

Confession and Mission, Word and Sacrament: The Ecclesial Theology of Wilhelm Loehe. By David C. Ratke. Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2001. 234 pp.

Although Wilhelm Loehe (1808-1872) exerted formidable influence in nineteenth century American Lutheranism providing leadership for missionary endeavors on the frontier and fathering seminaries in Fort Wayne, Indiana and Dubuque, Iowa, little has appeared in English that would make him accessible to an North American audience. Thanks to David C. Ratke of Lenoir- Rhyne College in Hickory, North Carolina, this unfortunate vacuum is being filled. While not as comprehensive or copious as Christian Weber's *Missionstheologie bei Wilhelm Loehe: Aufbruch zur Kirche der Zukunft*, Ratke has crafted a reliable guide to Loehe's understanding of ministry and mission in the context of his ecclesiology.

Ratke charts the course of Loehe's life from his birth in the town of Fuerth, his studies in Nuremberg , Erlangen, and Berlin, his vicarage in Kirchenlamitz, and his long career at Neuendettelsau demonstrating the eclectic influences that Lutheran Orthodoxy, Pietism, Romanticism, and the Confessional Awakening had upon his life and ministry. Loehe is contrasted with the Erlangen school in that "Loehe's theology was shaped not by reasoned reflection, but by reflection on what it means to be a pastor and what it means to proclaim the Gospel" (33).

Central to Ratke's study of Loehe is the focus on his doctrine of the church. Here Ratke observes the catholicity of Loehe's ecclesiology although he perhaps overstates the case to claim that "For all his confessionalism and adherence to Luther, he reached back beyond Luther and the confessions to the church fathers and sought to establish a church that was, in many respects, more akin to that of Rome or Constantinople than the Lutheran confessions" (39). At the center of the church is the apostolic Word. It is from this perspective that Loehe critique's tradition. Ratke aptly summarizes Loehe's stance: "Tradition, no matter what its guise, is of little benefit to the church. If it adds to the apostolic Word, it ought to be condemned. If it adds nothing, it is superfluous. Tradition can only confirm what is already clear in the Scriptures. There is no compelling reason to rely on tradition to clarify, explain, or amplify the apostolic Word" (44). For Loehe, the church is known by its true marks (the preaching of the pure Gospel and the right administration of the sacraments) in contrast to the "false marks" of antiquity and duration, wide extension, unity and succession, holiness of life,

and miracles and prophecies (50-52). Thus “Loehe’s confessionalism led him to demand doctrinal unity before altar fellowship” (69).

Individual chapters on “The Ministries of the Church” (Chapter 3) and “Liturgy and Worship” (Chapter 4) are enlightening expositions of crucial areas of Loehe’s thought. Ratke shows that Loehe takes a middle position between C.F.W. Walther and J.A.A. Grabau on the nature and source of the ordained ministry. For Loehe the pastoral office does not proceed from the congregation or the episcopacy but from Christ (91). Ratke discusses Loehe’s understanding of ordination pointing out that ordination involves both the clergy and congregation (93-94). Loehe also developed a theological rationale for diaconal offices and implemented this understanding in his establishment a deaconess community at Neuendettelsau.

In our day, when liturgy and mission are often placed in opposition to each other, Loehe’s union of the two deserves careful attention. His *Agende* sought to recover lost treasures for the Lutheran church and guide liturgically illiterate pastors and congregations in worship that conformed to the church’s confession of the faith. Loehe saw liturgy as a communal reception of the gifts of the triune God in sermon and sacrament and a communal expression of love for the world as the church lifts up all who are in need through intercessory prayer. Word and sacrament determine the order of worship for Loehe and in this divine ordering lonely human beings are brought into heavenly fellowship here on earth. The chapter on liturgy and worship is the highpoint of the book.

For Loehe, the nature of the church and her liturgical life could never be divorced from mission. Ratke sets Loehe’s missionary strategies in the context of nineteenth century missionary movements, accenting Loehe’s insistence that Lutheran missions is concerned with the proclamation of true doctrine and the establishment of Lutheran congregations. Chapter 5 (Mission and Proclamation) describes Loehe work in establishing mission colonies in Michigan as well as his tactics, including his insistence on the use of the German language. Chapter 6 (Inner Mission) gives an account of Loehe’s work on behalf of the suffering and needy carried out through the diaconal office in institutions of mercy. Loehe joins the proclamation of saving truth with the doing of acts of mercy for those who suffer earthly misery.

A final chapter (Significance and Assessment) documents Ratke's own critical appreciation of Loehe. In Ratke's estimation, the so-called "evangelical catholic" wing of contemporary North American Lutheranism is heir to prominent motifs in Loehe's thought, especially catholicity, ecumenical continuity, liturgical life, an ordered ministry, and sacramental piety. Yet Ratke admits that Loehe's ecumenism was confessionally anchored and normed; he was self-consciously Lutheran in doctrine and practice. "For Loehe, an ecumenism based on the principle that two churches could yield on a doctrine (for example, the real presence of Christ in the Lord's Supper) was not a unity worth having. It was a unity of falsehood and, therefore could not endure" (212).

Although *Confession and Mission, Word and Sacrament* was originally submitted as Ratke's doctoral dissertation at the University of Regensburg, the volume is not weighted down with unnecessary detail making it a fine introduction to the life, theology, and churchly work of this Bavarian pastor.

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