faith, the problem does not end there; like a cancer its deadly consequences spread. In heterodox churches the plague of unionism takes hold. Since God's Word teaches that every sinner remains a sinner until they die, they erroneously conclude that the sin of false doctrine is not dangerous or life threatening. Since it is possible to be saved in an erring church, they reason that they can remain there with God's

³⁶ "Glaubensmengerei."

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Ibid., 132.

³⁹ Ibid., 133.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 132-133.

blessing. Such a conclusion, Walther says, “Is dead wrong.”⁴¹ When a pastor, charged with the spiritual care of the flock entrusted to him, takes this attitude “the pastor has robbed that congregation of its crown: purity of doctrine.”⁴²

In Walther’s day, as in our own, Confessional subscription was and is a hot topic. Many would hold to only a partial or limited subscription of the Lutheran Confessions and therefore a limited subscription of the Scriptures.⁴³ For these pastors and congregations and synods he has little regard. But error can be subtle. Some would claim to subscribe to the symbolical books without reservation while making mental reservation about how to understand and interpret this or that point. Walther exposes this approach as treachery, “This kind of procedure produces no good whatsoever, nothing but a Babylonian confusion. In such circumstances the subscription is absolutely worthless.”⁴⁴ Article VII of the Augsburg Confession clearly teaches against any kind of partial subscription or partial practice of pure doctrine,

This quotation is especially important today because in certain quarters they want us to admit that a communion can be genuinely Lutheran even though it claims that it is not necessary that there be complete agreement in *every* article of faith and doctrine. The true visible church must have unity or it is not a church but a sect. The citation does not say: “in all the primary, most important, essential articles,” but it says, “in *all* its articles.”⁴⁵

For Walther an attack on pure doctrine and practice was always an attack on Christ and His Word. This is not merely a difference of opinion or a matter of interpretation where some understand things one way and others understand it in a different way; this approach is dishonest and foolish.

And yet nothing counts [in this matter] except the Bible, God’s clear Word. The truth is, our faith is not some marginal note or explanation of the Bible, but a simple referral to what has clearly been written. What counts is not that this or that famous Lutheran theologian has explained it this way or that way, but that the words of the Bible clearly stand there. Many doctrines are not included in the Augsburg Confession, and our predecessors deliberately did not include a whole string of doctrines. They did this, not because they were not sure of what they believed nor because they did not know what the Lutheran faith is, but because in submitting the Augsburg Confession the important thing was to give a complete and clear confession with regard to those doctrines that were in dispute. After all, all other matters that they believed were covered by their confession to Scripture. The Word is a two-edged sword, and we must never let go of it.⁴⁶

In summary, everything in the Book of Concord is Lutheran doctrine, be it intentional or accidental because what the Symbols teach is what God’s Word teaches. In addition, everything clearly stated in Scripture is Lutheran, even if the Lutheran Confessions have not expressed an opinion in the matter.

Walther reserves his longest and harshest comments for those who promote the idea of “open questions” in the church. It was becoming increasingly popular, in the name of peace, for a dispute to be declared an open question. If a point or issue was not specifically dealt with in the Confessions, the matter, according to this “modern theory,” must be left free, both opinions considered as having equal validity, and in the mean time there must be no condemnation or attack of persons. This state was to continue until the matter is settled by a Church or Council or Synod. Once the Synod has spoken, the matter would be clear and the doctrinal position of the Synod would hold sway.

⁴¹ Ibid. 132.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ A classic example today is the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA).

⁴⁴ Ibid., 134.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 135.

Walther mocked such an approach, “A Lutheran recognizes no ‘open questions’ in matters of faith, nor does anything but the truth have any right in a Lutheran Church, where nothing but the truth is to be taught.”⁴⁷

Now if two Lutheran theologians hold opposing positions on such a doctrine, then one of them is obviously in error. Furthermore, it never happened in the better days of the Lutheran Church that Lutheran theologians tolerated contradictory opinions or error in other theologians, thereby leaving that issue as an “open question...” This theory of open questions may have arisen from a misunderstanding of the doctrine that we should not immediately condemn those who err. So now they want us to tolerate also the error itself until an agreement is finally reached. But although we should be tolerant with an erring person, the error itself should never be tolerated in the Lutheran Church. No issue concerning which God has already given us the answer in His Word may be treated as an open question. Whether a doctrinal issue has been dealt with in the Lutheran Confessions is finally not the issue. The issue is whether that question has been clearly answered in the Scriptures. Questions that are not answered in the Bible do not belong in the church at all.⁴⁸

The conceding of “open questions” is nothing other than the church giving permission to teach false doctrine. Because of the sinful flesh, a Christian will occasionally commit sin and make erroneous statements; for this forgiveness is asked for and granted. But the church “cannot and dare not give permission to sin, just as little as it can give permission to err and to proclaim and profess false doctrine.”⁴⁹ He has harsh words for leaders in the church who take this approach, “With what kind of conscience can our opponents who think their opinion is right, allow the other opinion, which they think is wrong, to have equal validity until at long last the issue is decided by a church council? Their consciences must already be completely dull.”⁵⁰

Rather than falling for the trap of “open questions,” Walther emphasizes the importance of publicly refuting false teaching and proper church discipline. First he quotes Luther, “the church must not teach anything else than God’s Word, serve anyone else than God, place another light besides the true Light placed by God in the darkness. It is indeed a will-o’-the-wisp and error even though it were only a single untruth, for the church should not and cannot teach any lies or error, not even a single one. If it teaches a single lie, it is already altogether wrong.”⁵¹ He follows this by quoting Gerhard, “If a heretical doctrine is preached in a church, we regard it as heretical and call it so. The true teacher of a church distinguishes himself from a false prophet by pure, unperverted doctrine; so also the true church distinguishes itself from the false by pure and unperverted doctrine.”⁵² Walther then offers the following comments,

Also those churches are considered to be “pure” where false teaching is not allowed to raise its head, although there may be many members who hold erroneous views; but they are not allowed to make them public. If they do so they will be admonished, and if it turns out that they are stubborn, they are excommunicated. We say “the true visible church is pure,” but not implying that an error can never arise in its midst; rather that, when error does arise and becomes public, it will be punished. Only those who proclaim pure doctrine are recognized as being the voice of the “true church.”⁵³

Because precious souls are at stake and because it is indeed possible for a Christian to fall from grace and lose their salvation, we must be diligent in our proclamation of the Truth and in refuting error. In so doing we are truly carrying out the mission of the church.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 135-136.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 136.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Ibid., 135. “Against Jack Sausage,” LW 41:215.

⁵² Ibid., 136.

⁵³ Ibid., 137.

Now someone might get the idea that, in that case, it would be better if there were no Lutheran church. Then we could let people in their simplicity and ignorance and they would still not lose their salvation. But thank God that we do have the Lutheran Church to which we can cling, because: (1) False doctrine always keeps on spreading, imbeds itself ever more deeply in the heart, and in the end can cause us to forfeit our salvation in that the error ensnares us more and more. False doctrine is a poison that gradually permeates the entire body of the person who does not cleanse and purify himself of it. (2) How good it is that our Lutheran church stand there with its purity of doctrine, stubbornly abiding in the Word, and raising its voice like a trumpet! That intimidates the sects and enthusiasts, warning them not to go further with their erroneous ideas. Oh, how many Methodists will thank us Lutherans in heaven for always confronting their enthusiastic ideas with the Word of God and chiding them; thereby at least accomplishing this much, that we kept them from sinking deeper and deeper into them! Truly, next to gathering in the individual lost souls around the truth, the primary purpose of the Lutheran Church is to keep on raising the voice of its testimony. Whoever wishes to be a true disciple of Jesus must abide in His Word.⁵⁴

As always, Walther's desire for a clear and bold confession of the truth was motivated by faithfulness to God and a concern for precious souls that were at stake. There are many, because of weakness, that remain in synods that falsely bear the name Lutheran, but personally profess the pure Lutheran doctrine; they are indeed our brothers in the faith.⁵⁵ We must, however, continue to make the good confession loud and clear and encourage such brothers to leave these false communions, for the sake of their souls. In so doing, we are following the example of the ancient church, which did not keep quiet in the name of a false peace, but boldly confessed the truth of God's Word.

False doctrine had arisen. Did the church perhaps tell those congregations which were being disrupted by those false doctrines: "Now, now, first of all you need to calm down; when we conduct the next council, we'll study this matter carefully and settle the issue?" No! The church already knew what our faith must be. It rejected the budding false doctrine, and at the same time wrote in detail about its own Scripture-based faith. The subsequent councils merely ratified what the church had always held. That is how all the creeds and confessional writings, including our Lutheran Confessions, came into being.⁵⁶

But what about those who would like to modernize Luther and his teachings to help him speak more clearly to the attitudes and culture of the day? Can we not have a distinctively "American" Luther and "American Lutheranism" that takes the best of Lutheranism and combines it with the best of the other Christian confessions to make it more palatable to American ears? Walther's response was clear and unmistakable.

As true as it is that the Lutheran church is based on the entire Word of God, so certain is it that only those who accept the doctrines that are contained in the Symbolical Books can claim to be Lutherans. The name "evangelical Lutheran" has historical significance. There has been only one Martin Luther. Therefore if I want to know, "What does it mean to be Lutheran?" I need only to read Luther's writings, for there it is recorded what Luther taught. Now already at that time the Lutherans had to defend their faith. So they summarized their doctrine, and in the Confessional Writings they briefly indicated what their beliefs were. Consequently, anyone who wants to believe what Lutherans believe must conform his faith and confession to the Confessional Writings, or he is no Lutheran. The neo-Lutherans of the General Synod keep insisting: "We are Lutherans too, not German but American Lutherans." However, they are lying when they call themselves Lutherans, but refuse to abide by the old Lutheran doctrines. They are lying if they do not believe what that old German, not American, Luther taught to all Christendom on the basis of God's Word 350 years ago.⁵⁷

⁵⁴ Ibid., 133.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 141.

⁵⁷ Ibid., 140.

In his comments on Thesis XI, Walther emphasizes that the Lutheran church has never claimed to be the only saving church. True Lutheran desire nothing else than to be members of the one Christian church, outside of which there is no salvation; they disavow all false doctrine and the sects that promote them. Sadly, many do not recognize the destructive nature of the sects and their errors. Yet, in their simplicity, they still cling to Christ in faith even where false teachings and false teachers rage. “There are many children of God who have left the sects spiritually but not physically.”⁵⁸ But why is this distinction so important? The certainty of salvation is at stake!

In its entire history the Lutheran church has never made the erroneous claim of being the one holy Christian church, outside of which there is no salvation. Only Stephan, Grabau, and von Rohr have made such a claim. But that is a very damnable error, a heresy, for it claims that faith in Christ is not enough for salvation, that one may believe in Christ and yet be damned. That is robbing Christ of His glory and turning the visible church into a second Savior; that is damning all the believing children of God in other churches and imperiling even the salvation of Lutherans... in short, a Christian becomes uncertain about everything!⁵⁹

Contending for the Truth of God’s Word and the certainty of salvation are two recurring themes throughout the lengthy remarks on this thesis.

The First Testimony⁶⁰ is from the Preface to the Book of Concord, paragraph 11. “Whoever subscribes to the Symbolical Books thereby confesses with a solemn oath that he believes that outside the visible Lutheran church there are *many* precious children of God.”⁶¹ Walther uses the Reformed error on the Lord’s Supper as an example of how one can be in an erring church and yet still have a simple, saving faith.

One can readily imagine that a simple person, raised in the Reformed church and having from little on been taught the false doctrine of Holy Communion, does not recognize the consequences of this doctrine and the errors on which it rests, namely, that by those errors our Lord Jesus is robbed of His true incarnation, His omnipotence, omnipresence, and truthfulness. Such a person does not believe that in Holy Communion Christ’s body and blood are truly distributed and received, merely because he has never been taught anything different than that it only *signifies* His body. Along with this, however, he still believes that Christ is truthful, omnipotent, and omnipresent, also according to His human nature, and he places all his hope for salvation solely in Him. That such a person, despite his error, can remain a Christian and be saved, that is what the Book of Concord confesses, and that is also what we, therefore, gladly confess.⁶²

Walther also stresses the difference between the terms “church” and “sect” as used in the Symbols. When a heterodox fellowship is called a church, it is referring to the Word of God that is present there, and also the fact that Holy Baptism and believers are present there. That same heterodox fellowship is called a sect with regard to the false teachings and obstinate false teachers. This dichotomy is very similar to our understanding of the Christian being both sinner and saint.

The Second Testimony is from Luther’s *Letter Regarding Anabaptism* (LW 40:251) where the Reformer states that “we must confess that the enthusiasts have Scripture and God’s Word in other articles, and whoever among them hears and believes will be saved, though they are unholy heretics and will be saved.”⁶³ Souls are not saved by the

⁵⁸ Ibid., 145.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ The format for Walther's comments on Thesis XI is starkly different from that of every other thesis to this point. After opening comments, he takes twelve "testimonies" from the Confessions or orthodox Lutherans and gives expanded comments. In this format he is able to address a variety of topics and issues. It is one of the longest sections in the entire series of essays.

⁶¹ Ibid., 146.

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ Ibid., 147.

false doctrines and human opinions proclaimed in the sects; that would be blasphemy against God and His Word. It is a paradox that people can cling to a simple faith while at the same time being assailed by erroneous and confused teachings and opinions. Walther again uses the Reformed error concerning the Lord's Supper to make his point, but he also uses this Luther quote to speak against Grabau and the other Romanizing Lutherans. If the Word of God spoken by enthusiasts can save, then the efficacy of the Word is not dependant on the Office of the Holy Ministry as was being taught by Grabau. "But Grabau makes the efficacy of the Word depend on the divine call of the person and declares that the Scriptural truths retained by the enthusiasts are pure poison that destroys the soul. He declares the Word ineffective because it isn't being proclaimed by a properly called person."⁶⁴ To Walther this teaching was as scandalous as the Roman teaching that outside their fellowship there is no salvation. "To that end the office of the ministry is then granted special privileges and is turned into a new Savior. How unfortunate is the person who becomes a captive of such people!"⁶⁵

Grabau countered that Walther was guilty of a unionizing spirit, giving the impression that it really doesn't matter if you belong to a right teaching church or a heterodox fellowship. To this charge Walther was adamant that his teaching actually encouraged people to flee false teachers, demonstrating that while believers can be found in false churches, their souls were in grave danger and God commands them to leave for the truth.

Moreover, when we teach that also in hetrodox churches people will be saved, we are not thereby saying that it doesn't make any difference to what church you belong. Indeed not; according to God's Word, every person should be a member of a church that teaches the true faith. But whoever is a member of a hetrodox church is in grave danger of losing his soul. And whoever knows that false doctrine is being taught there and still remains-he will be lost; for he is sinning against an express commandment of God, 2 Corinthians 6:14ff., is participating in the sin of others, is strengthening the host of errorists and is fighting with them against those who confess the full truth, is by his example confirming in their errors others who are less enlightened than he is, and is thereby hindering the spread of the truth in the hearts of men. Just as he is thereby denying Christ, so Christ will deny him on Judgment Day.⁶⁶

Walther's Third Testimony is again from Luther and from his *Letter Regarding Anabaptism* (LW 40: 232). This long quote shows that the Pope is the Antichrist and that he sits not among the heathen, but in the church. This statement by Luther is not to praise the Roman church or her false teachings, but to demonstrate that this erring fellowship is called a church in Scripture, not because of the false teaching or because of the Antichrist, but because of the believers there. The believers there suffer much and are in great peril, "for maintaining and confessing the saving faith under the papacy was and is connected with great danger and suffering. In contrast, we today are such namby-pamby saints that we are inclined to think of ourselves as martyrs when we suffer a little ridicule or temporal harm."⁶⁷ Walther is concerned to be truthful regarding the power of the Word and the believers languishing in erring churches.

People criticize us, saying that our doctrine-that there are children of God outside of the true, visible Lutheran church-is a cozying up to the sects and an admission that false doctrine does have some value. But that is absolutely not true, for children of God are not produced by false doctrine, even among the sects; they are rather produced by the remnant of the pure Word of God they still have. Our purpose in teaching this doctrine is only that, like Luther, we do not want to reject the precious children of God in heterodox churches along with what they have of Christ; we don't want to deny that Christ is a king for whom the Lutheran church is far too limited a kingdom. His kingdom stretches from one end of the world to the other.

⁶⁴ Ibid. (Weil es nicht im rechten Beruf gehe)

⁶⁵ Ibid., 146.

⁶⁶ Ibid., 148.

⁶⁷ Ibid.

We merely want to preserve the truth that the Word of God does not lose its power when it is proclaimed by false prophets, so long as it is preserved in its essence and is recognized and accepted as God's Word.⁶⁸

In the Fourth Testimony, from Luther's *Great Confession of the Lord's Supper* (LW37:367), reference is made to the fact that Christendom is scattered physically throughout the world, yet gathered spiritually under One Head, Christ.⁶⁹ This is a union or gathering of all true believers, "the moment a person believes, he is immediately made a part of the one, holy, Christian church by the Holy Spirit, regardless of where he is physically."⁷⁰

The Fifth Testimony, again from Luther, is from his 1521 *Exposition on Psalm 19* (SL IV, 1169);

Wherever there are the Gospel and the words of the Spirit of Christ, there, beyond all doubt, is the true church of Christ, for the Spirit of Christ never speaks except in His church. Therefore, because here (Psalm 19:4) the text speaks clearly that the doctrine of the apostles has gone out throughout all the earth, and there is no place where we read that it was disavowed, we must take care that we do not glory in ourselves as being the only believers, as did the impious Donatists, no matter who they might be, whether the old or the new.⁷¹

Again Walther stresses that many have a simple faith, clinging to the truth while surrounded by error. This shouldn't be an offense to us, but should encourage us all the more to make the good confession and lead them out of the sects. In dealing with this article, Walther also pointed out that we must be very careful in distinguishing between the definition of the church and the distinguishing marks of the church, "the pure Word always remains the distinguishing mark of the church, of all believers."⁷²

The Sixth Testimony is from Luther's *Abuse of the Mass* (LW 36:188 ff.), and stresses that we are to condemn the error while realizing that the Christian caught in the error is trapped in ignorance; we have a duty to lead them out.⁷³ Walther now uses the Roman error on the Lord's Supper as an example in much the same way as he used the Reformed error previously. Simple people have been taught the error of the Mass from little on. "Because they err out of simplicity and also cling to Christ at the same time, their error does not damn them."⁷⁴ This fact should also teach us great patience as we teach people who have been exposed to error from little on, "As a matter of fact, if you were to catechize our orthodox congregations, even those who have heard the Word for 20 or 25 years and are believers, you would be shocked to discover the grievous false doctrines that would be revealed."⁷⁵ But Walther also cautions that in our patience⁷⁶ we remain bold and clear in confessing the truth.

⁶⁸ Ibid., 149.

⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁰ Ibid., 150.

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² Ibid., 151.

⁷³ Ibid., 151-152.

⁷⁴ Ibid., 152.

⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁶ Ever the pastor, Walther concludes with words of Law and Gospel, comfort and encouragement for the parish pastor: "How comforting this teaching is for all poor pastors who are in congregations where perhaps a large majority is antagonistic to the Word or refuses to let itself be ruled and led by the Word! How easily does a pastor in such a case begin to think of leaving the people and seeking a field of work elsewhere, where his work might have better prospects! But how grievously would he be sinning, for he would be forsaking the children of God- really his own congregation and church- who are still at this place and to whom he is to prove himself useful! Were he to leave such a place, it would be similar to a hireling saying, 'I see the wolf coming; I must flee. I'm not doing it on account of the poor sheep, but only because of the wicked wolf.' No, if he does not want to be a hireling, he must remain all the more." Ibid., p. 99

Luther says in conclusion that we should not damn those errorists who do not yet recognize their error, but that, on the other hand, we should reveal their error to everyone. We should take this to heart, not damning the person but always condemning the error. We should not become indifferent to error, but try to free everyone from it. Therefore we should say to a Reformed person, for example, “Your doctrine of Holy Communion is a damnable error.” If he then cries out, “What? Do you mean to tell me that all Reformed Christians are damned?” then we should reply, “No, that is not true, because many people in your communion cling to this error only in weakness and lack of understanding, and if they also cling to Christ in faith, they will of course be saved. But now consider this: You have just heard my testimony concerning your error and have just discovered that your doctrine is contrary to God’s Word. Now see to it that you purify yourself of that error, lest you become one of those who knowingly and deliberately cling to an error and thus fight against God. You cannot do that and still retain your faith and your good conscience, but will instead most certainly be forever lost.”⁷⁷

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⁷⁷ Ibid.