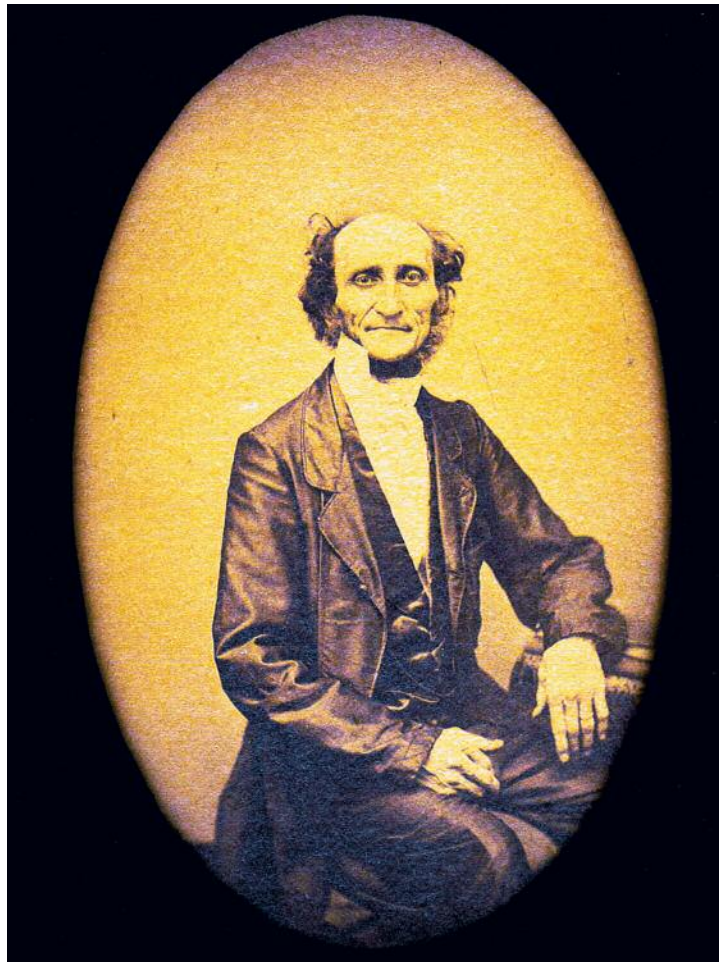


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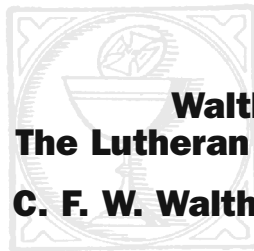


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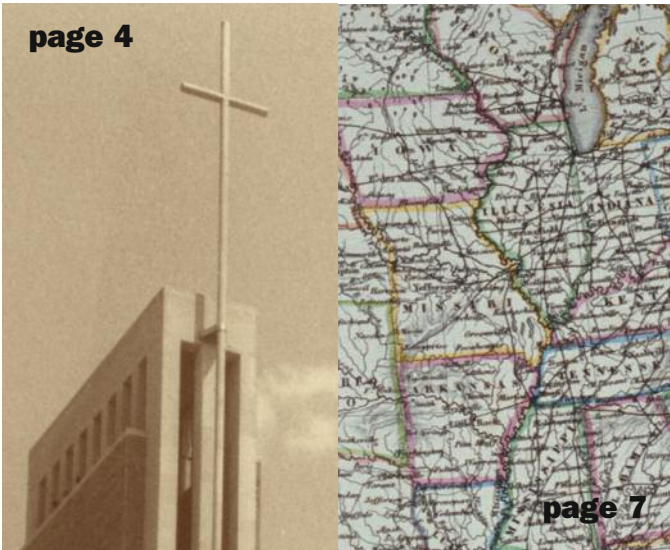
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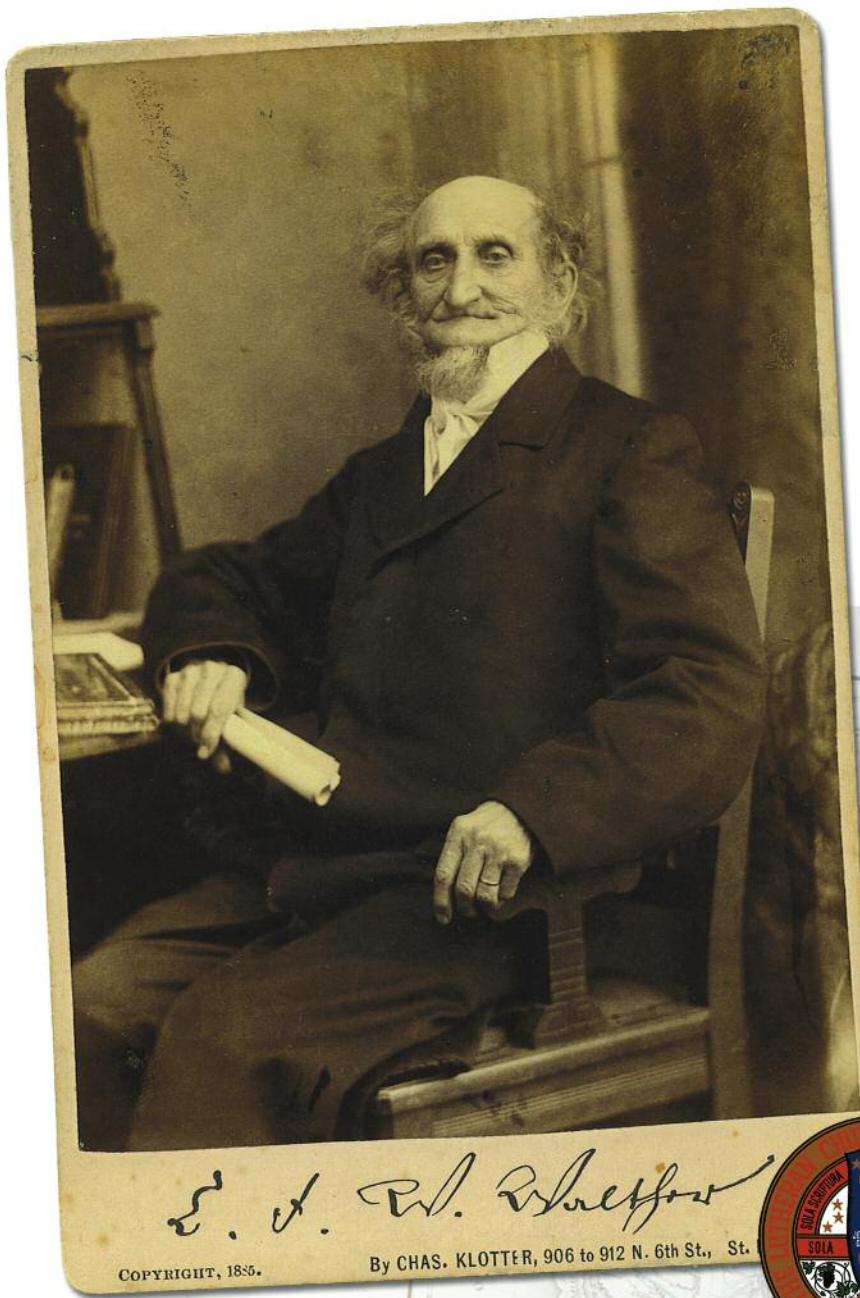
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Walther and the Formation of The Lutheran Church

Missouri Synod

By the Rev. Dr. Lawrence R. Rast, Jr.



When the LCMS came into existence, it brought together a remarkable assortment of people from a variety of backgrounds and commitments. F. C. D. Wyneken in Fort Wayne, Indiana (and throughout Ohio, Michigan, and Indiana), August Crämer in Frankenmuth, Michigan, Wilhelm Sihler and his colleagues in Ohio, and, last but certainly not least, there were the Saxons in St. Louis and Perry County, Missouri, led ultimately by C. F. W. Walther.

Too often the work of the founders is assessed unsympathetically and the vitality and depth of their efforts are blithely dismissed. It is almost as though some think that what became the Missouri Synod had to be. But it did not. When Walther and the Saxons arrived in the United States in 1839, they were just a few among the many Lutherans of America. Consider this: between the years 1840 and 1875 America's Lutherans

Many have asked, why use the name "Missouri"? However, the geographical designation is the least significant element of the new synod. Rather, what emerges from a reading of the new synod's Constitution is its clearly confessional character. The Missourians were determined from the start to make a clear statement of their beliefs in both their doctrine and their practice.

established no less than fifty-eight distinct Lutheran synods—of which the Missouri Synod was but one.¹ So the question becomes, if there were already so many Lutheran synods in America, why start another one? The answer is simple. Given their familiarity with the American religious scene generally and American Lutheranism more specifically, the founders of Missouri were determined to establish an orthodox, truly confessional Lutheran synod in the United States—something they believed was lacking at their time.

Many of the synods of American Lutheranism had departed from the orthodox faith and the Confessions of the church. The most notorious example was Dr. S. S. Schmucker (1799-1873), long-time professor at the Lutheran Theological Seminary at Gettysburg, Pennsylvania. Schmucker believed that for Lutheranism to develop properly and be meaningful to Americans, it had to change its doctrine *and* its practice. The primary statement of his theological and practical program was the *Definite Synodical Platform* of 1855. However, Schmucker had made his views clear in a number of forums well before that time. In sum, Schmucker specifically rejected the biblical teachings of the real presence of Christ in the Lord's Supper and that in baptism God washes away sin and gives new life to sinners. He rejected private confession and absolution and threw out the historic liturgies of the church. All of these things had to be changed, argued Schmucker, if the Lutheran Church was to survive. The historic doctrine and practice of the church simply did not make sense to Americans, argued Schmucker, and therefore it was incumbent on the church to change to fit the attitude of the times.

Walther totally disagreed. By the early 1840s he had concluded that the synods of American Lutheranism were so infected by the faulty thinking of the time that it was necessary to gather confessionally committed Lutherans into a new synod. Far from being isolationist in attitude, Walther reached out with the Lutheran confession of the biblical truth to America. On September 7, 1844, Walther published the first issue of *Der Lutheraner* ("The Lutheran") in which he sought to strengthen the ties of confessional Lutherans throughout the United States. When Wyneken received a copy of the issue, he is reported to have exclaimed, "Thank God, there are still Lutherans in America." Wilhelm Sihler also received a copy and soon was writing to Walther.²

It soon became clear that this diverse group shared a common commitment to confessional Lutheranism. Naturally they worked to solidify their emerging relationship. Meetings were held in Cleveland, Ohio (September 1845), St. Louis, Missouri (May 1846), and Fort Wayne, Indiana (July 1846), and led eventually to a draft constitution, adopted at the Fort Wayne meeting.³ This draft provided the basis for the Constitution formally adopted in Chicago, Illinois, on April 26, 1847, the birthday of the Missouri Synod.

Many have asked, why use the name "Missouri"? In fact, the original name of the synod was *Die Deutsche Evangelische Lutherische Synode von Missouri, Ohio, und andern Staaten* ("The German Evangelical Lutheran Synod of Missouri, Ohio, and Other States"). The voting membership of sixteen congregations and twelve pastors, along with eleven advisory members (ten pastors and one teacher), was drawn from Missouri on the west and Ohio on the east. Notably, the majority of congregations were in Indiana. The unwieldy formal title was quickly shortened to "Missouri" or the "Missouri Synod," and its participants were known as "Missourians." However, the geographical designation is the least significant element of the new

What was the point of forming the new synod? Walther and the other Missourians believed that the Lutheran confession of biblical truth was valid for all times and all peoples. The point was not to maintain a particular human culture, but to publish the good news of Christ crucified and risen again as rightly confessed by the Lutheran Church as widely as possible.



synod. Rather, what emerges from a reading of the new synod's Constitution is its clearly confessional character. The Missourians were determined from the start to make a clear statement of their beliefs in *both* their doctrine *and* their practice, as the reasons for forming the synodical union demonstrate:

1. The example of the Apostolic Church. (Acts 15:1-31)
2. The preservation and furthering of the unity of pure confession (Eph. 4:3-6; 1 Cor. 1:10) and to provide common defense against separatism and sectarianism. (Rom. 16:17)
3. Protection and preservation of the rights and duties of pastors and congregations.
4. The establishment of the largest possible conformity in church government.
5. The will of the Lord that the diversities of gifts be used for the common good. (1 Cor. 12:4-31)
6. The unified spread of the kingdom of God and to make possible the promotion of special church projects. (Seminary, agenda, hymnal, *Book of Concord*, schoolbooks, Bible distribution, mission projects within and outside the Church.)

AMERICA SETTENTRIONALE

While these principles stand solidly on their own, what do they mean in practice? The answer to this question shows how Walther and the Missourians viewed their mission in the chaotic situation of American denominationalism. Simply put, the Lutheran Church in America had become so confused in its doctrine and practice that it was difficult at times to recognize congregations as Lutherans. As a result, they wrote:

Furthermore Synod deems it necessary for the purification of the Lutheran Church in America, that the emptiness and the poverty in the externals of the service be opposed, which, having been introduced here by the false spirit of the Reformed, is now rampant.

All pastors and congregations that wish to be recognized as orthodox by Synod are prohibited from adopting or retaining any ceremony which might weaken the confession of the truth or condone or strengthen a heresy, especially if heretics insist upon the continuation or the abolishing of such ceremonies.

The desired uniformity in the ceremonies is to be brought about especially by the adoption of sound Lutheran agendas (church books).

Synod as a whole is to supervise how each individual pastor cares for the souls in his charge. Synod, therefore, has the right of inquiry and judgment. Especially is Synod to investigate whether its pastors have permitted themselves to be misled into applying the so-called “New Measures” which have become prevalent here, or whether they care for their souls according to the sound Scriptural manner of the orthodox Church.

What was the point of forming the new synod? Was it simply to provide a cultural haven for German immigrants? Certainly the Synod vigorously maintained the almost exclusive use of the German language. However, to see the Synod in such simple terms misses the point of Walther’s larger vision. Walther and the other Missourians believed that the Lutheran confession of biblical truth was valid for all times and all peoples. However, given their limited resources, they tended to restrict their efforts to the

exploding German population of the United States. At the same time, however, Walther recognized that this same truth needed to be confessed in the English language and so encouraged work among English speakers as well. The point was not to maintain a particular human culture, but to publish the good news of Christ crucified and risen again as rightly confessed by the Lutheran Church as widely as possible. For Walther and all the early Missourians there was no division to be made between dogma and mission, rather, as we have seen, doctrine and practice were mutually and integrally interrelated.

What resulted was explosive growth. In Walther we see a man who knew his circumstances well. Further, he sought to engage and address those circumstances with the unchanging truth of the Lutheran confession of the biblical truth. God richly blessed the Missouri Synod as it faithfully confessed the Scriptures in trying circumstances. If we can learn anything from Walther—and I believe we can—it is how vigorously, winsomely, and courageously to stand with the church of all time in making the good confession that we are saved by grace through faith on account of Christ alone apart from any merit or worthiness in us. The clarity of Walther’s confession is a clarion call to us in the present to recapture that uniquely integrated sense of doctrine, practice, and mission.



If we can learn anything from Walther—and I believe we can—it is how vigorously, winsomely, and courageously to stand with the church of all time in making the good confession that we are saved by grace through faith on account of Christ alone apart from any merit or worthiness in us.

1. E. Clifford Nelson, ed., *The Lutherans in North America*, rev. ed. (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1980), 175.

2. Walter Baepler, *A Century of Grace: A History of the Missouri Synod 1847-1947* (St. Louis: Concordia, 1947), 52.

3. The text of this draft may be found in Roy Suelflow, trans., “Our First Synodical Constitution,” *Concordia Historical Institute Quarterly* 16 (1943): 1-18. It is coupled with a translation of the constitution adopted in 1847. It is from this latter text that quotations in the remainder of this article are taken.

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