

DOES THE WORD OF GOD SUFFER LOSS

WHEN A CHURCH CLOSES ITS DOORS?

St. Peter's Evangelical Lutheran Church
Poplar Grove, Goodhue County, Minnesota

Church History Paper

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At 2:30 p.m. on September 21, 1986 the bell of St. Peter's Lutheran Church tolled 120 times. It tolled for the 120 years that the church had existed. It would seem that such an occasion would have brought joy to the members of St. Peter's who lived near Popular Grove, Goodhue County, Minnesota. But the tolling of a bell usually marks a somber occasion. To many it was. This was the last time any one would participate in a divine service as a member of St. Peter's, Popular Grove. Due to a number of reasons the voters at St. Peter's had voted to close their tiny church. Thus, the tolling of the bell marked the closing of the 120 year history of St. Peter's Evangelical Lutheran Church.

During the tolling of the bell, the congregation sang hymns that led them in a circle of the church year. One could safely guess that during those hymns most, if not all, hearts and minds were looking back in time--rethinking and reliving the many wonderful memories. As their minds ran from weddings to baptisms, from anniversaries to funerals, perhaps some wondered if somehow things might have turned out differently. Perhaps if the church had grown more, or if so many children wouldn't have moved from the farm country to the cities, maybe they wouldn't have been singing the last few hymns ever sung in St. Peter's. But, as the bell rang out the last few times, they felt again a lump of sadness in their throats.

Their sadness must have made it hard to see what good could come out of the closing of their congregation. No more praises

sung to God. God's Word no longer preached and taught. The wonderful news of salvation in Jesus Christ no longer heard. Such thoughts bring a very poignant question to mind: Does the Word of God suffer loss when a church closes its doors? A quick glance at the situation at St. Peter's would cause many to answer yes. But, if one looks deeper into the history of St. Peter's, this answer does not come so easily. In fact, the history of this church brings to light several things that give one every reason to rejoice. From early on, St. Peter's not only proclaimed the pure Word of God, but also passed her lutheran confessionalism onto her daughter congregations. Thus, in the following lines, do not expect a detailed delineation of pastors, church buildings and schools. But rather look for the answer to the question: Does the Word of God suffer loss when a church closes its doors?

The earliest beginnings of St. Peter's are difficult to ascertain due to the lack of records. The History Of The Minnesota Synod gives the following account:

There are no records of the very first beginnings of this congregation. Nor can one gain any exact information about the time of its founding from the surviving founders. Numerous individuals have testified that the first preacher was one Norwegian minister named Muus who served here on several occasions in about the year 1866. He was followed by a certain John Herzig of Rice Lake, who served here a short time. It appears that during this time the congregation was organized. The minutes of a meeting of the congregation on February 10, 1867 give the impression that the congregation was organized. On March 22, 1867, the congregation resolved to call a pastor from the Missouri Synod; it cannot be determined whether the call was successful (Louis Lange Publishing Co. 1910, p. 270).

Such a document does not lend much aid in determining how confessional St. Peter's was during its formative years. The fact that the congregation attempted to call from the Missouri Synod

is evidence that the congregation was somewhat concerned about getting a pastor of a conservative doctrine background.

During St. Peter's Centennial in 1966, more evidence came to light. Pastor Darryl G. Bruemmer found four pages of "superb German handwriting" in the cornerstone of the church. Pastor Bruemmer surmised that Pastor Wm. Lange wrote these pages in 1877 for the corner stone of the new church of his time (This church building was torn down and replaced by a new structure in 1920-21 which still stands today). These four pages were translated by Pastor H. F. Muenkel of Christ Lutheran, Zumbrota, Minnesota. If, indeed, these four pages were written by Wilhem Lange, they provide some very interesting details on the confessionalism of St. Peter's during its first years of formation.

Pastor Lange came to St. Peter's in the fall of 1875. This means most of the original members were still alive and able to relate to him the details of the church's formation in 1866. He gives the first pastor to serve as Pastor Herzer of Rice Lake, but does not give his synodical background. He confirms the next two pastors, Vomhof and Klinkenburg, as being from the Missouri Synod. This again supports the fact that the early members of St Peter's were concerned with the pure Word of God. Pastor Lange also lists several pastors that served here, but does not give any details as to their confessional leanings. German sounding names like Bahr, Wiese, and Meyer lead one to believe these men were also of Missouri background.

During these early times the congregation encountered difficulties in finding pastors to stay and serve them. No doubt

there were many long vacancies during the first ten years. In a list of baptisms compiled by Pastor Lange, he notes that several baptisms were performed by Heinrich Boettcher, a Methodist pastor. No doubt, in desperation the early settlers often had to settle for pastors not of an evangelical Lutheran background. But from their concern in calling conservative pastors after their formation, one can ascertain that the members of St. Peter's generally had the pure Word of God at the center of their worship life.

In the four pages supposedly written by Pastor Lange, one finds a brief synopsis of the church's beliefs and confessions. The statements are rather brief, but give the basic tenets of Bible doctrine held to by the early members of St. Peter's. This means that in less than 10 years since its founding, St. Peter's had established clear confessional lines. As one will see in just a moment, these confessional lines very closely followed the lines of confessionalism in historical Lutheranism. In a little over two pages, Pastor Lange makes several references to the Lutheran confessions.

Under section I. on the reception of new members, Pastor Lange established this limitation on any new member, ". . . though lacking in knowledge of the combined symbolical books, is at least familiar with the Augsburg Confession and Dr. Martin Luther's Small Catechism and confesses the same." Thus, one can surmise that the early members of St. Peter's did not follow an ecumenical spirit. They felt it very important to instruct any new member with a proper understanding of God's Word. St. Peter's wanted its

members to have more than just a passing knowledge of the wonderful truths found in God's Word.

We find this same spirit expressed in section IV. on the removal of a pastor from the congregation. The document reads, "Fixed reasons for deposing a pastor are: persistent adherence to false doctrine, which is contrary to the Word of God and to our lutheran confessions." Clearly, St. Peter's concerned itself very particularly with the religious background of its pastors. This poses a striking contrast to many churches of that time. Due to the lack of availability of pastors, many congregations often settled for very liberal pastors or pastors that were not even lutheran.

This attitude shows itself as well in the kind of education St. Peter's attempted to leave with its children. Section V. on the kind of books used in the church and school contains the following statement: "In the school the Holy Bible and Luther's Small Catechism are to be studied, and in addition to these only such books are to be introduced into class which in no way contradict the Word of God and our lutheran confessions(emphasis mine). Perhaps what is most interesting to note is the test that St. Peter's applied to any new material taught in its church or school. First, the material had to agree with the Bible. Secondly, the material had to agree with a proper interpretation of the Bible as found in the lutheran confessions. Instead of limiting a few particular materials, St. Peter's established a principle that her members could apply for future years to insure the truth and purity of God's Word in her midst.

Despite this strong evidence of early confessionalism at St. Peter's, however, one may have noticed one small problem. In the aforementioned places, one finds references only to Luther's Small Catechism or the Augsburg Confession. But as history proves, many reformed church bodies or other non-lutheran churches were able to ascribe to these confessions as well. These particular confessions did not deal specifically with some of the issues that set Lutheranism apart from other church bodies. For example, a reformed church body could ascribe to Luther's Small Catechism or the Augsburg confession but still hold to a false, unbiblical stance on the doctrine of the Lord's Supper. Thus, there is a possibility that such false doctrines could have existed at St. Peters during her early days.

But as one reads on in the four pages of "superb German handwriting," he finds any such possibility eliminated. In a final section which speaks to the children and following generations of St. Peter's, one finds the following statement:

Furthermore, all that we confess publicly(sic) before the world, and against those who superstitiously add to the written Word or in unbelief take away from it, this you will find plain and clear in the book which is called "The Book of Concord," as it was published in 1580. The enclosed(accompanying - beiliegend) book is an unaltered copy of the aforesaid book.

Here one sees the very positive proof that God's Word in its truth and purity existed at St. Peter's already in its early years. The Book of Concord was a lutheran confession which helped more than any other confession to set Lutheranism apart from the reformed churches. The fact that St. Peter's clung to such a confession proves beyond a doubt that St. Peter's was a confessional church

during the 1860's. This fact establishes that the members of St. Peter's felt that God's Word was ^{an} important part of their lives. They used the confessions not to supplant the Scriptures or to replace them. But they used the confessions to insure that God's Word was not lost or distorted even in the smallest way. One finds an excellent example of this in Pastor Lange's description of St. Peter's stance on Holy Communion:

Concerning the Holy Supper we believe and confess according to the words of institution of this Sacrament that in the same, where it is celebrated according to Christ's institution, everyone who eats and drinks of this meal, whether believer or unbeliever, receives, eats and drinks by mouth, with the bread the body and with the wine the blood of Christ. The difference between guests at the Lord's Table is only this, that the unbelieving guests eat and drink the body and blood of Christ to their damnation, the believers on the other hand eat and drink the body and blood of Christ to seal unto them the forgiveness of their sins.

Finally, one finds that St. Peter's felt this strong grasp on the Word of God to be important not just for its own generation but also for the generations of people still to come. Remember that Pastor Lange probably wrote this document for the corner stone of the new church in 1877. No doubt the thought of new church caused Pastor Lange to consider the many generations of people that would follow him. He realized St. Peter's presently had the pure Word of God. But he must have forswore the many dangers that lay ahead for the small congregations. Thus, he placed a strong admonishment in the document for future generations to read as they removed it from the cornerstone:

And now we beseech and admonish you, our children and descendants, in the presence of the living God to remain faithful to this doctrine and confession not only as long as we live, but long after we - and may God in grace grant it to us - have fallen asleep in the Lord with our

forefathers and our bodies are laid in the grave to await Judgment Day; and that you be thus faithful unto your death, having also instilled in your children this doctrine and commanded them to pass it on to their children and to cherish it, until the Lord Jesus returns on the day of judgment and gathers his militant church in body and soul to himself in heaven as the triumphant church.

If you, our children and descendants, however, fall away from this faith and confession, we also testify to you in the presence of the living God that you then have forsaken the clear and true word of God and thereby fallen away from God himself; and we beseech and admonish you by our Lord Jesus Christ to return to that faith, which God in his Word offers to all men, and which we have herewith briefly witnessed and presented to you, and which now and after our death bear witness to. Yea, and if you permit doctrines contrary to God's Word and our lutheran confessions in the Book of Concord(sic) to be preached in this house of God which we have erected, or if you yourselves confess such doctrines and cling to them, we will also testify against you on Judgment Day and praise God's righteousness when he carries out in eternity the punishment which in his holy Word he threatens: "You have rejected the Word of God, therefore will I also reject you."

From this final statement statement, therefore, one can ascertain that St. Peter's used the lutheran confessions very seriously in her early years of formation. But she used these confessions not for the sake of the confessions themselves, but only for the sake of the Word of God. The early members held to such documents only to maintain that the true Word of the Gospel of Jesus Christ would never be lost from them nor their children. They desired to preserve the simple gospel truth of free salvation through Jesus Christ alone for all the members of St. Peters-- present and future.

As one follows the history of St. Peter's during its 120 year history, he sees that the Word of God in its truth and purity did continue among her people. The pastors that served her continued to proclaim that pure doctrine Word established in St. Peter's

early years. Nevertheless, St. Peter's history did come to an end. As mentioned before, St. Peter's closed her doors for the last time in September of 1986. What about the pure Word of God? What about all that lutheran confessionalism? Clearly, the people of St. Peter's did not lose the the Word of God when they voted to close their tiny congregation. But hadn't the Word, or at least the preaching of the Word of God, suffered a great deal? No longer would a pastor proclaim from St. Peter's pulpit the wonderful news of free salvation through Jesus Christ. No longer would little children sit in Sunday school to learn about their friend and Savior, Jesus Christ.

Was all that St. Peter's had so firmly established in its early years to be suddenly lost forever? As stated in the introduction, a quick glance might cause one to immediately answer yes. But another closer look at the 120 year history of St. Peter's reveals another striking and equally important attribute of this small congregation. Not only did St. Peter's cling to the pure Word of God during its 120 year history but it also attempted to spread that Word throughout the area.

If one looks back to the time of Pastor Wilhem Lange during the 1870's, he finds that Pastor Lange concerned himself not only with serving the members of his own congregation. During his stay at St. Peter's Pastor Lange was also instrumental in helping another group of Christians form the congregation of St. John's in Minneola Township, several miles northwest of Poplar Grove. Also, soon after he arrived, Pastor Lange also began to serve a group of lutherans near the area of White Bridge which lies east of

Oronoco. Under the auspices of Pastor Lange this group organized itself as St. John's Evangelical Lutheran Church on January 11, 1879. In 1941 St. John's merged with St. Paul's Lutheran Church in Oronoco and became Grace Evangelical Lutheran Church. Both Grace of Oronoco and St. John's of Minneola Township are still active and growing in 1988.

On July 1, 1883 St. Peter's Evangelical Lutheran Church installed Pastor Karl Boerneke as her pastor. During his pastorate a request came from the members of St. John's of Minneola and the members of St. Peter's who had moved to Zumbrota, that someone begin conducting services in Zumbrota, several miles northwest of Poplar Grove. Thus, Pastor Boerneke began work in Zumbrota in 1886. Due to his work and preaching, a group of people in Zumbrota formed Christ Evangelical Lutheran Church on January 2, 1896. Christ Lutheran is also active and growing in 1988. It also has had a Christian day school for about 12 years.

One can see quite plainly that St. Peter's played the part of a stepping stone in southeastern Minnesota during the late 1800's. St. Peter's proved to be very instrumental in establishing the preaching of the pure Word of God in Goodhue County. The fact that her three daughter congregations are alive and growing today testify to her williness and zeal to reach out beyond herself with the saving news of Jesus Christ. In a sense, the congregations of St. John's, Christ Lutheran, and Grace are all a part of St. Peter's. They are her daughters. They are daughters that have inherited a wonderful legacy passed on to them by their mother.

Therefore, consider the following question again: Does the

Word of God suffer loss when a church closes its doors? In view of the events that took place at St. Peter's during her 120 year history, the answer is no. It is true that people will no longer hear the Word of God preached and taught within her church building. But when one looks at what still takes place at her three daughter congregations, he finds every reason to rejoice. He sees God's Word preached every Sunday--not just at one church but at three different churches. One sees Christian day schools guiding and teaching little children to know their Savior Jesus Christ. One sees children baptized into the Kingdom of God, young men and women entering their age of confirmation, young couples committing themselves to one another in Christ's love, and the sick, the aged and the dying comforted with words of hope, with the words of Jesus Christ.

No doubt the people of St. Peter's felt a twinge of sadness as their church closed its doors for the last time. But, certainly, their sadness must be tempered, even removed, when they see what their church has passed on their daughter congregations. As older people begin to feel the effects of age and contemplate the thought of dying someday, they often comfort themselves with the thoughts of their children, who will live to carry the family legacy into the coming years. So also the congregation of St. Peter's must comfort itself with the legacy it has passed onto its daughters. In a sense, St. Peter's has not closed its doors at all. In a sense, St. Peter's is also alive and growing in 1988--through the daughter congregations she left to carry on her work.

Perhaps, this is why Pastor Robert Berg entitled the closing

service at St. Peter's, "A Gift Of Time." The 120 year history of St. Peter's Evangelical Lutheran Church certainly was a gift of God. And as Pastor Berg brought out during the closing service on September 21, 1986, it was A Time To Be Born, A Time To Grow, A Time To Love and Build, A Time to Live and Share, A Time To Die, and A Time to Give Thanks. Certainly, one cannot deny that St. Peter's used God's gift of time to the fullest. From it earliest beginnings it established the pure Word of God on the rolling farmland of southeastern Minnesota. It also used that time to spread that Word beyond her doors. Thus, when her doors closed for the last time, the Word of God suffered no loss. But the Word of God continued to bring joy and hope to people throughout that part of the state.

In the church's constitution, some of the early members of St. Peter's provided that if St. Peters ever closed her doors as a congregation, the church building should be torn down. The former members of St. Peters have decided to erect some kind of monument on the place where the church stood, as a remembrance to their children and descendants. In the years to come after Sunday dinner, the church yard and cemetary will echo the sounds of car doors slamming as families and relatives stop to reminisce about memories from long ago. Former members will explain to their children that this was where they were baptized, or this is where Grandpa and Grandma were married, or this is where the church used to stand years ago.

And as they remember the good times, the happy times at St. Peter's, again a lump of sadness may rise in their throats.

But their sadness will turn to joy when they remember the precious gift their congregation left to the people in Goodhue County, Minnesota. Her 120 year history has come to an end, but St. Peter's has left her daughters with a gift of priceless value. Her former member's sadness will turn to joy when they reflect on the people who came to know Jesus as their Savior not only in their own congregation, but in the congregations St. Peter's help to establish. God's Word is a precious a Heritage. Thanks be to God that St. Peter's passed that Heritage on to her children.

B I B L I O G R A P H Y

Geschichte der Minnesota Synode und ihrer einzelnen Germeinden.
St. Louis: Der Louis Lange Publisching Company, 1910.

Credits:

Pastor Robert Berg for information gained from his booklet printed for the 120th Anniversary of St. Peter's Ev. Lutheran Church.

Pastor Darryl G. Bruemmer for information gained from his booklet printed for the Centennial Anniversary of St. Peter's Ev. Lutheran Church.

Pastor H. F. Muenkel for his translation of the documents found in the cornerstone of St. Peter's Ev. Lutheran Church and also his translation of The History of the Minnesota Synod.