

## Book Review by Cameron A. MacKenzie

Stephan, Philip G. *In Pursuit of Religious Freedom: Bishop Martin Stephan's Journey*. Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2008.

In 1953, Concordia Publishing House released *Zion on the Mississippi* by Walter O. Forster.<sup>1</sup> Anyone who has looked at this book knows how thoroughly Forster sifted through the evidence in order to recount “the settlement of the Saxon Lutherans in Missouri 1839-1841”; and Forster’s thoroughness alone is enough to keep most historians from trying it again. Unfortunately, Forster’s work did not deter Philip G. Stephan.

Of course, this is not because Forster is beyond criticism or because his conclusions cannot be questioned. Not at all. However, *In Pursuit of Religious Freedom* is not a good book. Interesting, yes; but not very well done. One hesitates to say this because the Stephan family has contributed much to the Lutheran Church – Missouri Synod over several generations; but it deserves better than the work at hand. Compared to Forster it is an embarrassment. It is filled with misstatements, its documentation is woeful, and its argument is tendentious.

A reviewer knows he’s in for a rough ride when the very first page of text contains an error – an assertion that Martin Stephan was “the first and...only bishop the [Missouri] Synod has ever had” (p. ix) – but synod only began in 1847 the year *after* Stephan had died! Perhaps one could dismiss this on account of its being in a forward not written by the author, but it’s hardly a good omen. And the errors continue: (1) the “Babylonian Captivity of the Church” occurred in the 14<sup>th</sup> century not the 12<sup>th</sup> (p. 15); (2) “awakened” in German is *erweckt* not *erwecht* (pp. 29 and 30); (3) Benjamin Kurtz’s periodical was in English not German (pp. 49-50); (4) the effort to implement the Prussian Union was not “completed in all of Germany [by] 1847” (p. 77); (5) Loeber preached the sermon that led to Stephan’s downfall on May 5, 1839 not March 5 (p. 179); (6) Augustine did not write, “*we were made in God’s own image* and our hearts are restless until they find their rest in thee” but instead, “You have made us for yourself and...” (p. 207); (7) Wilhelm Loehe was from Neuendettelsau not Dresden (p. 258) and his conversations with Walther were about doctrinal agreement not about “merger” (p. 258-59); (8) the Buffalo Synod did not “join” the Iowa Synod after Grabau’s death (p. 259); (9) Ottomar Fuerbringer was not president of Concordia Seminary in St. Louis (p. 260); and (10) “Zersen” is spelled with an s and not with another z (pp. 68, 71, 315).

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<sup>1</sup> Walter O. Forster, *Zion on the Mississippi: The Settlement of the Saxon Lutherans in Missouri 1839-1841* (St. Louis: CPH, 1953).

Of course, some of these mistakes show that the author simply needed a good editor. But it is also true that his errors sometime arise from inadequate scholarship. For example, Philip Stephan maintains that Martin Stephan Jr. “enrolled in Concordia College’s first class” (p. 268; expressed more tentatively on p. 230), but Carl S. Meyer’s *Log Cabin to Luther Tower* names all the students in the first two years of the school’s history and Martin Stephan is not among them – nor is Meyer in the author’s bibliography.<sup>2</sup>

Of all the Stephanites, C. F. W. Walther has been written about most, but the author demonstrates no real familiarity with this material. As a result, he gets little stuff and big stuff wrong. As an example of minor matters, the author writes regarding the candidate who misled Walther into Pietism, “Kuhn is the only name given. No first name is given in any of the literature” (p. 68). But Stephan does not *know* the literature. In an article by August Suelflow from 1987, we find the name, “Johann Gottlieb Kuehn,” [note also the umlaut that Stephan missed]<sup>3</sup> and in Suelflow’s biography of Walther, even more precisely, “H. Johann Gottlieb Kuehn.”<sup>4</sup>

More importantly, perhaps, Stephan repeats the story that Walther changed his travel plans at the last moment and so avoided the *Amalia* (lost at sea during the voyage across the Atlantic) (pp. 130-32). He cites Forster in connection with Walther’s “switch”; but does not inform the reader that Forster rejects the *Amalia* story for good and persuasive reasons<sup>5</sup> and that both of Walther’s modern biographers, Lewis Spitz, Sr., and August Suelflow dismiss this tale as well.<sup>6</sup> Even if Stephan disagrees, he needs to show acquaintance with the argument but he does not. Incidentally, neither biography made it into his bibliography.

In his second to the last chapter, “View from the Twentieth-first Century,” the author decides to go after Walther’s doctrine of church and ministry as well as to accuse the LCMS of hypocrisy regarding its nature as a “loose federation of independent, autonomous, congregations” but yet binding them to “the Word of God and the unaltered Augsburg

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<sup>2</sup> Carl S. Meyer, *Log Cabin to Luther Tower* (St. Louis: CPH, 1965), 5-6. The author would also have profited from consulting Meyer’s *Moving Frontiers* (St. Louis: CPH, 1964), a collection of documents regarding LCMS history, including the Stephanite migration; but this too is missing from his bibliography.

<sup>3</sup> August R. Suelflow, “Walther the American,” in Arthur H. Drevlow, ed., *C. F. W. Walther: The American Luther* (Mankato, MN: Walther Press, 1987), 15.

<sup>4</sup> August R. Suelflow, *Servant of the Word: The Life and Ministry of C. F. W. Walther* (St. Louis: CPH, 2000), 23.

<sup>5</sup> Forster, 194-96.

<sup>6</sup> Suelflow, *Servant*, 36; and Lewis W. Spitz, Sr., *The Life of Dr. C. F. W. Walther* (St. Louis: CPH, 1961), 47.

Confessions [sic]" (p. 260). Anyone at all familiar with Walther's commitment to the Scriptures and Confessions knows that he never thought that congregational autonomy extended to doctrine – nor did any of his fellow Confessional Lutherans at the time, including Martin Stephan.

Without quoting Walther or citing *any* of his writings (and once again, the bibliography contains none), Stephan also charges Walther with refusing to view the clergy "as those people who equipped the laity to do ministry." It is not at all clear why Stephan thinks this. After all, in his *Pastoral Theology*, Walther pointed out that an essential purpose of preaching was to instruct the hearers in righteousness.<sup>7</sup> Yet Stephan insists that Walther "gave ground on this biblical function of clerical ministry" on account of those who remained "skeptical about the power of the clergy over the laity" (p. 259).

Stephan also maintains that Walther taught that "the Office of the Ministry is the same as 'the priesthood of all believers'" (p. 259); but just a glance at Walther's *Church and Ministry* would have shown him that "the holy ministry or pastoral office is an office distinct from the priesthood of all believers" (Thesis 1 on the Ministry). In fact Walther goes on to call the ministry, "the highest office in the church." Stephan's statement that for Walther, "ordination was not separate from the call and was not a consecration to an office higher than that of any other believers" (p. 259) is simply confusing. Walther taught that ordination was the public confirmation of the call and that while the ministry is an office of service, "to the ministry there is due respect as well as unconditional obedience when the pastor uses God's Word." But he also insisted that the pastor "has no authority to introduce new laws or arbitrarily to establish adiaphora or ceremonies." If Stephan thinks that Walther was in error on *these* points, he should say so and explain why. What he should not do is to criticize his own version of Walther.<sup>8</sup>

As already evident in the above discussion, one of the major weaknesses of Stephan's book is sourcing. This is critical because *any* work of history is only as good as the information that goes into it. Thus, scholarly historical writing is full of footnotes that show the reader where the information comes from in order to persuade him that the analysis

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<sup>7</sup> C.F.W. Walther, *American Lutheran Pastoral Theology*, trans. and abr. John M. Drickamer from the Fifth Edition, 1906 (New Haven, MO: Lutheran News, Inc., 1995), 67-70. For the original, see C. F. W. Walther, *Americanisch-Lutherische Pastoraltheologie*, 5<sup>th</sup> ed. (St. Louis: CPH, 1906), 86-88.

<sup>8</sup> C. F. W. Walther, *Church and Ministry (Kirche und Amt)*, trans. J. T. Mueller (St. Louis: CPH, 1987), 21-23. For the original, see C. F. W. Walther, *Die Stimme unserer Kirche in der Frage von Kirche und Amt* (Zwickau, Saxony: Verlag des Schriftenvereins der sep. ev.-luth. Gemeinden in Sachsen, 1911), xv-xvi. The first edition was published in 1852.

rests upon facts rather than mere opinion or even imagination. So any careful reader of *In Pursuit of Religious Freedom* will ask where did Philip Stephan get his information?

On the positive side, there are a few places in which the author cites primary sources that improve our understanding of what actually happened, e.g., his long quotation of a letter from Stephan's attorney regarding Stephan's condition and lawsuit after his exile (pp. 243-48) and his quotations from court records and family correspondence regarding Stephan's wife (pp. 117-19, 222-25). Unfortunately, however, even these sources are problematical since they are unpublished (the author locates them in the "Stephan Family Archives") and so not easily available to scholars who might, for example, want to see if the translations are reliable.

Much more troubling, however, are occasionally the sources that he does cite and, most troubling of all, his failure sometimes to cite any at all. As an example of the former, consider his chapter on "Ancestral Roots and the Reformation." Basically, the author is trying to show that his ancestors were Hussites and so he refers to secondary sources for information about them. But which ones? A biography of Hus from 1915 and a general church history from 1834 (p. 19)! Good historians rely on the most recent research, not secondary sources 175 years old.

The section analyzed above dealing with church and ministry offers an example of the absence of sources to support a historical argument. The failure to cite Walther or Loehe or Grabau (to whom he also refers) or even secondary works that summarize their positions is bad enough; but he does not even cite the subject of his book, Martin Stephan, although he does refer to Ottomar Fuerbringer's criticism of Stephan's "errors" in this regard (p. 260). It is true that earlier sections of the book discuss Stephan's theology on the basis of his sermons (see, for example, Chapter 7, "Martin Stephan as Preacher"), but they do not treat church and ministry. There is some discussion in the section dealing with Stephan's becoming "bishop" about what he thought of this office, viz., that it was a human arrangement and not of divine origin (p. 163); but the author also says that Stephan thought the episcopacy was "the closest to New Testament practice" (p. 259). However, he does not quote the man or offer any other evidence.

Even in describing a crucial event that determined Stephan's fate, viz., the first confession of adultery involving Martin Stephan, the author fails to provide a source. Philip Stephan says bluntly, "The woman was Louise Guenther" (p. 180) but does not say where he got his information. He goes on to criticize one of Forster's sources and suggests that it was his only one: "Forster cites Gotthold Guenther...as his source for naming

other women. However, G. Guenther fails to mention his own sister's verbal confession. In light of missing documents and G. Guenther's omission of his own sister's involvement, the stories of other women accusing Stephan rely heavily on hearsay, conjecture, and gossip" (p. 180).

But Forster does *not* rely exclusively on Guenther. He also cites G. H. Loeber (on the basis of extant church records) who actually read three names out in church the following July as repentant sinners. This was hardly "hearsay, conjecture, and gossip." Incidentally, the three names did not include Louise Guenther, regarding whom Forster remarks that her admissions did not come until a month after the first revelations.<sup>9</sup> So where did Philip Stephan obtain *his* information? He needs to tell us if he expects us to accept his account of things rather than Forster's.

One possible source is a secondary work that the author relies on very heavily throughout his book, viz., an unpublished manuscript, "Pastor Martin Stephan and the Saxon Immigration of 1838," by William Koepchen, written in 1935. Philip Stephan's attachment to this work is remarkable. About a quarter of his footnotes cite it, and this total does not include references to another Koepchen manuscript that the author also uses extensively, "Brief Conference Notes." The problem, of course, is that Koepchen's history is a *secondary* work that is only as good as *its* sources. But about these, Philip Stephan does not inform us very much except to say that Koepchen worked closely with Theo Stephan "who had gathered a great deal of family history," including some letters from Stephan and his son. Only on rare occasions does the author indicate Koepchen's source when citing him. However, at the outset of his work, he does tell us that Theo Stephan and Koepchen "wanted to 'set the record straight' and 'stop the slander'" (p. xii).

But this suggests yet another problem with Philip Stephan's work (and probably with Koepchen's as well) and that is its tendentious character. It simply does not offer an objective reading of the evidence. Instead, its purpose is to rehabilitate Martin Stephan just as the final sentence in the book indicates, "Six generations of his family honor him for his dream, his courage, his patience, and his ability to live through many difficulties while continuing faithful service in the ministry of the Lutheran Church" (p. 272). Not a word about his "faithful service" coinciding with years of marital unfaithfulness!

And yet it is the charge of adultery that is critical. After all, it was the irregularities of Stephan's behavior, including his relations with women, that led to his being suspended from preaching in Dresden and then his

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<sup>9</sup> Forster, 392, note 7.

suspension that led to the decision by his followers that the time to leave had come. No wonder, therefore, that when the issue arose again in the New World and this time confirmed by admissions from those who had shared in Stephan's sin, the colony reacted in anger and summarily expelled him from their midst.

Of course, Stephan's stubborn denial of adultery and his persistence in it (Louise Guenther resumed living with Stephan after her confession right up until the time of his death) does not cancel out a ministry that provided the comfort of the gospel to many over the course of almost 40 years. But one cannot ignore it. Sex may not "matter" in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, but it did in the 19<sup>th</sup> – at least among Confessional Lutherans – and Stephan's behavior outraged many – especially those who had at one time accepted his denials.

Philip Stephan's treatment of these matters is illustrative of his whole approach. On the one hand, he cannot deny everything. After all, Louise Guenther's evidence (obtained by a lay leader of the colony just days after Stephan's exile) is very damning (see pp. 193-96). But he attempts to minimize it by asserting that it was forthcoming only because the Saxons had broken "the confessional seal." Of course, his failure to document Guenther's "confession" to Pastor G. H. Loeber in the first place makes this claim suspect. Even worse, however, is the double standard he employs. On the one hand, he tears into Loeber: "Loeber... knew the boundaries of the confessional. No doubt her confession stunned him. However, the severity and implications of Guenther's confession was neither premise nor excuse for him to break his oath and ethical pledge of privacy of the confessional" (p. 196).

On the other hand, what about Martin Stephan? Only a few sentences earlier, the author had pointed out that in Germany, Louise Guenther had referred to Stephan as her "confessor father, and she had been a 'beicht kind,' or child of the confessional." But does this lead the author to rebuke his ancestor for misusing the confessional by initiating an adulterous affair with his *Beichtkind*? Not at all. The author simply goes on to assert that Guenther had experienced the "grace and forgiveness of the confessional" and understood it as "very private and protected" (p. 196). Private yes but hardly protected from the deprivations of Martin Stephan.

But while the author is amazingly silent regarding Stephan and the confessional, he spends a great deal of space indicting Loeber and the others for abusing it. He charges them with breaking a solemn oath and maintains that *this* rather than Stephan's exploitation of young women was the source of the problem: "It did not even dawn on him [Loeber] that this confession would cause no problem for anyone [including

Stephan?] had he obeyed his pastoral oath of protecting the confessional seal. If he remained silent, *no one would ever know*” [emphasis mine] (p. 200).

This is quite an accusation but once again the author’s scholarship fails him, because he never shows that Loeber actually took the oath he is charged with breaking and he virtually ignores Loeber’s claim that he discussed the women’s confession *with their permission*.<sup>10</sup> This is extremely important because pastors preserve confessional privacy for the sake of those confessing, in this case the women, and *not* for those, like Stephan, who may also have sinned but remain unrepentant. Loeber committed no sin *against the bishop*. Furthermore, if the women recognized that the community needed to deal with their hypocritical leader and so permitted Loeber to use their admissions, he did not sin against them either.

But the author insists that it is *always* wrong to reveal a confession, “The seal should never have been broken, *even* if she had granted Pastor G. H. Loeber permission to discuss it with others. The pledge of confidentiality by pastors is firm, but even more important is the pastors’ ordination pledge to loose or bind sins confessed to him or her [sic]” (p. 200) – as if the absolution depends on privacy, but what does that say about the absolution delivered *in public* in Sunday morning worship? Even worse is the fact that in making his argument, Philip Stephan does not cite *any* oath or pledge from 19<sup>th</sup> century Saxon Lutheranism. Instead, he relies on another problematic secondary source, this time the audiotape of a pastoral conference paper by Stephen Wiest. How can anyone evaluate Wiest’s evidence from a source like this?

Furthermore, Wiest and Stephan may actually have been assuming that ordination oaths taken *today* are the same as those of earlier eras. Beginning with the agenda attached to *Lutheran Worship* in 1984, ordinands in the Missouri Synod have promised “never” to reveal sins confessed, but that was not true in the synod’s previous agenda in which they only pledged to do their duties according to the Scriptures and Confessions. So what oath did Loeber take? If the author wants to accuse him of breaking it, maybe he should know what it was in the first place.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Forster, 393. See also Carl S. Munding, *Government in the Missouri Synod* (St. Louis: CPH, 1947), 87, note 9.

<sup>11</sup> Lutheran Church – Missouri Synod, *Lutheran Worship. Agenda* (St. Louis: CPH, 1984), 212; and Evangelical Lutheran Synodical Conference, *The Lutheran Agenda* (St. Louis: CPH, 1950s), 106-107. Even with respect to today’s oath, the pledge to secrecy while important is not absolute, especially when keeping it would endanger others. See Lutheran Church – Missouri Synod, *The Pastor-Penitent Relationship: Privileged*

It is for reasons like these – inadequate documentation, prejudicial reading of the sources, and factual errors – that one must criticize Philip Stephan's *In Pursuit of Religious Freedom*. It is a deeply flawed book. However, it has convinced me that Martin Stephan could use a scholarly and unbiased biography. Unfortunately, this isn't it.