Löhe as Pastoral Theologian: The Discipline of the Shepherd

Over twenty-five years ago, in what would prove to be a pivotal text in recovering pastoral theology as a genuinely churchly discipline rather than a clinical or managerial undertaking, Thomas Oden begins his *Pastoral Theology: Essentials of Ministry* with this definition of pastoral theology: “Because it is a pastoral discipline, pastoral theology seeks to join the theoretical with the practical. It is *theoretical* insofar as it seeks to develop a consistent theory of ministry, accountable to Scripture and tradition experientially sound and internally self-consistent. Yet it is not merely a theoretical statement or objective description of what occurs in ministry. It is also a *practical* discipline, for it is concerned with implementing concrete pastoral tasks rather than merely defining them. Its proximate goal is an improved theory of ministry. Its longer ranged goal is the improved practice of ministry.”¹ Wilhelm Löhe’s work certainly fits with Oden’s description. In the midst of religious, philosophical and political turbulence of nineteenth century Germany, the Bavarian cleric sought to articulate what he thought to be an improved doctrine of the office that he believed to yet unfolding out of the New Testament. But Löhe’s ultimate goal had to do with the practice of the care of souls.

From 1837 until his death in 1872, Löhe was pastor of the Nicolai church in Neuendettelsau. This formed the context of his thinking. David Ratke observes “Löhe’s entire thought and perspective and life revolved around the axis of the congregation. It is here that the apostolic Word comes to life; it is in the congregation that the church finds expression. Löhe did not emphasize praxis at the expense of dogma. To be sure, doctrine was the pillar of fire which guided the church during the days when everything seemed lost. But the impulse for Löhe’s reflections was always the congregation and its life.”² Löhe would forge his pastoral theology out of his own work as a preacher, liturgist and pastor. Shaped by his childhood experiences in the village church at Fürth, university studies at Erlangen and Berlin, and several congregational assignments prior to his coming to Neuendettelsau, Löhe was drawn to reflection on the church’s confession and life, the character and work of the pastor.

Löhe was the product of a pious Christian home. While his father, a successful merchant, died at the age of fifty-two when Löhe was only eight years old, his mother would exert a strong influence on her son’s religious development. Barbara Löhe’s own spiritual life was shaped by Johann Arndt’s *Garden of Paradise* and J.F. Starck’s *Daily Handbook*. Later Löhe would reminisce on his mother’s influence saying “When my father died she did what she thought was right. Her love for the ministry and the church led her though she was a widow, to let me choose such a life’s calling. I owe her a thousand thanks. Who knows whether I would have become a Christian if I had not become a pastor.”³ Löhe also tells of how he would play church: “In our small yard there was a chopping block, I gathered the children of the rent people who lived in our house, put on a black

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apron to serve as a gown, stepped on to the chopping block, which served as a pulpit, preached, sang and prayed. Sometimes my mother would say to my father: ‘a minister is lost in that boy if you don’t let him study.’ The piety of his parental home insulated young Löhe from the Rationalism which would have been present in some degree in the village church and school. His confirmation day was particularly memorable. After completing his studies at the Gymnasium in nearby Nürnberg where Löhe, under the influence of its rector Karl Louis Roth, would confirm his aspirations to become a pastor, he would enter the University of Erlangen in November of 1826. Roth would have a similar impact upon J.W Hoefling, Adolph von Hareless, Christoph Luthardt and J.C.K. von Hoffmann all of whom studied at the Gymnasium and eventually would play prominent roles at Erlangen.

It is at Erlangen that Löhe would begin to develop a strong Lutheran consciousness although his presence as a student there predates the Erlangen School which would develop in the coming decade. It was the Reformed preacher and adjunct professor at Erlangen, Christian Krafft who would awaken in Löhe as he would in von Hoffmann, von Harless and others an appreciation for the confessional character of Lutheranism in contrast to most of the rest of the faculty who were still captivated by Rationalism. Inspired not so much by Krafft’s intellect as by his spirit, Löhe was led to read the theologians of seventeenth-century Lutheran Orthodoxy, especially David Hollaz, the last great dogmatician of that era. Löhe would follow his mentor in supporting the Basel Mission Society. It was not until 1842 that Löhe ceased supporting this group and instead sought to promote a confessionally-defined approach to missions.

In the summer of 1828, Löhe went to study in Berlin where both Hegel and Schleiermacher were lecturing. Löhe referred to his sojourn in Berlin as his “desert” and “Patmos” After attending a lecture by Hegel at Berlin, the young Löhe penned in his diary: “understood nothing, nothing to understand.” He was impressed by Schleiermacher’s sermonic abilities but not his theology. More positively, Löhe appreciated Ernst Wilhelm Hengstenberg, August J.W. Neander, Ludwig F.F. Theremin and especially the practical theologian, Gerhard F.A. Strauß whose example of an intense but churchly piety would leave its imprint on him. Löhe learned from Strauß to distinguish mysticism from pietism. In Strauß, Löhe found a teacher who awed him with a piety and romantic spiritual language that would correspond to his own religious instincts. In a letter dated 15 June 1828, Löhe wrote to his friend, H.W. E. Reichold, back in Erlangen: “Esteem high the evangelical simplicity! Give the small writings of Luther, as far as you can, to the members of the lower strata. So your circle will remain in blessing and the charge of mysticism will pass by. Do not encourage to make private hours of edification. Friends may pray together with friends, but everyone finds nourishment in our church, because the gospel is preached purely. I also desire that the mission circle deal less with prayer and singing, which have their place in home worship, in the church and otherwise, where one is together with those who belong to him- and instead read missionary reports and historical writings. The Bible is to be read but without explanations. I shall defend all this when I come back….Neither the lecture circle

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nor the missionary circle may be edification hours, but Christian conversation. Surely, this is edifying, too. You will agree with me, when I come. The Pastoreale of Strauß, that I want to read and maybe dictate to you completely, has taught me much about the right distinction between mysticism and pietism from what is evangelical.”⁵ Both Berlin and Erlangen contributed to Löhe’s shift from one who was a child of the Awakening to a self-consciously Lutheran identity. Yet the shift was not abrupt. On the day of his ordination on 25 July 1831, Löhe would write emphatically of his fidelity to the Lutheran Symbols. Three years later in 1834 he would still feel free to preach in a Reformed pulpit. Lothar Vogel observes that it was only in 1834-1835, when the church conflicts in Silesia heightened that Löhe embrace the confessional understanding that would mark him a convinced Lutheran⁶

In 1867 Gottfried Thomasius would write of his own movement from the Awakening to a more deeply Lutheran position through the embrace of the justification of the sinner by grace through faith: “Thus we were Lutherans before we even knew it; without reflecting upon the confessional idiosyncrasy of our Church, or upon the confessional differences which separate it from others, we were (Lutherans) in fact. We were not even thoroughly familiar with these differences. We read the symbolic books of the church as testimonies of sound doctrine….but their symbolical significance concerned us little. But as soon as we began to realize that we were standing squarely in the middle of Lutheranism…so we became Lutherans, freely, from within”.⁷ Thomasius’ testimony seems to fit Löhe as well. Like others who would be identified with the revival of confessional Lutheranism known as the Erlangen School, Löhe would read and be influenced by the writings of Johann Georg Hamann (1730-1788).

After his ordination in 1831, Löhe would serve in several pastoral posts before beginning his work at Neuendettelsau on 1 August 1837. For a short time he would serve as a vicar to the aged pastor in his hometown of Fürth, Pastor Ebert. This ended unhappily with the older pastor exhibiting jealousy over his younger associate’s popularity as a visitor of the sick and the elderly. Most significant was his service as a vicar from 20 October 1831 to 26 February 1834 in Kirchenlamnitz. Here Löhe worked under Pastor Christian Sommer and was “confronted by a range of demands that, as he met them, shaped the basic lines of his future ministry.”⁸ It was here that Löhe developed as both a preacher and curate of souls. Yet it was his pastoral success that would generate conflict. A prominent judge in the congregation felt himself unduly attacked by Löhe’s preaching. Charges were leveled against the young cleric accusing him of holding forbidden conventicles. Löhe was charged with fostering “a debauching and pernicious mysticism by which you allow actions which lead to a disruption of familial and social order, the creation of a detrimental religious separatism, and a transformation of active Christianity into a dead,

⁷ Quoted by Hermann Sasse, “The Results of the Lutheran Awakening of the 19th Century –Part II” Theological Quarterly (October 1951), 244.
⁸ Kenneth F. Korby, Theology of Pastoral Care in Wilhelm Loehe with Special Attention to the Function of the Liturgy and the Laity (Fort Wayne: Concordia Theological Seminary Printshop, n.d.), 91.
powerless, and lifeless religion of feeling.” Löhe was forced to leave Kirchenlamnitz, relieved by the consistory of his position. This was Löhe’s first experience with church politics; it would not be his last.

After a string of temporary positions in Nürnberg and surrounding villages, Löhe applied for and was called to the pastorate of the Nicolai church in Neuendettelsau. He married a former catechumen, Helene Andrae six years to the day of his ordination, 25 July 1837. A week later Löhe and his eighteen-year old bride would move to Neuendettelsau, a village of about 500, where they would remain for the rest of their lives.

Six years later, Helene only twenty-four years old, would die from complications with the birth of their fourth child. Within a year this infant son would also perish. Löhe would never get over his wife’s death and it would leave its mark on his piety and his work. In the writings that come after his wife’s death, Löhe expresses something of a heavenly homesickness, a yearning for the consummation of the Christian community in the New Jerusalem. This is especially evident in his Three Books About the Church published in 1845. The impact of Helene’s death echoes throughout Löhe’s life as he commemorated the anniversary of her death, November 24, yearly. In 1859, he includes a prayer for widowers in a prayer book that very much reflects his own loss: “O living God and Comforter of those who mourn, I have lost my dearest treasure on earth in childbirth. You have torn a rib and a piece of my heart from me. It is, however, your good will, Lord my God. You gave her to me and let her be with me for a short time and now she has been taken out of this misery back to you, because she knew and called upon your Son. Comfort me, a sad, miserable widower and help carry this pain and raise my children and send a holy glimpse that I and my children can come together before you in a new joy and eternal love, which you plant in all marital love and can make all suffering eternal joy and goodwill. We praise you in eternity. Amen.”

The death of his wife was one of several deaths impressed in Löhe a profound awareness of the shortness of this temporal life, stirring in him a sense of longing for the resurrection of the body and the communion of saints. He writes of his father’s death: “On the day my father died, October 28, 1816 – a Monday-I was in school. Our old servant, Susanna, came and got me. As I entered the room, my family was lying on their knees, praying for cessation of the painful struggle. Two of my sisters stood drowned in grief at the head and foot end of the death bed, respectively. My oldest sister, Anna, the sickly one, sat beside the stove without tears but with deep sobbing. As I entered the room, my mother rising from her prayers, took me by the hand and led me to my father, lying in his death rattle, put my hand in his and had me among other things which I don’t remember anymore, promise that I would never be a disgrace to my previous father in his grave. Barely had I finished my promise when my father stopped breathing, and I was an orphan.” Seven of Löhe’s twelve siblings died in infancy or childhood.

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9 Quoted by Schaaf in Three Books About the Church, 9-10.
10 Quoted by Ratke, 35.
The vacuum created by the death of his wife was filled with even more intense devotion to pastoral work, theological writing, and the organization of missionary and works of mercy. Beyond the confines of his parish, his reputation as a preacher would grow, prompting some to call Löhe “the Chrysostom of his century.” Löhe understood the Divine Service as the place where the Heavenly Bridegroom meets His Bride. He sought to recover the best liturgical practices of previous centuries so that the congregation need not be dressed in the threadbare worship forms of Pietism and Rationalism but in the splendor that befits the Bride of Christ. For Löhe, the center of the church was the liturgy of Word and Supper and from this lively and life-giving center, every aspect of the church’s life, including pastoral care radiated.

Kenneth Korby was of the opinion “that whoever wills to enter the thought of Wilhelm Löhe on the matter of the cure of souls must enter via his understanding of the church.”

Noting that Loehe did not develop his views on the church systematically in the way of a classical dogmatics text, Korby echoed the observation of Walter Bouman that “His (Löhe’s whole life and thought, his correspondence, his parish duties, his world-wide concerns revolved around the nature of the Church so that a biography of him can at the same time be an ecclesiology.”

Three strands of Löhe’s ecclesiological thinking relative to pastoral care emerge. First, there is the oneness of the church. Drawing on the Epistle to the Ephesians and the creedal confession that “I believe in one holy Christian and apostolic Church,” Löhe provides a corrective to the conceptuality of the church as “visible and invisible” inherited from Lutheran Orthodoxy and widely used in the nineteenth century. Löhe did not abandon this distinction as can be seen, among other places, in his Agenda of 1844 and his Three Books About the Church. In the foreword to the agenda, Lohe writes of that the church is the “marvelous creation of her one and only Lord and Master, which has demonstrated and will demonstrate herself independent of everything except Word and Sacrament. In her totality the church is and remains invisible and appears visibly sometimes here sometimes there, as her banners wave in the breeze sometimes here, sometimes there, and her marks appear in Word and Sacrament, sometimes here, sometimes there.”

In attempting to maintain the confession that the church is one and avoid positing two churches, one visible and the other invisible, Lohe seeks to speak of the church as simultaneously visible and invisible. This Lohe does by using the analogy of the human being who is both body and soul, one not existing without the other in this life and by making a distinction between those who are “called” as those embraced in the visible

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12 Korby, Theology as Pastoral Care in Wilhelm Loehe, 307.
13 Ibid., 148.
15 Cited in Korby, Theology of Pastoral Care in Wilhelm Loehe, 178.
church and those who are “chosen” as members of the invisible church. Korby acknowledges that Loehe’s treatment of the visible/invisible distinction is not without difficulties from the multiple perspectives of missiology, systematics and pastoral care. He identifies what he sees as problematic when one attempts to use the distinction: “To be caught in the tug of war initiated by the use of the words ‘visible’ and ‘invisible’ is to be threatened always to flee into the invisible, thereby turning every day churchly life over to machinations, devices, techniques, and powers of all sorts. Or, to choose to concentrate on that reality that corresponds to ‘visible’ is to shift the understanding of the Word of God and faith so that the inner life of the church is drained off into the quagmires of experientialism and into the legalisms of righteousness by works or rituals. And yet, to hold to both terms ‘visible’ and ‘invisible’ is very nearly to be caught defenseless against the ‘two church solution’ that has so often threatened the church’s unity and the Gospel.” Yet, positively, Korby argues Loehe is able to escape turning the doctrine of the church into an abstraction by avoiding a shift from oral/auditory images to visual ones in his ecclesiology. The inner life of the church which is hidden is given outward expression in preaching, baptizing, absolving and distributing the Lord’s Supper.

The inner and outer life of the church is joined together in a unity not to be broken. Loehe writes in his Three Books About the Church: “The visible church is the ‘tabernacle of God among men, and outside of it there is no salvation. A man separates himself from God the Father if he separates himself from the church, his mother….As a man stands in relation to the church, so he stands in relation to God.”

Second, the apostolic character of the church means that the church is not a static institution but a living organism. The church is both called and calling. By the apostolic Word, that is the living voice of preaching that is in conformity to the apostolic Scriptures, the church is called to life in Christ Jesus. This is the calling to faith as faith comes from hearing the Gospel. The church that is apostolic is constituted in and by this faith-creating Word. At the same time, the church that is apostolic is a calling church, as this church confesses Christ before the world and through the preaching of Christ gathers people from every tribe and tongue into the holy community whose head and center is the Lamb of God.

17 Korby, Theology of Pastoral Care in Wilhelm Loehe, 180-181
18 Ibid., 182-183.
19 Three Books About the Church, 90.
20 Korby expresses the connection between the apostolic Word and mission: “As the mission is the church of God in motion, so the energy of that motion is the Word of God, the apostolic Word. That Word alone is the energy; that Word alone is the uniting center. It is not the constitutional order of the church, not a lord, not a bishop that is the uniting power in the center of the church, but this apostolic Word, the Scripture. Apostolic is the principle name for the church, for these clear Scriptures are not only the uniting word, but that clear Word that is always at the center and the church is never without ‘its glorious center.’ Löhke equates the apostolic Word and the Scriptures. However, at the same time he continues to keep alive the quality of the Word as spoke, as oral” – Theology of Pastoral Care in Wilhelm Loehe, 177.
Acts 2:42 (“And they devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers”) is crucial in Löhe’s thinking on the nature of the life of the apostolic congregation expressed in worship. Löhe’s use of this pericope is another example of Löhe’s avoidance of abstractions as he concretely describes the character of the liturgical congregation as praying, preaching and celebrating the Lord’s Supper.21

Gathered by the apostolic Word, the church is fed by the body and blood of the Lord in the holy supper. While the appearance of four items noted in Acts 2:42 might appear in varying degrees in different gatherings of the congregation for worship, all four come to culmination and union in the service of Holy Communion. “One element may appropriately stressed over the others in any given gathering. But the great high point, the fountain of all other life and worship, is the union of the four elements. That union is the celebration of Holy Communion.”22

The Sacrament of the Altar shaped Löhe’s understanding of the church as a living organism. The church is known from the altar. And it is from the altar that mission is generated and to the altar that mission returns. The movement of mission is from and to the altar as the church lives as “an organism of rescuing love.”

Contrary to interpretations of Loehe that would see in him a hierarchal clericalism that demeaned the life of the laity, disenfranchising them from the life of the church, There is in Löhe a unity between the holy office and the holy priesthood. Both are from the Lord. The office is established by Christ for the sake of the apostolic Word so that it might be heard, believed and confessed in the places where the priestly people called by the Lord live and work.23 In his own way Löhe revitalizes a Lutheran doctrine of vocation that enlivens the laity to live out their callings in the world, especially in the Christian home where the Word of Christ is to dwell richly. Thus the laity are not only the objects of spiritual care, they are engaged in this work in union with the pastor. Korby observes that Löhe’s “Haus-Schul-und Kirchenbuch proved to be a coherent statement expressing the union of the home, the school, and the church in mutual care of souls, and included valuable guidance for laymen to engage directly in that caring work.”24

Third, the Lutheran Church is a confessional communion. As a heir of the confessional reawakening of the nineteenth century, Loehe embraced the Lutheran Confessions as the clear exposition of the Holy Scriptures. This led him to reject the Prussian Union and all that it entailed. Löhe’s confessionalism may be described as a “sacramental confessionalism” in that Löhe understood all of Lutheran doctrine drawn together in the sacrament of the altar. This sacramental confessionalism had both ecclesiological and pastoral consequences. Ecclesiastically it meant that for Loehe there could be no inter-

22 Korby, Theology of Pastoral Care in Wilhelm Loehe, 170.
24 Theology of Pastoral Care, 173.
communion with those of another confession. Pastorally it meant that the Confessions are embraced to keep the Lutheran Church centered in the purity of evangelical proclamation and administration of the Lord’s Supper. For Loehe, the Confessions prevented involvement in inter-confessional mission societies and the embrace of what he identified as “methodistic” tactics of evangelization and pastoral care.

For Löhe the ecclesiological foundation of pastoral theology would shape the practice of the care of souls in several ways.

First, the care of souls properly belongs to the church. Korby writes “The shape of Loehe’s pastoral theology can be designated as a tri-polar field. The basic pole is the Word of God; the other two poles are the congregation and the pastor. As the Spirit leads the congregation, giving them pastors and teachers as gifts, the same spirit gives the means for the church’s life and work. The wisdom and power of the pastoral office lie in the use of that Word. The object of pastoral care is the creation of new creatures. In Seelsorge, therefore, God’s Word, not human skills, is the essence of persuasion, for the aim of the Spirit is to make a new and holy people, not merely to modify behavior with human persuasion. Care of souls is the cure of souls.”

Set within the church is the holy office. It is through this office that Christ serves His bride. Löhe understands the pastor to be in succession with the apostles not by attachment to place or continuity of persons but by means of a common doctrine. Ordination places a man in the office which Christ instituted. For Löhe the ministry is derived from neither the congregation nor the episcopacy; it is established by the Risen Lord with the sending of the apostles.

Löhe sees that the office of the keys is given to the whole church but only ministers are entrusted with the responsibility to exercise the keys in loosing and binding sin. Rudolf Keller has pointed to Löhe’s reliance on Andreas Osiander and the Brandenburg-Nurnberg church order at this point. The minister does not serve by his own personal or charismatic authority but by the mandate of Christ. Ordination, for Löhe, binds the minister to this mandate rather than the whims of the congregation. Löhe deals explicitly with the nature and authority of the office in his Aphorisms (1849 and 1851). In his Der Evangelische Geistliche (Two volumes;1852-1858) he explores various facets of the pastor’s life and work, both in terms of his character and the skills needed for shepherding and teaching.

Second, Löhe insists on the primacy of private confession and absolution in pastoral Löhe: “Private confession is the mother of all care of souls and for it there is no substitute.” An evangelical reclaiming of confession and absolution is anchored in the

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25 Kenneth Korby, “Loehe’s Seelsorge for his Fellow Lutherans in America” Concordia Historical Institute Quarterly 45 (November 1972), 235.
27 GW IV:83.
chief article, justification by faith alone. Absolution is the enactment of the justifying word of the Gospel. For Löhe the *beichtvater*, the father confessor is not a judge over the penitent but a servant or ambassador who is sent with the verdict of the judge: forgiveness to those broken by their sin.

Gerhard von Zezschwitz, a professor of practical theology at Erlangen who had Löhe as his father confessor said that only he who knows Löhe as a Seelsorger and father confessor really knows him fully.28 Already in the pre-Neuendettelsau years wrote on confession as more important for man’s eternal welfare than sowing and harvesting is for his temporal wellbeing.29 An 1835 draft of what would be published two years later as his *Communion Booklet* would speak of the blessing and power of private confession. In 1843, six years after Löhe’s coming to Neuendettelsau did private confession emerge as a regular practice in the congregation. Three years later, in 1846, we learn that Löhe absolved 153 communicants in a single day.30 Wolfhart Schlichting indicates Löhe heard 2,250 individual confessions in 1858.31

Löhe believed that the practice of general confession should be retained for weighty pastoral reasons. Private confession is to be urged not as a replacement for the general confession but as a means that makes it possible for the penitent to name specific sins and the pastor to provide spiritual care-exploration, examination and absolution- appropriate to the condition of the penitent. Löhe gives guidance as to how confession is to be made so that it avoids what he calls a shameless rambling on about sin and its effects or a confession of one’s circumstances but a naming of the sin before God. While private confession gives the pastor opportunity to counsel the penitent in the avoidance of new sins, Löhe praises confession as God’s own way of humbling and mortifying the old Adam. Only the one whose bones have been crushed by the law are in a position to hear the words of absolution that restore broken sinners to joy and gladness.

Third, tied to the restoration of confession and absolution is the necessity of discipline within the church. The word of blessing in the absolution directed toward sinners who repent has its antithesis in the word of curse in the binding key spoken to hardened sinners who will not repent. Korby writes “Löhe saw private confession and absolution as only a half measure if there is not joined with it the power to refuse absolution or to deny the Lord’s Supper. To use only one key means the loss of both. Löhe judged easy or cheap care of souls to be worthless. ‘There is no such thing as care of souls without training or discipline.’ If there is no practice of excommunication, absolution loses some

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29 Ibid., 120.
30 Ibid., 122.
of its significance.” For Löhe discipline in the church is work of rescue. It may be compared to the physician setting a broken bone, painful but necessary for the healing of the patient. The binding key is necessary so that finally the loosing key can be employed to set the person brought to repentance free.

On more than one occasion, Löhe’s insistence on church discipline would get him in trouble. For example in 1860, he refused to officiate at a wedding of a member who had divorced his wife. The state through the Bavarian church insisted that Löhe perform the wedding or else he would be suspended from his pastorate. Löhe refused and was suspended for a time. This episode is illustrative of Löhe’s ongoing worry that a territorial church made church discipline nearly impossible. It was a worry that more than once prompted him to seriously ponder leaving the territorial church for a free church.

Fourth, sermon, sacrament and catechization form a necessary triad in the care of souls. In *Three Books About the Church*, Löhe characterized his own time as “a time of one-sided and experimentation.” Writing in a time of liturgical experimentation and exploration of new paradigms for mission and ministry, Korby noted the parallels between Löhe’s time and the late twentieth century in regard to what he believed was detrimental to the genuine care of souls. The care of souls requires church. That is the care of souls is dependent on a context formed by preaching, the Lord’s Supper and catechetical instruction.

Löhe was himself a gifted preacher who possessed an extraordinary power of speech, energy of expression, pictorial richness and passion grounded in deep conviction. His preaching followed the traditional lectionary. He suggests that the Lutheran preacher would not replace it with free texts or with continuous readings from Holy Scripture. Instead Löhe writes that “a man who changes texts every year is no good as a preacher for the people, or we might say for the church.” For Löhe, the preacher grows deeper into the text as he expounds the same well-known pericopes year after year.

Löhe understands the preacher as an ambassador of divine reconciliation who speaks with sincerity and forthrightness as one who is sent. The preacher does not need to decorate his proclamation with literary artfulness. As in pastoral care so also preaching is not given to the “new measures” of the Methodists as he calls them but to a confident reliance on the biblical Word. Thus Löhe says that “A sincere preacher therefore will not intentionally withdraw himself nor make himself prominent, but he comes with the Word and the Word comes with him. He is a simple, faithful witness to the Word, and the Word witnesses to him – he and the Word appear as one. All his preaching is based on holy calm. Even when he condemns and the zeal of God’s house consumes him, it is not the wrath of the warlike God which is kindled in him. It is not primarily he who speaks but

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32 Korby, *Theology of Pastoral Care in Wilhelm Loewe*, 189.
the Lord who speaks in him and through him, and the way he performs his duty is worthy of the Lord. Always it is the measure of manliness and maturity which distinguishes the preacher of the church.”

Hugh Oliphant Old describes Löhe’s preaching as “doxological” in that his sermons not only exhort congregants to adoration and worship but are in and of themselves hymns of praise as they draw the congregation into the angelic hymn.

While his preaching was doxological, it could also be sharp and stern. Sins known to the public in Neuendettelsau such as drunkenness and immorality were named. On one occasion Löhe preached a funeral sermon for a woman who had borne eight children with man to whom she was never married. Löhe had cared for the woman on her death bed; she confessed her sin and received absolution and Holy Communion. Nevertheless Löhe referred to her in the funeral sermon as “this poor whore” warning the congregation to avoid her sinful ways even as he rejoiced in her repentance.

Preaching, for Löhe, does not aim to excite the emotions of the hearers but to implant in their inmost being the living and active Word which grows he says like a mustard seed. Good preaching brings about patient perseverance with the Word and in the Word. Preaching requires of the preacher careful study, contemplation and meditation so that the preacher might learn what Löhe identifies as “the great secret of preaching” namely that a preacher uses “what is familiar to create an entrance for the unfamiliar and to expound all the doctrines of the church on the basis of texts which are familiar to all.”

Löhe’s preparation for preaching was disciplined study and prayer. He typically began each day, Monday through Saturday at 5:00 am with study of the text. “I must give birth to my sermons with pain….I groan, pray and am fearful till I step into the pulpit , and then God’s grace is renewed.” Generally his sermons were carefully written out word for word except for funeral sermons that were generally done in outline form. Hermann Bezzel, perhaps Löhe’s most prominent successor would say “Loehe’s sermons are nothing less than a reflection of the thoughts of God.”

The sermon is linked to the sacrament. While Löhe writes of preaching that “among the means which the church uses for the salvation of souls, preaching occupies the first place,” he sees the sermon as necessarily moving to the sacrament. As Thomas Schattauer observes “For Löhe, the Lord’s Supper provided a comprehensive interpretation of Christian existence.” This can be seen in an 1853 sermon on I

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36 Ibid., 168.
38 Johannes Deinzer, Wilhelm Löhe’s Leben Band 2 (Nuremberg: Gütersloh, 1872-1892), 188.
39 Wilhelm Löhe, Three Books About the Church, 169.
40 Schober, Wilhelm Loeh. 85.
41 Ibid., 87.
42 Wilhelm Löhe, Three Books About the Church, 167.
Corinthians 5:6-8 where Löhe proclaims “For Christians, the whole time from the sacrifice at Golgotha until the return of the Lord is a true and unceasing Easter celebration, a time of the Paschal Lamb and the Lord’s Supper, not only in a figurative and symbolic way, but in a most perfect and holiest solemnity. New Testament congregations live from the preparation to the partaking of the Paschal Lamb, from partaking to preparation: between preparation and partaking time passes, until he comes. Ever a new they desire to partake of their eternal salvation in the Lamb of God who was slain and to be assured thereby full peace and joy in the Holy Spirit, full light and power for sanctification. There is no higher view of earthly life than this –and therefore no more perfect blossom of earthly life, no more time which deserves the name ‘high-time’ than the time when one comes to the holy Supper and partakes of the Paschal Lamb. To celebrate the Lord’s Supper – indeed, that is the highest, most glorious work of a Christian congregation –or rather, not a work, but where it lays down every work, where it lives entirely by faith”44 (Rule of Prayer, 251-252). The Lord’s Supper according to Löhe, the energies inherent in the body and blood of Christ enliven faith and love in the Christian individually and the church corporeally. Eating the body of Christ and drinking his blood, the church is most profoundly the Body of Christ.

Löhe sees the Lord’s Supper as the ultimate gift of Christ Jesus for here the Lamb of God imparts His body and blood for the forgiveness of sins. With this gift the communicants are bound together with their Lord and one another. At the altar doctrine and life converge in Löhe’s thinking. Contradiction of Christ’s words must be laid aside therefore there could be no altar fellowship with those who twist or deny the Lutheran teaching. But Löhe held that there was more to the sacrament than simply having a correct doctrinal definition. Later in his life, addressing a pastoral conference in 1865, he says “I am the same good Lutheran as earlier, but in a more profound way. Before, Lutheranism was for me little more than affirmation of the confessions from A-Z; now the whole of Lutheranism is for me hidden in the sacrament of the altar, in which, as can be shown all the chief doctrines of Christianity, especially those of the Reformation, have their center and focus. The essential thing for me now is not so much the Lutheran doctrine of the Lord’s Supper, but the sacramental life and experience of the blessing of the sacrament possible only through partaking of it abundantly. The words ‘sacramental Lutheranism’ signifies my advance.”45

The benefits of the sacrament are to be preached. The Lord’s Supper was honored by frequent, reverent and salutary use in the congregation. Preparatory services on Friday and Saturday prior to communion Sundays aimed to assist Christians in a beneficial partaking of the sacred body and blood. Löhe also prepared a variety of devotional aids to help communicants examine themselves and meditate on the benefits of the sacrament. Löhe promoted a more frequent celebration of the sacrament in Neuendettelsau, moving beyond the traditional spring and fall communions with several services in the spring beginning with Palm Sunday and continuing through the Easter Season. In the autumn there would be multiple services in October and November although parishioners

44 GW 5/2: 673
typically commune only once during each cycle. In the 1850’s the pattern changed to the celebration of the Lord’s Supper every three weeks and on major feast days. In the 1860’s, Löhe established “small communion” services, abbreviated celebrations held early on the morning of those Sundays when there was no celebration of the sacrament in the main service.  

Catechization is necessary for a fruitful hearing of God’s Word and a holy reception of the Lord’s Supper. Löhe lauds Luther’s Small Catechism as a confession of the Evangelical-Lutheran Church asserting that “no catechism in the world but this can be prayed.” He recognizes Luther’s genius in crafting with such simplicity of style and yet richness of meaning. In Three Books About the Church, Löhe warns pastors against using the Catechism as a pretext for delivering dogmatic monologues and instead urges that the catechist stick to the words of the Catechism itself. He draws attention to Luther’s own prefaces to the Small and Large Catechism as providing a simple and churchly method of teaching the faith. In this way, Löhe argues “the Catechism should be engraved on the memory of the child for its entire life.” He suggested that catechization move from the text to an exposition of its meaning to the clarification of its content for doctrine and life.

Fifth, Löhe maintains the necessity of making a distinction between the “ordinary” and “extraordinary” forms of pastoral care. The ordinary means for the care of souls are sermon, liturgy and catechesis. The extraordinary means would be those pastoral activities that attend to specific needs and crises in the lives of believers. Here again we see that the church is fundamental to pastoral care. Korby writes “So radical was this contextual setting to be understood that Löhe argued: if one does not anchor the extraordinary means in this general setting of the ordinary, he will make the grave error of turning the extraordinary into the ordinary. That is, the private care, the care of the individual, will become the ordinary means of the pastor’s work and preaching, catechesis, and liturgy will become occasional, peripheral, and insignificant. The private care of the individual is extraordinary, by Löhe’s description. But if it is to be fruitful and blessed work, it must be done with those on whom the ordinary means of the care of souls have done their work.”

Löhe spotted a tendency to replace the ordinary with extraordinary: “Such an inversion is what he (Loehe) called ‘methodism’ in pastoral care. Löhe called this a one-sidedness, growing out of the conviction that the Word of God would work effectively only if it were used in a certain way. By the attempt to achieve something special, something spectacular in this way was like cutting with the handle of a knife. The feverish creation of new measures for pastoral care will, in the long run, produce just that, ‘new measures.’ It does not take too long before the effects once produced by the ‘new measures’ begin to wear off, for in becoming the ordinary means for the care of souls, the extraordinary

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47 Wilhelm Löhe, Three Books About the Church, 171.  
48 GW VII/2:590.  
49 Wilhelm Löhe, Three Books About the Church, 245; also see Kenneth Korby, “Loehe’s Seelsorge for his Fellow Lutherans in America,” 227-246.  
50 Ibid., 246.
means do not have the staying power that the ordinary means contain within themselves.”

Pastoral care for Löhe does not seek after the “new measures” with the multiplicity of techniques but the “old means” in their evangelical simplicity.

Sixth, intercessory prayer is a necessary component. “There is no care of souls without intercession and common prayer.” The hallowing Word of God anchors the prayers of Christians in the gracious will of the Father. The General Prayer in the Divine Service is the priestly voice of the church making intercession for the world according to the apostolic mandate. Löhe sees that the Litany especially lends itself to intercession as it provides both structure and elasticity in bringing before God the needs of the sick and dying, the tempted and distressed, expectant mothers and widows; in short it is expansive enough to incorporate all who need our prayers. Löhe composed Seed Grains, for example, to assist the laity in hallowing all of life by the Word of God and prayer. Löhe was known for his prayer book and devotional literature but also for his fervent prayers made at the bedside of the sick and the dying and in the presence of the tormented and spiritually distressed. Hans Schwarz observes the similarities between Löhe and his contemporary with whom he was acquainted, Johann Christoph Blumhardt (1805-1880) in this respect.

When Löhe died in January of 1872, he left behind a legacy that would extend far beyond the little village of Neuendettelsau, the seat of his life’s work. His contributions to missions and diaconal work remain and are rightly celebrated. His contributions to pastoral theology have often been eclipsed by approaches derived from psychological disciplines. In recent times –that is within the last fifty years-the only pastoral theology in English, at least, that utilizes Löhe is the Barthian Eduard Thurneysen’s A Theology of Pastoral Care. We would do well to listen again to the wisdom of Löhe’s pastoral theology, to critically engage his thought toward a renewed understanding and practice of the care of souls in our spiritually needy world.

-Prof. John T. Pless
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51 Ibid., 247.
52 GW VII/2:590.