

C.F.W. Walther's 1870 essay on Communion Fellowship with those who believe differently

Rev. Dr. Brian Saunders – President's Keynote

Dr. Scaer will be presenting on the challenges from a society and culture which is counter-Christian. He will make us aware of the tactics used by Satan to destroy the Church as well as equip us with biblical foundations by which we confront and conquer these attacks. For the most part Dr. Scaer's presentation will address outside influences which conflict against our doctrine. I will present, in this paper, an area Satan is attacking the Church from within its own membership. I refer to the pressure our pastors are under to practice what is known as open communion. This is not new; the Church has battled this for centuries. Our day and age is no different than the day the Saxons emigrated from Germany to Missouri in 1838. To demonstrate this fact President Walther of the Lutheran Church Missouri Synod delivered a set of theses to the Western District in 1870. He wrote 13 theses. My intention today is to summarize what he said and show how it still applies today. I will not cover all 13 theses but will make use of 9 of them. I will state the thesis, quote its most impactful statements and then follow with my commentary on its application then and now.

Thesis I, II

The true visible church in an absolute sense, or part of the same, is that church in which the Word of God is preached purely and the Holy Sacraments are administered according to Christ's institution...A Fellowship in which the Word of God is fundamentally denied, or in which a fundamental denial of the Word of God is tolerated, is not a true orthodox church, but a false heterodox church or sect.

Walther: We make this statement because our faith, doctrine, and confession, in all of its parts, agrees precisely with Scripture, the Word of Christ, and the apostles. The Lutheran Church is actually not only "a" but "the" true visible church of God on earth, insofar as "true" means nothing other than "as it should be according to the Word of God." We neither can nor do we want to boast before other churches about our pious behavior. But we can and must boast about the pure doctrine which, by God's grace to us poor sinners, shines among us like the clear bright light of the sun." The doctrines of baptism, communion, and the eternal universal gracious will of God, for example, are contained in God's Word clearly, plainly, and understandably enough for a child. Anyone who will hold his reason captive to the obedience of faith and not petulantly resist, can and must become certain of divine truth and convinced that the contrary doctrine is from the devil.

Walther quotes Luther: Therefore the holy church cannot and may not lie or suffer false doctrine, but must teach nothing except what is holy and true, that is God's Word alone; and where it teaches a lie it is idolatrous and the whore-church of the devil...for the church ought not and

cannot teach lies and error. If it teaches one lie, then it is wholly false (Lk. 11:35-36). For God's mouth is the mouth of the church and visa-versa. God cannot lie, nor can the church.

Walther: The orthodox church can never tolerate or authorize false doctrine. It can never make a union with the lie. If, for example, a pastor were to propose false doctrine and his hearer were to allow this without protest or struggle, or did not withdraw from him, so must we consider them also to be erring and, under the circumstances, even heretical. One may with justification judge a member of a congregation by his pastor, just as one may judge a church by its confession.

My commentary: It is interesting that Walther does not begin his essay with the passages that deal directly with the Sacrament. He begins by identifying the "true visible church on earth" by its marks, i.e., Word and Sacrament. Walther identifies a person's confession by what they say along with the doctrine of the altar they attend. Fellowship must be founded on those means of grace and cannot exist if false doctrine is preached and tolerated. Walther does make ample use of Galatians 1:6-7 and II Thessalonians 3:6 in these two theses.

Closed communion is pure doctrine according to the Word of God. Since it is pure doctrine of the Word of God, we have fellowship only with those who share this doctrine. I offer these passages for consideration. From Matthew 26:18, 20; Luke 22:11, 14 we can see that the first celebration of the Lord's Supper was held in a closed circle of the disciples (the twelve).

In I Corinthians 10:16-21 Paul clearly opines that the church is not to practice open communion. "The cup of blessing that we bless, is it not a participation in the blood of Christ? The bread that we break, is it not a participation in the body of Christ? Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one bread. Consider the people of Israel: are not those who eat the sacrifices participants in the altar? What do I imply then? That food offered to idols is anything, or that an idol is anything? No, I imply that what pagans sacrifice they offer to demons and not to God. I do not want you to be participants with demons. You cannot drink the cup of the Lord and the cup of demons. You cannot partake of the table of the Lord and the table of demons."

Thesis IV

Every man is obligated to avoid heterodox churches, and in the event that he has belonged to a heterodox church, his obligation is to renounce it and separate himself from it.

Walther: This is taught by Psalm 26:4-5, "I don't sit with men who lie; I don't keep company with hypocrites. I hate every assembly of those who do wrong and will not sit with the wicked." Among other things I Corinthians 10:18 says, "Don't those who eat the sacrifices share the altar?" This text indicates an important element of our separation from the false church, namely, that we include all communion fellowship with them. Because in the same way as that Corinthian who ate from the heathen idol offerings had fellowship with the heathen, so still today a Christian who takes part in a false communion service practices fellowship with the heterodox church. Titus 2:10 says, "A heretic warn once and then a second time, and then don't have anything more to do with him." II John 10:11 says, "If anyone comes to you and doesn't teach

this, don't take him into your home or greet him. If you greet him, you share the wicked things he does."

This does not mean that one should avoid secular courtesy and necessary communication. Instead, it means that over against the heterodox one should avoid all that communication which could open up our sympathy for them, because that would mean a denial of Christ. He who takes part in unionism also therewith takes part in the evil and unbelief that is basic to it. An orthodox Christian should and must earnestly flee from that kind of fellowship; and would better never receive Communion or die rather than partake of a Zwinglian Communion. Walther then goes on to quote the Lutheran Confessions: Tractate on the Power and Primacy of the Pope, 42.

My Commentary: In this thesis Walther is talking mainly about the non-Lutherans who are aware that something is off in their own congregation, and they are seeking where the truth is proclaimed. They show up at your church on a Sunday, how do we address this? We appreciate the fact they are aware of a problem with their current church. It is only fair to them and to your assembly that they be taught what the doctrine of your church is. By catechesis they can determine if the Lutheran Church teaches the truth of the Word. It would be unreasonable to expect the visitor to know what the Lutheran Church teaches if they have not first been taught. We invite them to instruction so they may become members who are in full agreement with the food the altars of the Lutheran Church serve. To feed them the Sacrament before that is to assume they know what they can't possibly know before being instructed.

Given this situation it is crucial to publish your congregation's closed communion policy where it can easily be seen. More than that, make yourself available prior to the service to speak with visitors. Have your elders and usher trained to welcome and assist visitors in knowing what the policy of the Church is.

Thesis VI

Those who are aware of the partial apostasy of the church fellowship to which they belong and yet continue to remain within that fellowship are not to be considered among the weak but are either the lukewarm who the Lord will spit out of His mouth or Epicurean religious sceptics who within their hearts would ask with Pilate, 'What is truth?'

Walther: Luke 11:23 says, "Anyone who is not with me is against me, and anyone who does not help me gather, scatters." Neutrality in the kingdom of God is condemned. He who is not openly for the truth is against it. Some who recognize the errors of their sect still remain in them because of timidity, fears of conflict, cross and all kinds of earthly trouble. They have misgivings about publicly separating themselves and joining the orthodox church. Those who think that a quiet, comfortable, outward peace is more edifying and conducive to the growth of the church are fools. No, nothing is more dangerous or more evil, than if a so-called graveyard peace prevails in the church. Adam would never have become a Christian or Luther a man of the gospel if both of them had not penitently abandoned their false religions.

Walther then quotes Luther: Whoever really regards this doctrine, faith, and confession as true, right and certain cannot remain in the same stall with such as teach, or adhere to, false doctrine;

nor can he keep on giving friendly words to Satan and his minion. A teacher who remains silent when errors are taught and nevertheless pretends to be a true teacher, is worse than an open fanatic and by his hypocrisy does greater damage than a heretic. Nor can he be trusted.

My commentary: Included in this thesis is the application concerning those who have been taught rightly and confirmed in the Lutheran Church. Who then move away and join heterodox churches for many and various reasons. They do so knowing the altar they have now joined teaches falsely but remain with it anyway. The application is made when they return for visit and want to commune where they were once confirmed but now reject by the fact they joined themselves to a church which teaches false doctrine and are no longer members of the true visible church on earth. Should they commune they either proclaim the doctrine of the Lutheran altar has changed or are willing to make for a union that does not exist in the Word of God. The doctrine of the Lutheran altar is taken from the Scriptures which do not change, and the Scriptures only allow for a union based on common belief concerning the Word of God and the Sacraments.

Francis Pieper, in his *Christian Dogmatics*, vol. III, 385-386 comments on the practice of open communion: “In vain is love, or charity, appealed in defense of ‘Open Communion.’ The fact is that this practice is contrary both to the love of God and love of neighbor, for it ignores that the Sacrament of the Altar must be properly used, as prescribed in Scripture, and it leads the neighbor to sin by partaking unworthily in the Sacrament.”

Thesis VII

The main purpose of the Holy Sacrament is to be a tool and a means through which the promises of grace are offered, communicated, and appropriated, as with a seal, guarantee, and pledge through which these promises are confirmed. However, within this major purpose, as a secondary goal, the Sacrament is to be a distinguishing sign of confession and a bond of fellowship in worship. Therefore, Communion fellowship is Church fellowship.

Walther: This thesis is particularly important because our opponents (those who do not subscribe unconditionally to the Lutheran Confessions) contend that if you Lutherans acknowledge that there are also Christians in other churches, then you must admit that they also should have a part in your Sacraments which are signs and seals of the gracious goodwill of God which belongs to all Christians. Against this we now say: It is true that the Sacraments are this and indeed primarily and principally this, and it would have also been proper, if they had been nothing other than this. But they are also distinguishing marks of confession and bonds of fellowship in divine service (I Cor. 10:17). And now consider what a grievous sin those commit who administer Communion to those who are of another faith and confession, and thereby recognize them as being one and a brother (I Cor. 11:20). Whoever, therefore, goes to Holy Communion in a Lutheran Church declares openly before the world: “I belong to this church, to the doctrine which is preached here, to the faith which is confessed here, and to all the confessors who belong here.: The pastor who administers the Sacrament to him declares exactly the same thing.

In Acts 2:42,46 and Acts 20:7 the Holy Spirit mentions with praise how the Christians in Jerusalem and at Troas in Asia Minor demonstrated their oneness in the faith and their

brotherhood in the breaking of bread, that is, in the celebration of holy communion. If heterodox Christians come to our communion, with our knowledge, then both we and they are hypocrites. They appear to be Lutherans but are not. They (pastors) do not say to their communicants who believe differently that they through their partaking of communion with us are confessing our doctrine and our church. Instead, they allow them to remain stuck in their error and plunge them and themselves into the sin of hypocrisy. The Augsburg Confession says: “Of the use of the Sacrament they teach that the Sacraments were ordained, not only to be marks of the profession among men, but rather to be signs and testimonies of the will of God toward us” (XIII:1).

Walther quotes Luther from *An Order of Mass and Communion*, (AE 53:32-34): Here one should follow the same usage as with Baptism, namely, that the bishop be informed of those who want to commune. They should request in person to receive the Lord’s supper so that he maybe able to know both the names and manner of life. And let him not admit the applicants unless they can give a reason for their faith, and can answer questions about what the Lord’s Supper is, what its benefits are, and what they expect to derive from it. For participation in the supper is part of the confession by which they confess before God, angels, and men that they are Christians. Care must therefore be taken lest any, as it were, take the Supper on the sly and disappear in the crowd.

Walther: A communicant comes forward as a preacher in that he confesses the true church to be there where he eats the Sacrament. This being the case it is a most grievous fraud and a deception in the name of God to impress the seal of orthodoxy upon those who believe differently, in that they are received at Holy Communion. If the Sacrament is a mark of confession, as it is, there it is a mark of pure confession. If anyone comes to our altar we must first ask him: “Do you believe and confess what we Lutherans believe and confess?”

My commentary: What Walther is emphasizing or reminding us of here is the horizontal communion that exists in Holy Communion, that is, the participants declare that they are in communion, they are one, not only in what is confessed about the sacramental and vertical union of Holy Communion, but in all points of doctrine learned from Luther’s Small Catechism.

Thesis VIII

Holy Communion was not instituted to make people Christians. It was instituted to strengthen the faith of those who already are true Christians. Therefore Communion should be administered to no one who has been reveled as a false Christian.

Walther: This is clearly asserted by this passage: “Anyone who eats the bread or drinks the Lord’s cup in an unworthy way is sinning against the lord’s body and blood. Examine yourself and then eat some of the bread and drink from the cup. Anyone who eats and drinks without seeing that the body is there is condemned for his eating and drinking” (I Cor. 11:27-30).

Walther quotes Conrad Dannhauer: The teachers should do and go as far as he can. If they are not able to do more they should still prevent wicked sinners from coming to communion. For whoever admits an obstinate sinner, for whose iniquity there is sufficient evidence, and gives him the pledge of the forgiveness of sins, sins against him in a threefold way: 1-with a false

witness in which he takes part, 2-with an increase of condemnation, 3-with a betrayal of the body and blood of Christ.

Walther: This indicates the continuing importance of personal announcement before Holy Communion in our churches. Even one who still has love for Christ may not automatically receive Holy Communion in all circumstances. For example, Holy Communion should not be received in a situation where offense has been given or taken and there has been no Christian reconciliation. In the same way he who believes differently should not receive holy Communion as long as they have not renounced their error or their heterodox fellowship and in this way reconcile themselves with the orthodox church.

My commentary: It seems Walther is addressing two issues here. One is that those who are not Christian are not to be admitted to the Supper. He also brings out the point that those who are an offense against the Church should repent and reconcile with the Church before returning to the Supper. Offense here is understood as conflict between members or a conflict with the doctrine of the Church while standing in direct violation of it. Of such issues we face today are co-habitation, gender identity, and million-year-old creation among many others.

Thesis IX

In Holy Communion the Body and Blood of Christ is actually present, distributed and received by every communicant. Therefore, Communion cannot be administered to anyone who does not confess a belief in this mystery without grievous sin.

Walther: I Corinthians 4:1 “Think of us (pastors) as servants of Christ and stewards of the mysteries of God.” Accordingly, pastors are not only distributors of the divine mysteries of grace but they are also stewards. God, the heavenly landlord, has bound them to definite instructions according to which they are to administer his mysteries, as treasures entrusted to the Church.

Walther quotes Luther: It is very well true that where preachers administer mere bread and wine as the Sacrament there is no more concern about to whom it is administered; or what they understand or believe; or how they perceive it...But we intend to educate Christians and to leave some behind us; for in the Sacrament we administer the body and blood of Christ. We cannot and will not give such a Sacrament to anyone who has not been previously examined as to what he has learned from the Catechism and whether he is willing to abandon the sins which he has done to the contrary (St. Louise ed. XVII, 2018).

My commentary: Here Walther is pinpointing his attention upon those churches and pastor's who deny the real presence of Christ body and blood in, with, and under the bread and wine. This would include most of Christendom today (in the U.S) apart from Roman Catholicism and some Episcopalians. Of such Luther and Walther declare there is no Sacrament where Christ is not believed to be present. Those who believe that, ought not commune in a Lutheran Church nor should a Lutheran commune in theirs. For example, while Roman Catholicism believes that Jesus Body and Blood is the Sacrament- their altar also confesses that your works contribute to your salvation. They also claim Mary, the Mother of our Lord, hears your prayers and carries them to Jesus which results in extensive prayers to her. Scripture rejects those beliefs. The same

is true of the Episcopalians. While they believe in a consubstantiation presence of Jesus Body Blood in the Sacrament- their altar also confesses that women should be ordained clergy. To add to that as of late they have now allowed same-sex marriages to be blessed by the church. Scripture rejects such beliefs.

Thesis X

Holy Communion is a mark of confession of Faith and Doctrine among those who celebrate together. Therefore the admission of members of heterodox fellowships to the celebration of communion within the Lutheran Church is in conflict with: 1-Christ's institution; 2-The commanded unity of the church in faith and accordingly in confession; 3-Our love for those to whom the Sacrament is administered; 4- Our love for our own fellow believers; especially the weak who by this action would be given serious offense; 5-The command not to become participants in the sin and error of others.

Walther: For the past two hundred years the enemies of a correct doctrine and practice on Communion have asserted that the use of the Sacrament should distinguish Christians from the heathen not the orthodox from the heterodox. But that is false. All unbelief and all false doctrine is a part of heathenism. Communion fellowship with all those who believe differently is forbidden in the institution of Christ.

Walther quotes the University of Wittenberg faculty from 1656: If we are not to take those who do not bring the doctrine of Christ into our homes nor greet them, according to St. John's reminder (II John 10-11), so that we do not therefore become participants in the evil things they do, much less can we admit one to Holy Communion who cannot believe in the oral eating and physical presence which Christ has instituted and promised.

Walther quotes Count Frederick of Wurtemberg in 1587: Then he who takes part in Communion with a particular church, which presently exists, no matter what it is called, therefore gives it to be understood that he is also a follower of the doctrine of that church. Thus, Communion should not be held with those who follow another doctrine, but we should openly separate ourselves from them... Therefore we have always held, and still do, that the reception of the Lord's Holy Communion should not be trifled with in that a person would be willing to confess one doctrine by a public reception of the Sacrament while holding to another doctrine in his heart.

Walther quotes George Konig (1880): Therefore, one must guard with the greatest diligence that he does not admit anyone to communion who does not understand the matter and is still filled up with his error. Much more he must previously be clearly taught how far apart from one another we are in this part of doctrine and clearly instructed as to why one part cannot commune with the other; namely, because also among other purposes the Lord's Supper also has this to be a mark and a sign of the religion which an individual confesses.

My commentary: It is quite clear Walther is addressing church bodies who may even have a doctrine of the real presence such as Rome but still purport false doctrine on other issues. The ELCA comes to mind with this point. They did not exist at the time of Walther but the Ohio Synod of the Lutheran Church and later the Iowa Synod did. To whom the LCMS never did

consider them in fellowship because of their views on such things as predestination and the end times (Chiliasm). Now we have church bodies around us who ordain women to the Holy Ministry, conduct homosexual marriages, deny the Word of God is divine truth from eternity. Many around us hold to such views while maintaining they believe in the real presence of Jesus in the Supper. Yet, their divergent doctrines on so many levels are why the LCMS has never been in fellowship with the ELCA.

Thesis XIII

The more unionism and syncretism is the sin and corruption of our time, the more the loyalty of the orthodox church now demands that the Lord's Supper not be misused as a means of external union without internal unity of faith.

Walther: The holy prophet Jeremiah called to faithless Israel: "Go over to the coasts of Cyprus and see and send to Kedar and examine carefully. See if there has been anything like this: Has a nation ever changed its gods? And they are not even gods? Yet my people have given up their Glory for something that can't help them! Let this amaze you heavens, shudder and wither away, says the Lord," (Jer. 2:10-12).

If the blind heathen themselves will not change their false religion, is it not truly terrible if this would happen to Christians today if they, as it clearly happens at the communion practice of the unionists, were to unite the truth of the Christian religion with the lie and would justify this as much as that within the church. We for our part, would hold fast to that which Formula of Concord says over against this unionistic abomination: "We believe, teach, and confess also that at the time of confession, when the enemies of God's Word desire to suppress the pure doctrine of the holy Gospel, the entire congregation of God, yes, every Christian, but especially the ministers of the Word, as the leaders of the congregation of God, are bound by God's Word to confess freely and openly the doctrine and what belongs to the whole religion, not only in words but also with works and with deeds," (X).

Walther: The Antichrist first succeeded in seating himself in the midst of God's temple through security and carelessness in the church. Later on, through the security and carelessness of the church false unionism also crept in. Now it is up to us to fight against this enemy and to disentangle ourselves from the webs and the bindings of the syncretistic spirit of the time. May the faithful and merciful God aid us and fill our hearts with a hatred for the lying spirit and an inner true love for the Word of God and the truth.

My commentary: Not that I can improve even one iota on the great teacher of our church, I add only this. We have been handed a brilliant treasure which forgives our sin, strengthens faith in Jesus, and confirms the promise of everlasting life. In this treasure is the command to keep it unstained from those who have gone astray. To mingle with stain (syncretism) is only to sully ourselves. This essay by Walther is a road map for us, a teaching tool and a warning. To unite with those of false doctrine (unionism) will only result in us losing true doctrine and uniting with the false church. No greater shame can be levied against a church body. The Great Lord of Grace and the Mighty God of Mercy keep us in the true faith. May the fruit of that be an example to the world what faithfulness looks like. May it also be a reason from them to inquire what we believe

and why. In and through the pure Word faith is created and sustained unto eternal life. Soli Deo Gloria.

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The Lutheran Church Missouri Synod

Delivered at Iowa District East in Convention

June 24th, 2022