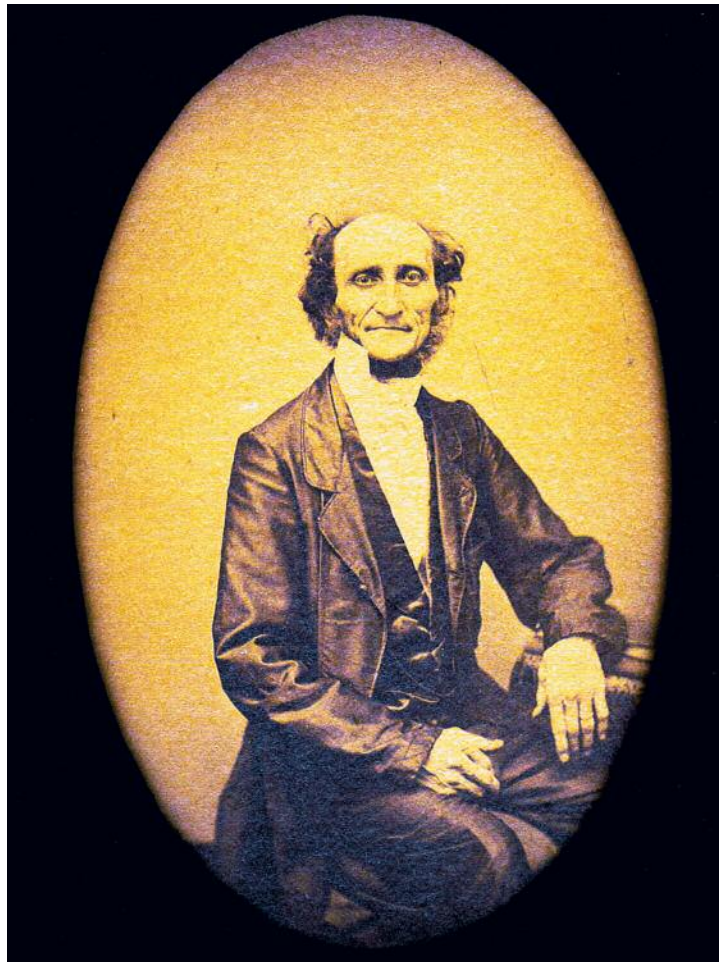


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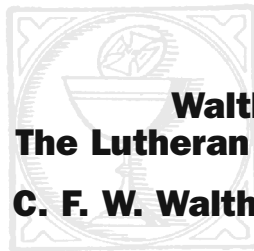


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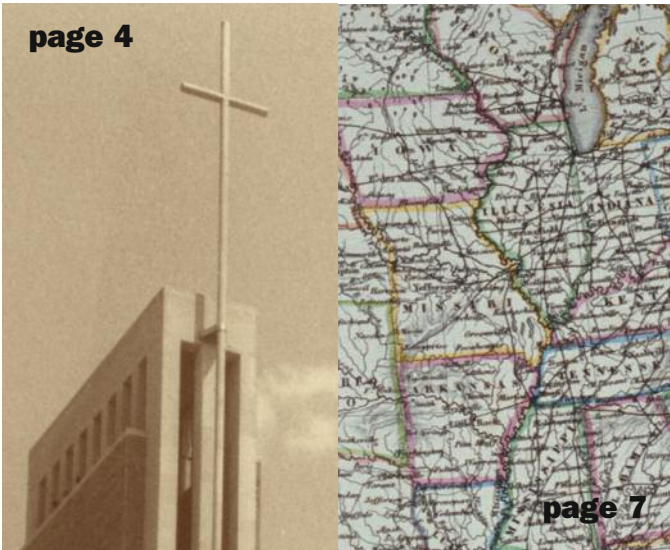
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# Walther as Church



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By the Rev. Dr. Edwin S. Suelflow



**W**alther Memorial Lutheran Church, Milwaukee, Wisconsin, is the only congregation in The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod which bears the name of its first president. It was my privilege to serve this congregation as pastor for 29 years. A portrait of Dr. Walther hangs in the narthex of the church—a tribute to his memory, also a reminder of the doctrinal heritage this churchman left for us as a congregation and as a Synod.

In 1987, under the encouragement of the Lutheran Heritage Committee of the Synod, special services were held during the Reformation season of that year to call to mind, with thanksgiving to God, the legacy C. F. W. Walther left for the Missouri Synod. For this special observance, the Heritage Committee suggested the words recorded in Jude, v. 3, as the text for the sermon on that day: “I urge you to fight for the faith once entrusted to the holy people.”

No one will deny that as a churchman, C. F. W. Walther contended for the faith. History records his valiant efforts, even in the face of tremendous odds. This was the situation in Perry County, Missouri, when the Saxon immigration people lost heart over the scandal surrounding their leader, Martin Stephan. Walther was forced, under the circumstance, to go to the Scriptures to clarify his position on the doctrine of church and ministry. With the Holy Spirit’s help, his position prevailed, it saved the immigration from failure, and provided sound theological foundation for the Missouri Synod today. The LCMS Convention of 2001 reviewed and reaf-

firmed this position.

Later, when Walther was president of the seminary in St. Louis, his concern for the training of pastors resulted in the special evening conversations he held with students on the subject of the proper distinction between Law and Gospel. Even today, most pastors have in their personal library a copy of these theses formulated by Walther.

His *Pastoraltheologie* contains a wealth of theological literature, demonstrating his conviction that the Word of God must speak to specific situations in the life of the Church.

When the many immigrants from Europe in the 1800s formed a number of different synods in America, Walther, the churchman, sought earnestly to gather likeminded, confessional Lutherans together, an effort which culminated eventually in the

formation of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod. His prolific writings in the *Der Lutheraner* and *Lehre Und Wehre*, which addressed contemporary issues on the basis of God’s Word, and his voluminous correspondence

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**Walther lived in a different time from ours. Yet, the basic, fundamental problem for people living in any century has not changed. We are still born with original sin; we still need the regeneration given in Holy Baptism; we still need daily repentance; we still need to hear the absolution; we still need the Sacrament of the Lord’s body and blood for the assurance of forgiveness; we still need to hear the saving Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ.**

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all contributed to the effort of establishing a Synod based solidly on the Sacred Scriptures and the Lutheran Confessions.

Surely Walther followed the encouragement of the Apostle “to fight for the faith once entrusted to the holy people.”

We recognize the God-blessed efforts of Walther in the history of our Missouri Synod. Reflecting on this, we do well to think about our life in the church and ask ourselves: Are we following in his footsteps? Is adherence to the Word of God as important to us as it was to Walther? Do we place human reason in subjection to the Word of God? Do we always say “thus saith the Lord”?

How would Walther see our Synod today? How would he address the problems that cause divisions among us? How would he have dealt with the Yankee Stadium affair? What would he say to the Council of Presidents to encourage faithfulness to the Word of God among the pastors of the Synod in their preaching and in their practice? What would he say about the church growth movement? About contemporary worship forms? About women’s ordination? About the Concordia University System? About the Pastoral Leadership Institute? About the financial crises in the Synod? And the many other problems which are causing debate and even division among us?

Granted, Walther lived in a different time from ours. These differences are obvious. Yet, the basic, fundamental problem for people living in any century has not changed. We are still born with original sin; we still need the regeneration given in Holy Baptism; we still need daily repentance; we still need to hear the absolution; we still need the Sacrament of the Lord’s body and blood for the assurance of forgiveness; we still need to hear the saving Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ. We still need, as the old Lutheran Hour sign proclaimed, “A changeless Christ for a changing world.”

So what has changed? If he were a churchman in the Missouri Synod today, Walther might well ask: Why do you place so much emphasis on your convention resolutions, and synodical bylaws, decisions of the Committee on



Constitutional Matters, and decisions of dispute resolution panels? Where is the Word of God in the summary judgments you make to decide issues facing the church? Why do you think that being “user friendly” in your worship forms will “grow” the church? Why do you allow the culture in

which you live to dictate to the church what it should do—isn’t it the other way around—the church is to influence the culture? Why are numbers seemingly more important than faithfulness in preaching the Word and administering the Sacraments according to their institution by Christ?

Walther, the churchman, would encourage us “to fight for the faith once entrusted to the holy people.” “The faith” is something that has been given to us by the Holy Spirit working through God’s Word and the Sacraments. It is not something we can claim as having come from within ourselves, something we decided upon or sought after because it sounded good to us. Neither is it merely an emotional experience. No, “the faith” is a gift from God—the gift which makes it possible for us to receive eternal life in heaven after death. “The faith” is centered in Jesus Christ, the Son of God, Who came according to God’s plan to pay the ransom price God had demanded for sin—your sin and mine—as He suffered and died on the cross at Calvary, then rose again from the dead to prove that God the Father had accepted the sacrifice of His Son for the sins of the world.

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Walther’s primary goal was to give all glory to God, as a humble servant of the Lord. He was one of those distinguished churchmen whom God sends to His Church on earth at various times and in various places to address the needs of the Church in a forceful, yet evangelical manner. Our pastors and our leaders in the church could well follow the example of Walther, keeping before their eyes at all times the Christ-centered Gospel and the integrity of Lutheranism as detailed in our historic Lutheran Confessions.

*Dr. Edwin S. Suelflow is a retired LCMS pastor living in Mequon, Wisconsin. He is also the former President of the South Wisconsin District.*