

Carl Ferdinand Wilhelm Walther Churchman

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The third in a series of Walther Lectures delivered at the Seminary during the past schoolyear. Dr. Mundinger was formerly president of St. John's College, Winfield, Kansas, and is presently a professor there. He is author of GOVERNMENT IN THE MISSOURI SYNOD.

“IT WILL BE unnecessary to write a biography of Doctor Walther since we may assume that the details of his life are well known to our Christians.” These words, written on October 3, 1911, by Dr. L. F. Fuerbringer, editor of *Der Lutheraner*, depict the degree of familiarization with the life of Doctor Walther in the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod of fifty years ago.

Are the facts of Dr. Walther's life sufficiently known to our people today? Can we assume that “our Christians,” young and old, are knowledgeable of the great theologian? Is it within the realm of possibility that some of our students of theology, and even clergymen, are not as conversant with the life of the founder of our church as they might be?

Several years ago the *Walther League Messenger*, a magazine published by the organization of young people which derives its name from Dr. Walther, tried to determine the degree of familiarity of our people with the life of Walther. Their findings were most astonishing! Many of them seriously thought that Walther League was named after Walter A. Maier, the *Lutheran Hour* speaker. One of them even posed these questions: “Who and what does Walther represent?” “What church is he affiliated with?” (*Walther League Messenger*, Feb., 1959, p. 42). As recently as January of this year (1961) the editor of the *Walther League Messenger* wrote: “Take my word for it, as well as the word of the men on the staff here, that few Walther Leaguers know who Walther is.” Can this be accepted as an apt description of our membership in general?

In order to understand fully what kind of a churchman Dr.

C. F. W. Walther was, we should have to discuss several ep out of his life. However, the one we shall primarily consider Altenburg Debate.

What was the Altenburg Debate? What were the issues? were the factions? What was settled through the Theses ac at Altenburg? The Altenburg Debate was not really a debat was more of a discussion of issues that had been simmering for time and finally had come to the boiling point.

The Altenburg Debate took place on the 15th and 20 April, 1841. The events which led up to the debate occ two years or more before. Martin Stephan had been depos May 30, 1839. The man who led the Saxon immigrants in re ing Stephan from their midst was none other than C. F. W. Wa He left St. Louis on the 19th of May, arriving in Perry Coun the dark of night. He carefully and stealthily saw that their transactions were completed; that the right people were info of the misdeeds of Stephan; preached on Sunday morning to a gathering of the colony, and, after thus mending his fences turned to St. Louis. He was in Perry County about eight or days.

Several days passed. Walther and the rest of the clergy cussed further the doings of Stephan. They informed the p who remained in St. Louis how they intended to deal with Step and then made preparations for the remainder of the colony t down to Perry County. Two boats, the *Prairie* and the *Toledo*, hired to transfer the people from St. Louis to Perry County. *Prairie* arrived at the mouth of the Brazeau on May 29, 1839. *Toledo* discharged its passengers at the same place at five p.m. same day.

On the morning of the 30th a council consisting of all pastors and four of the leading laymen held a meeting. They resolved to issue another summons to Pastor Stephan to appear fore them. However, he refused to appear. The council count by promptly excommunicating him. Then and there, after sea ing his house once more, they determined to put him in a rowl and to ship him to the Illinois side of the Mississippi river. H ever, their plan couldn't be carried out the same day. Logs v

coming down the river from the north, and no one was brave enough to get into a boat and row him over to the other side. All were incensed at Stephan! They wouldn't even allow him to live in his house. He had to live in a tent nearby. The next day, May 31, at 10:30 a. m. Stephan, stooped over a cane, and protesting his innocence with visible emotion, was conducted to a waiting ferry. He was rowed across the Mississippi river by two men. Equipped with a spade and axe, he was placed on the Illinois side near a curious rock formation which bore the lurid name of "The Devil's Bake Oven."

Why was C. F. W. Walther chosen for this mission? Had he shown any qualities of leadership to this date? Was he particularly active in the matters of the colony? Was he experienced by age or otherwise? He was the youngest of all the clergymen, being 27 years old. He had not been active in the affairs of the colony. In fact, he was one of the least important of the clerical group. The answers to the questions are purely conjectural. He was probably chosen because no one else wanted to go. We know that God had His hand in the whole matter. C. F. W. Walther was slowly but surely ripening into leadership.

The fall of Stephan signaled the beginning of difficult and turbulent times for the Saxons. The troubles, the anxieties, which beset them were endless. I shall not discuss the deep needs of food and shelter, nor do I wish to mention the great amount of sickness, fever, and disease which harrassed the colony; remember, they were out in the wilderness under God's heaven.

But the worst development was the rise of two opposing groups, a clerical faction and a lay faction. The clerical faction seemed dominant, but the lay faction was strong enough to create doubts in the hearts of the colonists. The truth of the matter was that the lay faction was largely in the right and the clerical faction was tenaciously clinging to its hierarchical system of government. They were trying to play Hamlet without Hamlet. Stephan was dead as far as the colony was concerned. But they tried to keep the old regime going. All were agreed that Stephan had disgraced himself, but they said his ideas of church and civil government were correct. The thing to do was to carry on as before.

The laymen, however, tried their level best to discredit the clerical group. What were the principles on which the laymen wished to see the government of the church based? In their protest (*Protestationschrift*) we find statements like these: "Christians are priests through baptism by faith and must exercise the priestly office, not only as a matter of right but as a matter of command." "As spiritual priests, laymen have the right to preach all doctrine and to supervise all the activities of the clergy." "The final decision of all disputes rests with the local congregation. The local congregation has the power and the duty to establish all regulations regarding liturgy, ceremonies, and church constitution." "The true church is invisible." "It is dangerous to judge people by their doctrine and as to their faithfulness over against established teaching. Equally dangerous is the habit of extolling clergymen as a class. Cause such a habit engenders servility and hypocrisy." "The type of church polity is the one that prevailed during the first centuries of the Christian era. All that time individual congregations, some small and some large, existed independently side by side." "The association of individual congregations is not necessary and may be harmful. The concept of the *ecclesia representativa*, i.e., that the church is represented in the clergy leads to passivity and to a lack of interest in church matters on the part of the laity." "Men who have not studied, yes, ordinary men, may administer the sacraments. Stephan taught false doctrine concerning the church, concerning church polity, concerning secular government, concerning the office of the ministry, concerning excommunication and concerning the cure of souls."

The lay party, as these principles taken from the *Protestationschrift* show, stood for an extreme congregationalism, with heavy emphasis on the individual. Like the Anabaptists, they took certain isolated quotations from Luther's writings of the early 1520's and tore them out of context, and tried to construct a new church polity. Had the lay party prevailed during these two years of intense struggle, the church polity of the Missouri Synod would have been highly individualistic congregationalism, somewhat akin to the polity of the Southern Baptist Convention. The fact that both the lay party and the clerical party were authoritarians, that both went to Luther's writings for their ammunition, made an intensely difficult situation.

At times the lay party went to almost ludicrous lengths—with the aid of quotations from Luther—in their efforts to subordinate the clergy to the laity. With candor they advocated a subordinate position for the clergy; for instance, in public processions the clergy was to follow the laity to demonstrate the honored position of the laity.

Ferdinand Sproede, one of the leading laymen of the colony, who had been a particularly ardent Stephanite, a hot-headed and rather pugnacious fellow, a baker by occupation, wrote a document in which he “gave the preachers a terrific shellacking and condemned their call and office.” His argument was that the colonists were no congregation and that therefore Walther had no call. The congregation which Walther served in Perry County and from which he was called to Trinity Church, St. Louis, could not give him a release because, said Sproede, “They were no congregation, and therefore the call which he claimed to have from them was no call at all.”

Though C. F. W. Walther opposed a public confession of guilt on the part of the emigrating company, he does not seem to have tried to keep individuals from making such statements; there was a regular epidemic of confessing during 1840-1841. His brother made one. His brother-in-law, Pastor E. G. W. Keyl, made a lengthy one. Pastor C. H. Loeber also made a rather long confession, which he called “Renunciation of Stephanism.” Pastor Ernst Moritz Buerger tells us that he made three sincere and lengthy confessions in three different meetings. Candidate Theodore Brohm felt the urge to write a confession. This was followed by a document of Magister Wege, in which he is said to have been guilty of gross exaggeration. Every clergyman was confessing, except C. F. W. Walther.

Why didn't Walther want to confess? Why didn't he want to join his fellow pastors in making a clean breast in a common confession? Didn't he have anything to confess? First, he did not believe in a common confession, because a common confession would have to say that they were all guilty. It would distort the facts. He knew that many men had joined the colony more or less innocently. Why, he asked, should the innocent man be put in the same category with a man who was Stephan's secretary?

Furthermore, many of the people who wrote confessions confessed things which were not sinful in themselves. Walther was

particularly opposed to making certain acts sinful which were sinful. He called it "Sündenmacherei." The whole conflict of Law and Gospel came into play. Walther by this time was shadowing his future stand on the Law and Gospel.

When all is said and done we have to remember the situation of Walther at that particular moment. Walther had been an extremely zealous Stephanite in Saxony. His rabid Stephanism had brought him into endless trouble with both the civil and ecclesiastical authorities in Saxony. He had repeated rows with his teacher Brauensdorf. He had a tiff with the school officials because he stubbornly refused to introduce certain new textbooks. Furthermore, he had broken up several homes by insisting that the wife, "Christian" (Stephanite), would have to leave her husband to "follow Christ to America." Furthermore, C. F. W. Walther had been guilty of "kidnapping" his niece and nephew, Theodor Marie Schubert. The warrants for his arrest arrived one day at Bremerhaven when the colony left Germany. He had hurriedly left, getting permission to sail on the first boat, the *Johann C*

In addition to this, Walther's release from his former imprisonment was not entirely clean. While he received a formal release from the consistory, his obstreperous behavior as a Stephanite prevented him from securing an entirely clean release. The confessions in which he admitted that the emigration was sinful and that they would have to return to their homeland. The possibility of a return to Germany was rather distasteful to the young pastor. Consequently, C. F. W. Walther refused to join the parade of confessors.

Finally, a public debate on the questions which had all along disrupted the colony was set for April 15 and 20, 1841, at Augsburg, Perry County, Missouri. To what extent Walther promoted the rising clamor for a full and free public debate of all the issues involved in the lay-clerical controversy cannot be ascertained to any degree of certainty from the documents at hand; but we do know that he had been sweating over the problems of the colony for more than two years.

This public debate is a definite milestone in that it marks a turning point in the development of church polity in the colony. At all events, from that time on the colonists knew where they were headed. Whether it was really the "Easter Day" of the bedeviled

colony, as one of the participants, the exuberant Schieferdecker, later called it, may be questioned. This much is certain: it helped to clarify the people's thinking. It catapulted C. F. W. Walther into a position of prominent churchmanship.

Who were the debaters? Walther, of course, was the chief leader on the clerical side. Franz Marbach, a lawyer, was beyond a doubt the most able of the lay leaders. Marbach was concerned with the moral aspects of the problem in his discussions. He had drawn a number of counter theses with which he hoped to destroy the propositions which Walther had set forth. He attacked the problem *negatively*. His first question was, "What is a false church?" He offers a threefold definition in answer. A false church is every church which is not the true orthodox church; it is every church which has been adulterated, but which has not entirely lost the foundation of the true church which is Jesus Christ; and finally, Marbach said, "A false church in the most eminent sense is a group of people who have not been called by means of the true Word to the true Christ, but by means of the false word to a false Christ." This latter definition of a false church is the one which Marbach applies to their colony. The conclusions which he draws from his various definitions of a false church show how completely he is caught in the idea that their problem is a moral one. To apply the word "church" to an organization that is built upon something that looks like the Word of God, but is not, is not a misuse of the term, he maintains, but it is simply unscriptural. God never calls such people a "church," or His children. Since such people have a false word, a false spirit, and a false Christ in their hearts, they cannot be saved. There is no salvation in such a church. Such churches, Marbach claims, have no God-given authority to administer the mysteries of God which have been entrusted to the Church and until they have repented and renounced the false word and false Christ and returned to the true Christ, they cannot call a pastor or administer the Sacraments. Until such time they are only a godless mob, and such a mob is not merely to be reformed, but to be built anew from the ground up. Until it destroys the old foundation, it is under the wrath of God; and he who wishes to save his soul must avoid contact with such a mob.

We see from this that the heart of the discussion was the nature of the church. What, then, is the Church? "A seven year

old," says Martin Luther, "knows what the Church is. Namely, holy believers and lambs who hear the voice of their Shepherd. For the children pray thus: 'I believe in one holy Christian Church

Walther was violently opposed to those who saw only a narrow issue in their problem, and who made the intensity of the contrition a yardstick with which to measure the sincerity of people's confessions. He calls such men "conscience pushers" (*Gewissensdränger*). He spoke of the tyranny of the conscience (*Gewissensbeherrscherei*), of making things to be sin which are not sin (*die neue Pest der Sündenmacherei*), of calling into question the grace of God, which many of us believe we have received.

Walther asks why should men who were the confidants of Stephan and initiated into all the secrets of Stephan, who knew what was going on—why should they make the amount of the contrition and the intensity of their confessions the yardstick with which to measure the amount of guilt to be assessed against the simple, uninitiated layman? Many followed Stephan, Walther claims, but had neither the ability nor the opportunity to judge. They were misled in their ignorance. They were not wicked; they were misled. It is not fair to hold them equally responsible with the intimate confidants of Stephan? Besides, what good could come from a collective confession? Walther would have nothing to do with such new deals.

Walther took his cue from Dr. Edward Vehse, a lawyer who had returned to Germany, although he had violently opposed Vehse at the beginning of this two-year period. He now saw that Vehse, from his many lapses into error, had many good points which could be exploited. Pushing personalities and morals into the background, Walther took a realistic position. He even thought that their election might be a work of God; but whether it was or not, it certainly was not the issue on which to lose time right now. The burning question was whether they were a part of the Christian Church and, as a part of the Christian Church, they had the right to call ministers and whether their ministerial functions were also valid in the name of God.

It was here that Walther put forth his now famous *Alte Theses*:

I

The true Church, in the most real and most perfect sense, is the totality (*Gesamtheit*) of all true believers, who from the beginning to the end of the world, from among all peoples and tongues, have been called and sanctified by the Holy Spirit through the Word. And since God alone knows these true believers (II Tim. 2:19), the Church is also called invisible. No one belongs to this true Church who is not spiritually united with Christ, for it is the spiritual body of Jesus Christ.

II

The name of the true Church belongs also to all those visible companies of men among whom God's Word is purely taught and the holy sacraments are administered according to the institution of Christ. True, in this Church there are godless men, hypocrites, and heretics, but they are not true members of it, nor do they constitute the Church.

III

The name "Church," and, in a certain sense, the name "true Church," belongs also to those visible companies of men who have united under the confession of a falsified faith and therefore have incurred the guilt of partial departure from the truth; provided they possess so much of God's Word and the Holy Sacraments in purity that children of God may thereby be born. When such companies are called true Churches, it is not the intention to state that they are faithful, but only that they are real Churches as opposed to all worldly organizations (*Gemeinschaften*).

IV

The name "Church" is not improperly applied to heterodox companies, but according to the manner of speech of the Word of God itself. It is also not immaterial that this high name is allowed to such communions, for out of this follows:

1. That members also of such companies may be saved; for without the Church there is no salvation.

V

2. The outward separation of a heterodox company from an orthodox church is not necessarily a separation from the universal Christian Church, nor a relapse into heresy and does not yet deprive that company of the "Church."

VI

3. Even heterodox companies have church power; even when the goods of the Church may be validly administered, the ministry established, the Sacraments validly administered, and the keys of the kingdom of heaven exercised.

VII

4. Even heterodox companies are not to be dissolved, reformed.

VIII

The orthodox Church is chiefly to be judged by the common orthodox, public confession to which its members acknowledge and confess themselves to be pledged.

What did Walther accomplish with his victory at Altenau? Pastor Loeber who wrote a letter to Superintendent Guericke in Saxony seven days after the close of the debate said: "The number of many have vanished. Those who had formerly been converted were now strengthened in their conviction." The air was clear.

The conviction grew generally that they were a part of the invisible Christian Church (*una sancta ecclesia*), that as such they had the power to call ministers, and that ministerial acts of properly called ministers were valid also in the sight of God. Individual congregations did not hesitate to call pastors, and a healthy church life began to develop.

Just how did the principles which Walther derived from his work out in the day-to-day life of a Lutheran congregation? Did the Luther principle that laymen have the power by majority to regulate financial and spiritual matters practical? Did the principle of the "Supremacy of the Congregation" work? Did Walther's doctrine of the transfer of the pastoral office to one man of the congregation (*Uebertragungslehre*) work out in practice?

Nowhere is the working of these principles better revealed than in the minutes of Trinity Lutheran Church, St. Louis, one of the mother churches of the Missouri Synod. A careful reading of these minutes will yield a wealth of pastoral knowledge which will be amazing.

In the framing of the constitution for the congregation we see how Walther proceeded step by step according to the principle he had gained in the Altenburg debate. In the instruction for the officers, for example, the congregation laid down the following rules: 1) Any member of the church board (*Kirchenrath*) who ceases to be a blessing to the congregation and becomes an offense may be removed by vote of the congregation at any time. 2) The activity of the church council shall in no wise deprive an individual church member of the rights and privileges guaranteed to him by the priesthood of all believers. 3) Members of the church council must observe the utmost secrecy concerning all private matters that are discussed in the meetings of the council. 4) At every election to church office this "Instruction" shall be read to the voters.

In the meeting of November 8, 1841, the "Instruction" was changed to the effect that the name "*Kirchenrath*" be stricken because it was offensive to some ("*weil er einigen anstössig gewesen ist*"). "*Gemeindevorstand*" was substituted. In the meeting of January 24, 1842, it was decided that the four elders were to change off in presiding over the meetings of the voters. In the meeting of February 28, 1842, someone suggested that the congregation follow the constitution of Zion Church in Baltimore in appointing a committee to nominate suitable candidates for the election of elders. This suggestion was flatly rejected, because the voters wished to retain full freedom in electing their elders ("*sondern dass die Gemeinde die freieste Wahl behält*").

Similarly Walther dealt with the problem of building a church, and with the forming of Synod. Everywhere we look we find the same tenets of the church polity being applied; in fact, we see that everywhere Walther works he applies the principles of churchmanship developed at Altenburg and refined in his handling of the embryonic church elsewhere.