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## A FREE CHURCH IN A FREE COUNTRY.

Address at the Walther Centennial Celebration at the Light Guard Armory  
at Detroit, Mich.<sup>1)</sup>

FELLOW LUTHERANS:—

We are met to celebrate the dawn, a century ago, of a life that has proved eminently useful, chiefly to the American Lutheran Church, but in a larger view to the Church of Christ in all lands. Walther's uncompromising loyalty to the Holy Scriptures, which he accepted as verbally inspired; his clear and thoroughgoing distinction between man's estate by nature and by grace, under the Law and under the Gospel, through faith and through works; his powerful presentation of that article of the Christian religion with which the Church either stands or falls, the justification of a sinner before the tribunal of divine justice by grace through faith; his equally strong emphasis on the necessary sequel to justification, the sanctification of the justified sinner by daily repentance and renewal, and by holiness of life and conduct; his fearless application of the Word of God to the lives of Christians in all sorts of callings, avocations, and pursuits,—all these things surely merit the approbation of the entire Church.

There is, however, one feature that rises mountainlike out of the level plain of Walther's great life-work, and at the same time is so unique that I believe it deserves special consideration during these commemorative exercises. To this feature I shall, with your permission, limit my remarks.

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1) Published by request of Pastoral Conference of Detroit.

The well-known organization which has sprung up in America principally through Walther's labors, the Missouri Synod, is a Lutheran Free Church. Viewed merely as such, without considering its present dimensions, it is without a parallel in the history of the Lutheran Church. Not that the Lutheran Church had not, from its beginning, been projected as a Free Church. In his teaching on the character and mission of the Church, Walther has said nothing but what Luther and the confessional writings of the Lutheran Church had laid down as the rule, on the authority of Scripture. However, every student of Lutheran history knows that, owing to unfavorable circumstances prevailing at the time, the Scriptural principles of the age of the Reformation were not at once reduced to practice. It was here, in America, that Lutheran teaching and, what comes to the same thing, Scriptural teaching, concerning the dignity and sovereignty of the local Christian congregation, the relation of the ministry to the laity, the rejection of all human authority when employed for the purpose of determining what Christians shall believe and do, or refuse to believe and do, the proper attitude of the Church to the State, and vice versa, has not only been accepted as a doctrine of the Christian religion, but has been made the very condition under which the Church here lives, and moves, and has its being. If we leave out of consideration a few minor instances where a condition like this has been attempted in other ages and outside of the Lutheran Church, such a thing has not happened since the days of the apostles and the early fathers, prior to the age of Constantine.

Americans probably feel little surprise at hearing this stated; for is not every church in our country a free church? True, yet there is a difference. The Lutheran Church in America rejoices, not only because it is become *de facto* a free church, but because such a condition accords perfectly with her Confessions, and is the very thing which she has always and everywhere advocated. The Lutheran Church in America desires no change whatever in present conditions.

This subject interests us both as Lutherans and Americans. I shall point out a few facts in the life-work of Walther that may show how we came to be what we are, an American Lutheran Free Church.

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The beginnings of the society from which our organization has sprung are overcast with gloom. You remember the scene on board ship, when the Saxon emigrants met at the cabin of their leader Stephan, and signed a document which gave that man almost absolute power over them. Walther, with a few others, did not sign that document. Walther's Lutheran conscience revolted at the idea that he should surrender his God-given right of private judgment to any man. He perceived the hierarchical tendency in that move. That is the first intimation we have of a leading trait in the character of Walther, his abhorrence of man-power, of princely authority within the Church, to be wielded over the Church.

Walther has never claimed that it is wrong in principle for a Church to have bishops. He has, however, contended that bishops are not *juris divini*, by divine right. The Scriptural bishop, in Walther's view, is the pastor of the local congregation of Christians. He alone exists by divine right. All other functionaries of the Church are *juris humani*, are human creatures, which may or may not be called into existence, as the local congregation elects. They may also have their functions altered, yea, entirely abrogated, to suit the needs of a given time or place. Withal, they are mere contrivances for convenience; and their duty is to serve, not to rule.

Walther laid stress on the word of Christ: "One is your master, even Christ; and all ye are brethren." To him the spiritual privileges of a believer are a direct grant from Christ who has earned them by His living and dying. The exercise of these privileges is controlled solely by the Word of Christ. To make the possession of these privileges dependent upon the pleasure, and their exercise upon the dictate, of any man, was to Walther an affront offered to the Redeemer Himself. "Stand

fast in the liberty wherewith Christ hath made us free, and be not entangled again with the yoke of bondage"—this saying of Paul came to be a settled principle of Walther.

This principle was applied without fear or favor to any hierarchical tendency which cropped out in the American Lutheran Church. It brought on the first great controversy which our Synod had to wage. Walther, and we with him, denied the right of a pastor to excommunicate a church-member upon the pastor's sole authority, the pastor's right to levy a church-tax, to issue ordinances, to set up church-customs, etc. Walther's most famous book, on the Church and the Ministry, was written in defense of his position, and attracted such wide attention that on account of it a European university, that of Goettingen, asked him to accept the degree of Doctor of Divinity.

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The Missouri Synod was organized in 1847, chiefly through the instrumentality of Walther. The organization was not effected until after the jurisdiction of the body had been strictly defined. The organization was to be a federation of congregations, each of them retaining complete autonomy, and uniting with the other congregations merely for the purpose of achieving certain measures which the individual congregation could not hope to accomplish alone, such as, the carrying on of missions at home and abroad, the founding of schools for the training of ministers and minister's helpers, the publication of suitable denominational literature, the defense of the Confession of the Church in the forum of the general public, etc. The powers of the Synod were made merely advisory, it being left to the free choice of the congregations whether or not they would adopt any of the measures which the Synod at its stated conventions had resolved upon and recommended. The right of revision is an inalienable right of every Missouri congregation.

At these conventions the clergy and the laity are equally represented and have equal privileges of speech and vote.

Yea, suffrage lodges ultimately in the congregation; for a congregation temporarily without a pastor still may cast its vote, and ministers serving congregations not organically connected with the Synod have no vote.

Everything, thus, was done in the organization of the Missouri Synod to avoid the creation of a higher tribunal, a consistory, or ecclesiastical court, that would decree and determine matters for the congregations.

All this was a new venture in the American Lutheran Church. The oldest American Lutheran synod was not called a synod, but a ministerium, and most of the older Lutheran organizations in our country adopted the same designation. The very word "ministerium" tells a tale. It means that those organizations were federations of ministers in which the congregations had little representation that was of any importance. The example of the Missouri Synod has effected a noteworthy change in this respect. Congregational sovereignty is now an accepted fact and an acknowledged principle of polity in the American Lutheran Church; and the application of this principle, no doubt, has given the greatest impulse to the remarkable growth of our Church in this country during the last century.

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Walther's position was subjected to severe criticism. It was held by some, that his teaching must necessarily weaken the influence of the ministry, that it would reduce the pastor to a mere puppet who must obey the beck and nod of his congregation, and that it must open the floodgates to congregational demagoguery and anarchy. Others held that Walther's position smacked of independentism and separatism. They feared that the right of private judgment would be used to the detriment of the unification of the Church as a whole and of the upbuilding of strong local congregations. Men would do under this teaching only what they pleased. As regards the synodical organization which Walther had effected, it was predicted that it would be short-lived. A synod without mandatory powers,

it was said, could not hope to accomplish anything; it would be a sort of ecclesiastical caucus, without authority to bind even its own members further than these chose to be bound.

Walther met all these arguments. He insisted that the ministry is by divine appointment. It is not optional with the congregation whether they will have a pastor or not, nor what they may demand of their pastor. The functions of the ministry are clearly stated in Scripture. These statements bind both the pastor and the congregation, and when the pastor acts within the limits of the divine Word, the congregation owes him obedience. On the other hand, it is the congregation which not only elects the pastor, but also dismisses him if he fails to meet the requirements of his sacred charge. Thus the rights of either side are fully secured by God's Word, and better guarantee it is impossible to offer. The relation between pastor and people, according to this teaching, is not determined after the fashion of a mere human agreement or contract, often limited as to time, but it is divinely regulated and safeguarded.

Subsequent events proved that Walther's position did not harm, but benefit the ministry. The so-called time-call, which had been a favorite practice in American Lutheran churches, went out of existence, and everywhere there was abundant evidence that the people cordially respected their ministers, just because they saw that these men did not mean to domineer over them, but to serve them.

As to the separatistic tendency of his position, Walther set to work to show how a congregation, that is, a Christian congregation in truth and deed, ought to be constituted in accordance with the teaching of Scripture. His second best and greatest book was written for this purpose. It explains in two parts: 1. the rights and privileges of membership in a local Christian congregation; 2. the duties which result from such membership. In Walther's estimation church-membership in a Christian congregation is a holy affair, a sacred trust, a grave responsibility. Walther meant to raise up an intelligent laity that would know how to apply the grand prerogatives with

which they had become vested by the Lord Jesus; a laity that would prize very highly the boon of Christian union and fellowship on the basis of a common understanding of the revealed truth; a laity, moreover, that would unitedly strive for "whatsoever things are true, whatsoever things are honest, whatsoever things are pure, whatsoever things are lovely, whatsoever things are of good report; and if there be any virtue, and if there be any praise, would think on these things." His book is an exquisite manual of church-membership, and it would be most appropriate if in this year of jubilee we would all take up this noble book and study it again.

The test of actual experience also bore out Walther's claim that his principles were not only true by the rule of the divine Word, but also practicable. Strong, well-informed, conscientious, and energetic congregations grew up under the application of these principles from the Atlantic to the Pacific, in the North and in the South.

Lastly, as to the feebleness and insufficiency of the synodical organism which he helped to erect, Walther soon could point to the faith-compelling argument of actual results. The Synod which had seemed so loosely bound together, and so limited as to its powers of jurisdiction, came to be the largest and most powerful Lutheran body in America. From a handful of delegates that met at Chicago to effect the organization, the Missouri Synod has grown to a communicant membership of over half a million, representing 878,654 souls. It carries on its synodical roster the names of 3767 congregations and missions served by its pastors, and the number of all clergymen organically connected with the Synod is 2213, inclusive of the teachers at the Synod's colleges and seminaries.

In his opening address before the second convention of the Synod, in 1848, Walther said: "It is possible that we are all more or less stirred with anxious concern when we reflect that our deliberations may prove futile, since according to our synodical Constitution we have merely advisory powers, merely the power of the Word and of moral suasion. Our Constitu-

tion does not permit us to issue decrees, to proclaim ordinances and laws, and to hand down legal decisions enjoining upon our congregations certain actions and compelling them to submit. Our Constitution does not create us a sort of consistory, or supreme court, set up above our congregations. It leaves to the congregations the most perfect liberty in all things, the Word of God, faith and love alone excepted. According to our Constitution we are not above but within our congregations, and at their side as aids. Does this arrangement, now, deprive us of all possibility to exert a thorough and salutary influence upon our congregations? Have we, by adopting a Constitution such as ours, made ourselves a mere shadow of a synod? Shall we not, in a mutual relation such as we have entered into, weary ourselves with labors that may easily prove utterly lost because nobody is compelled to submit to our resolutions?" Walther negatives all these queries emphatically, and then goes on to show: "Why we should, and can, carry on the work of the Lord cheerfully, although we have no other authority than that of the Word of God." He shows that Christ has given to His ministers no other power than that of the Word, and that this is amply sufficient for the upbuilding of the Church. He says: "When the minister is given only the power of the Word, however, that power in its full compass; when the congregation hearing the Word of Christ from its minister receives it as the Word of God, then the proper relation exists between the pastor and the congregation. Then the pastor serves the congregation, not as a hireling, but as an ambassador of the Most High, not as a servant of men, but as a servant of Christ, and teaches, warns, reprovcs in Christ's stead. Just where these conditions prevail, the apostolic injunction is properly heeded: 'Obey them that have the rule over you, and submit yourselves.' The more clearly a congregation perceives that the man who presides over its affairs in the Lord desires nothing but that the congregation should yield obedience to Christ and His Word, the more it becomes convinced that the pastor does not wish to domineer, but himself



jealously guards the liberty of the congregation; the more ready it will be to listen to his salutary counsels, even in matters that God has left optional. . . . This same prospect of being able to exert a wholesome influence our synodical body has, provided it does not seek to accomplish anything except by the power of the Word. True, we expect conflicts because of this position of ours, but they will not be such humiliating conflicts about trifles as usually arise from disputes regarding human ordinances, but they will be holy conflicts, in defense of the Word of God, and of the honor and the kingdom of God. And the more our congregations come to see that we do not mean to exercise any other power than the divine power of the Word, which saves all who believe it, the more they will become accessible to our counsels. Those who do not love the Word will, indeed, turn from us; but those who love the Word will regard communion with us as a comforting refuge. When they have freely adopted our resolutions, they will not bear them as a foreign yoke that has been laid upon them, but they will esteem them a blessed and gracious expression of brotherly love, and will maintain, champion, and defend them as their own."

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The Saxon emigrants and their later associates had come out of the German state-churches. They found conditions prevailing in America which entirely eliminated the jurisdiction of the State from the affairs of the Church. It was these conditions that had attracted them to this country in the first place. They rejoiced in the separation of Church and State, which is a covenanted article of the American Constitution.

They defended this principle of true statecraft from the view-point of Scripture. Walther has frequently in his writings sketched the distinct character and functions of the Church and the State. He regards the authority of the State as temporal, corporal, visible, external, that of the Church as internal, spiritual, invisible. Earthly, or political, citizenship must be indiscriminately extended to the evil and the good, to Chris-

tians as well as non-Christians, to believers as well as to unbelievers. But church-membership can be consistently granted only to those who hear and believe the Word of the Good Shepherd. The aim of the State is to secure for its citizens conditions of peace and prosperity, and to protect them in their temporal interests and possessions. The aim of the Church is to reconcile men with their God, secure them against sin, death, devil, and hell, and save them eternally. The rule by which the State is guided in its actions is reason and common sense; that of the Church is the written revelation of God. The State makes laws to meet existing conditions; the Church makes no laws, but merely reiterates and applies the eternal laws of God. The State punishes acts that are evil outright; the Church places its censure also on the evil disposition of the heart. The State permits everything that is conducive to its own interests; the Church permits only what God has sanctioned or left optional. The State exacts obedience on the ground of the authority vested in it; the Church demands obedience only on the authority of Christ. The State employs force and coercive means to accomplish its ends; the Church never employs force. The State has for its component parts those who are in authority and exercise the functions of government, and those who are subject to the powers that be; in the Church there is no such distinction between a governing class and one that is governed. Jesus said to His disciples: "Ye know that the princes of the Gentiles exercise dominion, and they that are great exercise authority; but it shall not be so among you."

Because of these essential differences, Walther held, with the Bible and the Augsburg Confession, that State and Church must not be commingled. We Christians, who hold citizenship both in the State and the Church, must accord to each its due, rendering unto Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and unto God the things that are God's. Walther held that the State cannot, and must not, be governed according to the principles of the Church, nor the Church according to the principles of the State.

As a practical result of this teaching, Walther opposed two evil tendencies which have in every age wrecked either the Church, or the State, or both. On the one hand, he held that the Church must never seek to gain its ends by the aid of the State, so that the State virtually becomes a subordinate functionary of the Church, and the leaders of the Church act not only as guides in the spiritual, but also in the temporal affairs of their flocks, and are not content with being simply pastors, but seek to obtain political influence, and become statesmen and politicians. This evil, which is known under the name of Papocaesarism, Walther fought with resolute spirit. On the other hand, Walther held that the Church must never suffer itself to become a political fixture, by which the State carries its purposes into effect. Christian pastors must not make policemen, sheriffs, prosecuting attorneys of themselves, nor claim recognition and support from the State on the ground of their being churchmen. Walther warned also against this evil, which is known as Caesaropapism, in many of his public utterances.

In view of the dangers with which the democratic institutions of our American Republic are threatened from both the directions aforementioned, we may say that Walther has placed our whole country under obligation by his able and consistent defense of the principle of the separation of Church and State. Walther loved America and her liberties, and often spoke of our government in words of high praise. "Our government," he said on one occasion, "is really what the prophet Isaiah said a government should be, a nursing mother of the Church. For our government, as its office requires, powerfully protects us against every form of external violence, against the bloodthirstiness of Antichrist and his henchmen, and against the murderous spirit of the atheists of these last sad days of apostasy."

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It goes without saying that Walther's persistent opposition to any effort by which it was sought to erect a human authority within and above the Church, and his maintaining to the last legitimate conclusion the sovereignty of the Christian congrega-

tion, caused much strife. We do not regret this strife. No great and good cause in this world ever came to be accepted without conflict.

We have been warned that we must not deify Walther. We assure every one that we are fully aware of Walther's human frailties and shortcomings. We know that he did not think of himself except as a poor sinner, always in need of the forgiving and sanctifying grace of God. We have little interest in the mere man Walther. We honor, however, at this centenary, the principles for which he contended. These principles we mean, by the help of God, to maintain after him.

Walther is now removed from the strife of tongues and from the toil and worry of the Church militant. While he was with us, he was a tower of strength. Let us make his deeds commemorate him by making them an illustrious model for our own work, and thus let us perpetuate his work in ours. His memory shall remain green among us as long as there shall be found among us men who appreciate the religious, scriptural, the confessional, Lutheran, position occupied by the great American Lutheran, Carl Ferdinand Wilhelm Walther.

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