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Wilhelm Löhe on Pastoral Office and Liturgy

WALTER SUNDBERG

LÖHE'S LASTING CONTRIBUTION

"Wilhelm Löhe's most lasting contribution to the church," wrote the late James L. Schaaf of Trinity Seminary in 1970, "was not a literary one...but a living one."[1] If only this were true, then we could ignore Löhe's theology and concentrate instead on the remarkable story of his accomplishments as a pastor, teacher, and church administrator. Assigned unwillingly to a parish in the obscure farming community of Neuendettelsau in 1837, a place where he said he would not want his dog buried, Löhe spent the next thirty-five years until his death carving out a mission that would send church workers to places as disparate as Latvia and the Ukraine, Australia and New Guinea, Brazil and the American Midwest. Löhe's ecclesiastical career was the triumph of faith over circumstance. His tireless energy created schools, hospitals, orphanages, and mission stations.

But while Löhe's life is important, so is his theology. Despite Professor Schaaf's judgment, made a generation ago, Löhe's ideas cannot be ignored. They represent a pattern of thinking in Lutheranism that is perhaps more influential today, at least in certain circles of the church, than it was thirty years ago. They are also controversial, even disturbing in their implications. Within the pages of Löhe's

[1]Wilhelm Löhe, *Three Books about the Church*, trans. with intro. James L. Schaaf (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1969) 17.

Wilhelm Löhe's life and witness should continue to be honored and remembered, argues Professor Sundberg, but "his theology of pastoral office and liturgy is another matter altogether."

collected works, which run to seven large volumes in the critical edition,[2] can be found the parameters of a theological position, especially on pastoral office and liturgy, that bears little resemblance to Lutheran identity as forged in the Reformation. Its usefulness today as an inspiration or guide is also highly questionable.

The purpose of this article is to describe this legacy of Löhe's theology and place it in context. In this way, Löhe is recognized not simply by praising him, but by treating his ideas seriously and assessing them critically. As Löhe was provocative in his time, so he continues to be provocative today.

THE CONTEXT OF NEO-LUTHERANISM

Löhe was part of a conservative theological movement called "neo-Lutheranism" that dominated German Lutheran territorial churches in the middle decades of the nineteenth century. This movement was more reactive than constructive as it sought to protect the church against the threat of political change. Nineteenth-century continental Europe lived under the memory and shadow of the French Revolution of 1789. By overthrowing a legitimate monarch and, in its most radical phase, rejecting Christianity as the foundation of social order, the French Revolution symbolized for governmental and ecclesiastical leaders the very essence of political chaos. A more immediate threat in German lands was the effect of Napoleonic reorganization of states and territories after the ending of the Holy Roman Empire in 1806. Even though the French were expulsed from Germany by 1813, their occupation had lasting influence as they redrew political boundaries that had operated since the Peace of Westphalia in 1648. New confessionally mixed states were created that placed Reformed, Lutheran, and Catholic side by side, subject to the same government. Territorial churches (*Landeskirchen*) found themselves beholden to princes who did not share their doctrine and practice. For liberal Protestants, the burden of this change was easier to bear, because they believed that church doctrine was historically relative and often secondary to political and cultural imperatives. They willingly subjected confessional differences within territories to the larger political goal of creating a pan-German nation. Roman Catholics dealt with political reorganization by securing their identity in the episcopal ordering of the church, especially the transnational authority of the papacy. In this way, Roman Catholic ecclesiology transcended political boundaries of particular states. But for conservative Protestants, particularly Lutherans, it was difficult to find a replacement, secular or ecclesiastical, for the inherited organization of the territorial church. They were more dependent than they realized on the practical ecclesiology of the Peace of Westphalia. To be placed under the authority of a non-Lutheran prince as *summus episcopus* (highest overseer) was to them abhorrent; but they had nothing with which to replace him. In this confused political environment, Lutherans tried to find their place.

[2]Wilhelm Löhe, *Gesammelte Werke* (hereafter *GW*), ed. Klaus Ganzert, 7 vols. (Neuendettelsau: Freimund, 1951–1986).

The immediate catalyst for the neo-Lutheran protest was the formation of the Prussian Church of the Evangelical Union by royal decree of the Prussian King, Friedrich Wilhelm III, in 1817. The King was a pious Christian, Reformed in faith, who found it intolerable that he could not share the Lord's Supper with his Lutheran wife. He believed that a united church would advance the Christian cause. Emboldened by Napoleonic precedent of reorganization and exercising his legal rights as *summus episcopus*, the king created a union church. He prepared his own liturgy and regulations and imposed them on the churches of the territories he controlled. The reaction was fierce, especially among Lutherans. The year 1817 was, after all, the tercentenary of Luther's revolt. Echoing the first thesis of Luther's "Ninety-Five Theses," a Lutheran pastor from Kiel, Claus Harms, laid down the gauntlet:

> When our Lord and Master Jesus Christ says, "Repent," He wants men to conform themselves to His teaching; He does not conform His teaching to men, as is now the custom in accord with the changed spirit of the time.[3]

Any compromise with new political arrangements, or with a theology that might support such arrangements, was thought to be anticonfessional, nothing less than a political form of synergism.

By the time Löhe takes up these issues in midcentury, conservative Protestants faced yet a further threat. The revolutions of 1848 brought down governments from Paris to Prague and had reached as far north as Denmark and as far south as Italy. Progressive forces called for an end to monarchy and the beginning of representative government. Ecclesiastical authorities now feared not only the challenge of a prince who did not share their teaching, but also the return of the French Revolution with its secular, anti-Christian spirit.

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LÖHE ON PASTORAL OFFICE

In this political context, the neo-Lutherans attempted to practice "confessional theology," and they did so in a self-conscious, ideological manner. They honored Luther not only for his doctrine, but as the patriarch of German culture and nationalism. They revived confessional studies, employing an idealistic, historical hermeneutic in which the teachings of the Lutheran Confessions, including the ancient symbols of the Apostles', Nicene, and Athanasian Creeds, were conceived as a development of dogma through which the church experienced both continuity and change in the understanding of revelation across time. This

[3]Quoted and translated in Carl S. Meyer, *Moving Frontiers* (St. Louis: Concordia, 1964) 66.

allowed conservative ecclesiastics to claim that the Lutheran church retains its core identity even in the face of the relativism of political change. As a hymn from the 1840s put it:

> Secure Church, our Church
> Her wall, her safety and defence
> Is Augsburg's conquering creed
> A mighty rampart round her.[4]

But a hermeneutic of doctrinal development also allowed them to question those aspects of Reformation theology they found unsympathetic to their conservative cause. For example, Luther's early commitment to the priesthood of all believers; his rejection of ordination as "an invention of the church of the pope" that creates a "detestable tyranny of the clergy over laity by which clergy and laymen should be separated from each other farther than heaven from earth, to the incredible injury of the grace of baptism and to the confusion of our fellowship in the gospel";[5] and his declaration that Scripture gives "overwhelming power to the Christian congregation to preach, to permit preaching, and to call"[6] were found too radical for the present age because they would open the floodgates to revolution. The fact that the Augsburg Confession grounds ministry in the modest idea of "a regular call" (article 14) without specifying any particular rite or ceremony for ordination was taken as proof that the Reformation's doctrine of ministry stood in need of theological reappraisal. This reappraisal was defended as "apostolic." In this way "change" was disguised as "continuity" of the church's original witness.

In his "Aphorisms concerning the New Testament Offices," that appeared a year after the revolutions of 1848, Löhe gives his idea of how this theological reappraisal worked.[7] It is a view that shares little with either Luther or the Confessions. Löhe asserts that word and the sacraments depend on apostolic ministry established by Christ himself. The office of ministry stands over against the congregation and is nothing less than the authentic source of the congregation: "Not the office originates from the congregation, but it is more accurate to say, the congregation originates from the office."[8] Without the ministry, the congregation is in danger of being separated from the Lord. Any collegial church order that gives congregations the right to vote on ecclesiastical affairs is "not only unapostolic, but highly dangerous."[9] The idea that congregations can choose their own ministers is out of the question. The clergy must be seen as the "strong princes of the church":[10]

[4]Quoted in Karl Barth, *Theology and Church*, trans. Louise Pettibone Smith (London: SCM, 1962) 115.

[5]Martin Luther, "The Babylonian Captivity of the Church" (1520), in *Luther's Works* (hereafter *LW*), 55 vols. (Philadelphia and St. Louis: Fortress and Concordia, 1955–1986) 36:112.

[6]Martin Luther, "That a Christian Assembly Has the Right to Judge" (1523), in *LW* 39:311.

[7]On the following, see Walter Sundberg, "Ministry in Nineteenth Century Lutheranism," in *Called & Ordained*, ed. Todd Nichol and Marc Kolden (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1990) 85f.

[8]Löhe, *GW* 5/1:262.

[9]Ibid., 5/1:287f.

[10]Ibid., 5/1:274.

like princes, they cannot be elected by the people; rather, the ministry arises by succession to the ministerial office, "from person to person, by reason of God."[11]

Like other neo-Lutherans, Löhe is highly suspicious of the interference of the government in church affairs. The prince should not be *summus episcopus*. But this viewpoint does not draw Löhe to the Reformation principle of the freedom of individual Christians and congregations. Rather, it is the clergy, representing their people in synods, who are responsible for the life of the church. If exclusive clerical control cannot be permitted—that is, if there must be leadership in the church directly from the laity—then it is better that the prince rules and not the members of the church: "a tyrant is easier to endure, if indeed one there must be, than the many."[12] Löhe conceives the office of ministry not only as the center of authority in church order, but also as itself a means of grace. Ordination, by the laying on of hands, is nothing less than a consecration. Ordination provides "capability," "privilege," "charism" for ministry; it is entirely other than "a naked ceremony."[13]

Just how far Löhe is willing to take this notion is apparent in two ways. First, in his "New Aphorisms" of 1851, Löhe declares that there is an essential difference between the word of forgiveness spoken by one Christian to another and the word of forgiveness spoken by the office of the minister: only the latter provides the gift of absolution.[14] Here, Löhe clearly oversteps the bounds of any recognizable Reformation position.[15] Secondly, even though he was instrumental in the formation of the Lutheran Church–Missouri Synod in 1847 as part of the missionary work of Neuendettelsau, Löhe was nevertheless willing to sever ties with the new church because its constitution balanced the authority of ordained ministry with the rights and powers of the priesthood of all believers gathered in congregations. With no understanding of the American democratic context, Löhe expressed uncompromising hostility to the Missouri Synod's constitution: "We fear certainly with a perfect right, that the fundamental strong mixing of democratic, independent, congregationalistic principles in your constitution will cause great harm, just as the mixing in of princes and secular authorities in our land has done."[16]

LÖHE ON LITURGY

Paradoxically, while Löhe denigrates the congregation in relation to the ordained office, he elevates the congregation in an unprecedented manner in his understanding of liturgical worship. The reason for this was not a democratic impulse but rather nostalgia for the stability of an imagined past. Neo-Lutherans, like other

[11]Ibid., 5/1:294.

[12]Ibid., 5/1:325.

[13]Ibid., 5/1:296.

[14]Ibid., 5/1:549.

[15]Gerhard Müller, "Das neulutherische Amtsverständnis in reformatorische Sicht," *Kerygma und Dogma* 17 (1971) 58.

[16]Wilhelm Löhe, *Kirchliche Mittheilungen*, no. 6 (1848) col. 44; quoted in E. Clifford Nelson, ed., *The Lutherans in North America* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1975) 181.

movements of counter-modernization, hungered for stability and unity in a world that threatened the privileged position of the church. They believed they could find it in liturgy centered on the Sacrament of the Altar.

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In his *Agenda for Christian Congregations of the Lutheran Faith* (1844), which Luther D. Reed calls "the most important work" in nineteenth-century liturgical revival,[17] Löhe asserts that the key to Christian faithfulness across the ages is the Christian cult. In worship, centered on the Lord's table, the church is thought to be most truly itself. "In public worship," says Löhe, "the Church experiences an especial nearness to God." It is "the prettiest flower that can bloom on human stems"; it is "the image of the inner unity and harmony of the spiritual life."[18] Liturgy is like a spiritual journey up a mountain that brings one into the presence of God. This mountain has twin peaks, "one of whose heights is a little lower than the other. The former of these heights, and the lower, is the Sermon; and the other, and the higher, is the Sacrament of the Altar, without the celebration of which no public worship is complete." In worship, "the soul is engaged in an ascent, the goal of which is reached at the Table of the Lord." Through the power of the gospel in preaching, worship "develops to that point in which the congregation is now conscious of its union with the Lord." In the sermon, "the face of the Highest is unveiled," which "expresses the communion of the saints, all of whom are glad in the presence of the Lord."[19] At the table, "the worshiping people now know themselves as the Bride of the Lord; their hearts' longings are satisfied...they are the people of God—a unit in their inner life and experience."[20] Through liturgy, the congregation is enabled to receive the Sacrament of the Altar without confusion, conflict, or doubt and thus to be one with its Lord.

What Löhe describes in the *Agenda* is an idealized community of worship that borders on the docetic. The imperfection and ambiguity of human life, the *simul iustus et peccator* that is the anchor of the Reformation's theological anthropology, the reality of the church as a *corpus permixtum* (a "mixed body" of both saints and sinners), so fundamental to the orthodox tradition of ecclesiology, whether Catholic or Protestant, is left behind in a vision of a perfect community of discipleship on earth. But what does this have to do with any real assembly of believers that gathers at the corner church on Sunday morning?

[17]Luther D. Reed, *The Lutheran Liturgy* (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg, 1947) 153.

[18]Wilhelm Löhe, *Liturgy for Christian Congregations of the Lutheran Faith*, 3rd ed., ed. J. Deinzer, intro. Edward T. Horn, trans. F. C. Longaker (Newport, KY: 1902) xi.

[19]Ibid., xiv.

[20]Ibid., xiv–xv.

The temptation to describe worship in romantic terms is a long-standing one in the church. Luther, for example, can imagine "a truly evangelical order" of worship attended by those "who want to be Christians in earnest," not "for all sorts of people." He envisions it as a simple, heartfelt service, taking place "in a house somewhere." But as a practical pastor and experienced sinner, Luther realizes that such idealized worship will not take place: "[I]f one had the kind of people and persons who wanted to be Christians in earnest, the rules and regulations would soon be ready. But as yet I neither can nor desire to begin such a congregation or assembly or make rules for it. For I have not yet the people or persons for it, nor do I see many who want it." "In the meanwhile," says Luther, the public services we have "must suffice."[21]

"This is the true beauty of Christian worship, whatever form it takes. It is an assembly of sinners in need of redemptive grace or it is nothing."

And God's word allows such public services to "suffice." At such services God through his word invites repentant sinners in confession. He comforts them with the gospel in the office of preaching. At Holy Communion, it is the Lord alone who sets the table by his word, and he does so for us as he did for the disciples "on the night in which he was betrayed." Christ knows full well the people before him in worship have ascended no mountain and have not freed themselves from sin. They come forward to the altar often confused and broken in spirit. But this is the true beauty of Christian worship, whatever form it takes. It is an assembly of sinners in need of redemptive grace or it is nothing. Either the liturgy conveys the depth of this grace of God or it is not a Divine Service.

Likewise, the liturgy must convey the call to discipleship. In confession, the office of the keys as both binding and loosing sins; in the office of preaching; in the exhortation to communicants, the Christian is called to confront his or her sin and to promise to obey Christ in daily life. Explicit faith (*fides explicata*) in the Reformation tradition must be explicit or it is nothing. A romanticizing and idealizing of the congregation's response to the gospel is no replacement for what the Augsburg Confession calls "the New Obedience" (article 6). Indeed, the new obedience precedes the church (article 7).

In his effort to free the church of his time from confusions attendant to the emergence of the modern secular world and its challenges to the church, Löhe, it appears, fell to the temptation to create a mythical realm of liturgy to which believers could escape into religious bliss. The fact is that Christians are not capable of achieving such mythical bliss nor does the Lord demand it of them. Just as disturbing is the way Löhe subjects the word of preaching to the sacrament. There is no

[21]Martin Luther, "The German Mass and Order of Service" (1526), in *LW* 53:63–64.

basis for this in Lutheran understanding. As the Lutheran theologian Hermann Bezzel explains:

> The Word has been the first and will remain the first. It does not say, Heaven and earth shall pass away, but my sacraments shall not pass away; but it says, But my words shall not pass away. And just because with us it is easy for an overvaluation of the sacraments to enter in, for the reason that a magical effect is expected for them, it is necessary as between them to consider the sober evangelical concept. The Word is the primary thing. There is of course Word without sacrament, but never sacrament without Word. The Word is the first thing. The Word existed before the sacrament was. The Word stands alone, sacrament can never stand alone.[22]

The Shadow of Wilhelm Löhe

The lasting contribution of the theology of Wilhelm Löhe is to place before the church an argument for the authority of ordained ministry over against the priesthood of all believers and to elevate the liturgy as the primary means to Christian discipleship. Anyone familiar with the theological preoccupations of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America can recognize the relevance of these issues to contemporary Lutheranism in America. For example, in "Called to Common Mission," the ecumenical agreement with the Episcopal Church, the focus for the unity of the church and its mission is the succession of bishops in the so-called "historic episcopate." That such a view of ministry finds no explicit support in either Luther or the Confessions—and indeed much that goes against it—is discounted, in part because contemporary Lutherans can point to the neo-Lutherans in the nineteenth century, above all Wilhelm Löhe, as precedents for the acceptance of hierarchical pastoral authority in Lutheran identity. There is no doubt that this is a lasting contribution of Löhe's theology in Lutheranism today. But it is a most problematic one.

Likewise, Löhe's liturgical theology presents problems. The last thing the ELCA needs today is an ideological conception of traditional liturgical worship that turns discipleship and forgiveness into ritual practice. If this struggling denomination needs anything, it is a robust theology of preaching that focuses on evangelical outreach to the unchurched. The ELCA, like other mainline denominations, is losing members at an alarming rate. In the decade of the 1990s, 100,000 people disappeared from the rolls. They will not return to a church turned in upon itself, one which, in the pursuit of a romantic ideal of worship, disconnects itself from where people really live and struggle to make meaning of their lives.

Löhe's life and witness should continue to be remembered and honored; his theology of pastoral office and liturgy is another matter altogether. ⊕

WALTER SUNDBERG is professor of church history at Luther Seminary, Saint Paul, Minnesota.

[22]Johannes Rupprecht, *Hermann Bezzel als Theologe* (1925) 369; quoted in Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics I/1*, trans. G. T. Thomson (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1936) 79.