

Dr. C. F. W. Walther

—An Evangelical Leader in His Synod

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TO SPEAK of Walther's synod is not to suggest that he was the founder of the present Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod. The history of our synod clearly demonstrates that it had its beginning in several separate areas in the United States. Men in each of these areas had proven their interest in sound Lutheranism. Each area furnished leaders, theologians, educators. To give proper credit for the organization of the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod, as it is now called, we would have to speak of the work of a number of great lights in the church.

But this year we are observing the sesquicentennial of the birth of Dr. Carl Ferdinand Wilhelm Walther. It is proper, then, that we direct our attention to his activities in the formation of a soundly Lutheran synod in a land where Lutheranism, generally speaking, was no longer true to its name.

A real contribution to the cause of sound Lutheranism was the publication of Walther's church paper, *Der Lutheraner*. In his prefatory remarks regarding the reason, the purpose, and the content of the church paper he states as one of the objectives that the paper give testimony concerning what is believed and taught in our church. Among the purposes listed are these: 1) To acquaint readers with the doctrine, the treasures, and the history of the Lutheran church; 2) To furnish proof that ours is not a sect but the old true church of Jesus Christ on earth.¹

In the first issue of the paper Walther answers the question, What does it mean to be a Lutheran? The article is polemic in nature. The writer hits at false Lutheranism as it evidenced itself, especially in the East. Walther indicates that he will have no part of it.²

But Walther was not alone in this. Readers of the paper in other states at once wrote to him, encouraging him to continue the fight. Fraternal relations were soon established. Brothers in the faith became close friends. They saw their need of one another and the dangers confronting them if they were to remain inde-

pendent confessors of the faith. And so the synod was organized, so that congregations, which would be in danger of becoming new sects if they stood alone, could unite their efforts in the preservation of the truth.³

Walther's views regarding the purpose of a synod, if one were to be formed, are reflected in the first constitution. Walther felt that the purposes of a synod would be achieved if synod, in addition to recognizing the Word of God, would also recognize all of the confessions of the church, where possible also including the Saxon visitation articles, though he would not wish to bind men's consciences and insist upon the latter. He wished also that in the constitution of the new body all syncretistic operations would be ruled out. Thirdly, the purpose should be especially the maintenance and extension and preservation of the unity and purity of Lutheran doctrine. Fourth, that synod should not especially have the power to judge but should be an advisory body, to which a congregation could take refuge when it needed advice or support. Synod should abstain from any pressure in the calling of pastors.⁴

The comparative value that Walther himself placed on his membership in synod and on his position as pastor of a congregation is clearly indicated in his decision not to attend the sessions of synod while a plague was rampant in St. Louis. He noted that most of those who suffered from the terrible disease remained conscious up to the very last and that here was a real opportunity to visit those who were stricken and to bring them the Gospel and possibly the sacrament. By the time that synod convened, the plague had greatly subsided, so that Walther was able to attend at least a few of the sessions.⁵ I added the last comment so as not to encourage absence from synodical sessions except in cases of real emergency. Walther himself would have been the last to take synod lightly.

As indicated, Walther considered it one of the purposes of synod to maintain, extend, and preserve the unity and purity of Lutheran doctrine. He, therefore, suggested that at every synodical session some time should be devoted to the consideration of doctrine. And in this connection he urges a careful study of the confessional writings of the Lutheran church. His loyalty to these confessions and his conviction that they must be preserved at any

cost we can see from a lengthy article in *Der Lutheraner*, from which I wish to quote at length. The title of the article indicates the spirit in which it was written:

“Why Should We, Even in This Day, Hold Unflinchingly to the Confessional Writings Of Our Evangelical Lutheran Church?”

“‘Beloved, believe not every spirit, but prove the spirits whether they are of God, for many false prophets are gone out into the world.’ That is the complaint of the Apostle St. John in his first Epistle, and so it has been necessary in every age of the Christian church to complain about false prophets. As often as God has permitted the wheat of His pure Word to be sown, so often the enemy has at once caused the tares of false doctrine to be sown between. The grievous result of this has been that in the midst of Christendom a number of sects have arisen which distinguish and separate themselves from one another through the different faiths which they have and confess. Most of these sects have therefore also recorded definite confessions of faith which contain their teachings and through which they separate themselves from others and upon which they have joined together the members of their particular churchly fellowship. Now the books in which such confessions of faith of the different church bodies are recorded are called symbols or symbolical books. It is a Greek word and means as much as standard or emblem. . . . The members of a church group can very easily be distinguished from others by means of the symbols or public confessions of faith of the same, distinguishing those who are for from those who are against his faith. Our church, too, as is well known to our dear readers, has such symbolical books and public confessions. . . . In these symbolical books which in their collection are called the Book of Concord anyone can clearly find just what is taught and believed in our Evangelical Lutheran Church if he wishes to find it. The doctrine contained in this book our first so-called Lutherans very openly confessed before the whole world and then set down in writing for all times. Upon the doctrine contained in these books and upon none other the first Lutherans were united in churchly gatherings. Upon this book of confessions, there-

fore, the Lutheran Church is founded, for through it she has come into being and through it she distinguishes herself from all factions and communions in Christendom. Therefore, he who says, 'I want to be a Lutheran,' confesses thereby and professes himself to the symbolical books and to the doctrine contained in them. And he who says that he wants to be a Lutheran pastor confesses therewith that he not only holds the articles of faith in these books to be true and right but that he will also preach them, defend them and seek to spread them as God gives him grace and power thereto. . . .

"In our time more than in any other, people have become critical against such symbols. From all sides the call is now, 'Away with symbols; they coerce faith. They are a chain upon the spirit and the children's shoes of a past which we must now lay aside in this enlightened age. . . . They are the product of men capable of error; they are colored glasses through which a person sees the Bible and the teachings of his sect. They are polluted channels through which the divine truth is not brought to us in its full purity, but muddied through the mixing of human error. He who holds too strictly to the symbols places the books of men on the level with those of God, yes, he places them above.' That is the cry leveled at us. . . .

"Do we now truly have reason, because of their objection, to let go of our symbols? God forbid, beloved Lutheran brother! These are objections which might well cause one who doesn't know to fall. But if carefully examined we see that they are not valid. The fact that the church expects all of its members to accept the symbols is called the coercion of faith. But who in all the world is forced to become a member of our church? Isn't that left to the individual? Isn't it his own right to join or not to join? And to separate himself from us or to remain with us? Where is the coercion? But just as invalid as is the objection of seeming coercion to faith so invalid is also the reasoning that if a person accepts the man-made symbols of our church in full faith and subjects himself to them he thereby places them on the same level with, yes, in a certain sense even above, the Books of Holy Writ.

"This objection is groundless because we do not believe

in the teachings for this reason that they are contained in the symbols but because they are taken from the Word of God: Not because Luther and other respectable learned men of God believed and taught them but because they agree with Holy Scripture. A true Lutheran does not make the symbols the source and the foundation of his faith. He rather accepts them because they are taken out of the Bible as source, and are founded on the Bible as foundation.

“But some men ask, ‘Aren’t the symbols of the church written by men who are likely to err? Who can depend on them?’ We answer: ‘The question is not here whether the authors of the symbols were men who could err, but rather whether they erred in the teachings which are confessed in these books and have been set down in them.’ We admit very readily that they could err, but we deny the thought that they did err in the articles of faith which they set down. Who could deny that the mode and manner in which the biblical doctrines are confessed in our symbols and are defended in them is a human and therefore not a perfect one? But that the teachings should themselves be human, imperfect and admitting error, that we reject with all earnestness for thereby we would be declaring that God’s Word itself is imperfect and full of errors. . . . Does the Bible doctrine become a doctrine of men when those who are giving witness to it are men? Does the Word of God, when spoken by a mortal sinner, become a changeable wisdom of this world? Oh, then the millions of beloved martyrs who were men who could err would not forever have the truth but would have shed their blood for uncertain opinions and views under nameless martyrdom. Then also the church of Christ, because it consists of men, could never say, ‘We have found the truth.’ Oh, away with such blasphemous skepticism, with such heathenish despair of finding the truth. For this reason the Bible was given to men that they would no longer be without light, without hope, without certainty in this world, but, defying world and hell, could rejoice in firm faith: ‘We have found the truth.’ And just the Church itself should be a pillar and a firm foundation of the truth. (I Tim. 3:15). If nowhere else in the world, then at least in the Church, this most precious of all treasures ought to be found. . . .

"It is not enough that one say that the writers of the Confessions could err, but it is necessary to prove *that* they erred and *where* they erred. How certain we Lutherans can therefore be! For this kind of proof no one has yet offered. They have been able to strike at our Confessions with their reason and with the thoughts of their hearts, but with the Word of God they have never yet been able to refute them. If one were to ask his reason or his heart regarding many of the doctrines, one could say with Nicodemus, 'How could this be?' But never could one object to them as with the symbols of other churches with an 'It is written.' It is true that for three hundred years the Lutheran Church has been accused of insisting too rigidly, too firmly on the very letters of Holy Writ in the symbolical writings, but seldom has anyone dared to say—and never has anyone been able to prove—that she has departed from the Scriptures. If then we would fall away from the teachings of the symbolical writings, then we would not be falling away from the word of men but rather from the Word of God. We would not be denying Luther, but Christ. We would not only cease to be true Lutherans but we would cease to have the right to be called Christians.

"But many will say, 'Granted that your Confessions agree fully with Holy Scripture. Yet you cannot deny that they are still human confessions. Why would you not rather remain with Scripture alone and go back to it as the pure Word of God?'

"To this we would answer as follows: 'It is folly to make a comparison between the Scriptures and the Confessions. The Bible is, so to say, God's confession to us. The symbolical writings are our confessions to God. The Bible is the question of God to men: 'Do you believe My Word?' The symbolical writings are the answer of men: 'Yes, Lord, we believe what You say.' The Bible is the chest in which all treasures of wisdom and the knowledge of God lie hidden. The symbolical writings are the jewel-room in which the Church has deposited, as in a spiritual arsenal, all of the treasures which in the course of hundreds of years with great effort she has drawn and dug out of the treasury of the Bible. The Bible with its teachings is the handwriting of God concerning our salvation, which Satan

always wishes to falsify and declare as unauthentic. The symbolical writings contain the records which have been laid down, from which one can see how the Church has believed these teachings from time to time, and has ever held fast to them. The Bible is the revealed Word of God itself. The symbolical writings, however, are the correct understanding of the Word of God as God has given it to His church. . . .

“Then we should give up these precious Confessions which our fathers have worked out and fought for with such unspeakably difficult sacrifices? . . . We should throw them away as worthless? Would we dissolutely throw away the fruit of the Reformation? the booty of a thousand year long battle of the whole Christian Church of all times? The spiritual inheritance of our spiritual fathers? Would we actually now faithlessly surrender into the hands of our enemies and sacrifice to the indifference of our times that for which countless martyrs shed their blood and which the Church after enduring the most terrible persecutions has as its trophy of victory?

“But men will say, ‘Wouldn’t it still be good to go back to the Bible? Isn’t the Bible enough? If the doctrines of the symbolical writings were taken from the Bible, will the Bible not be sufficient then to permit any and everyone to find them even without the symbols?’ We answer, ‘To hold fast to the true symbolical writings is actually no different than to go back to the Bible for the symbolical writings are nothing but the Confession of the Church for the Bible. How would a person hope to find the light singlehandedly after which Christendom had sought for many hundreds of years? Will God give us His Holy Spirit in these last times to find that which God has already permitted His Church to find, if we do not accept that which has already been found, but desire rather to seek it out ourselves? No, he who will not as a humble student accept the pure doctrine from the Church to which God gave it 1800 years ago and to which He again gloriously revealed it 300 years ago, to him God will not give the light and grace to find it himself.’

“God dispenses His gifts in different ways. He does not give all to everyone, nor does He give all in every age. He:

gives to every Christian and to every age their particular measure. Therefore a Christian should use the gifts of others and those in a later generation should use those of a previous one. Yes, it is God's holy, wise and saving will that men who form a great earthly family, their later generations stemming from previous ones, should also be a great spiritual family. These younger members are begotten by the older. Therefore Paul says in the name of all believers concerning the Church, 'She is the mother of us all. . . .' The Church today should therefore be in a relation of daughter to mother and we should all be children. The faith of the ancient church should be the faith also of the living church. Her doctrine, her teaching, her confession should be our doctrine, teaching and confession. Her victory over the enemies of the truth should be our victory. Her treasures in knowledge should be our possession.

"O let us then, dearly beloved, fellow believers, be on guard against the thought of those who refuse to build on the building of the past, but would begin with something new. Let us bear in mind as the Apostle writes to the Ephesians in the fourth chapter that there is one body, one faith, one baptism, so also one true church and one right doctrine which should not now for the first time be found but always was and will continue unchanged until the end of days so that all *new* doctrines and *new* churches are *false* doctrines and *false* churches. For the church has the promise, 'My words which I have put in thy mouth shall not depart out of thy mouth, nor out of the mouth of thy seed, nor out of the mouth of thy seed's seed, says the Lord, from henceforth and forever.' (Isaiah 59:21). . . . Let us hold fast to her confessions as being our own. Thus we place ourselves in membership with all of the children of God, the witnesses of the truth. Thus we prove that we are of equal birth with our faithful fathers. Thus we join ourselves to the true church of all times and of all places. Thus we take part in the victory of all true contenders of the unadulterated Word of God and are fellow-heirs of the full blessings of the Reformation . . ."6

Such a clear voice needs to be heard in the church today. The Confessions must be the basis for all our teaching, not as a source of doctrine, but as a trustworthy expression of the doctrine of God's

holy Word. Some may feel the need of a more timely document. I personally am convinced that the Book of Concord speaks more clearly to any and every problem in the church than does any document drawn up since the days of the Reformation. With that I would not rule out other documents. But I submit that documents written today should clearly indicate their agreement with the Book of Concord, not merely in a general statement, but on each point of doctrine. That will, under God, give us the stability which the church enjoyed in the days of Walther.

With that I do not wish to give the impression that there were no doctrinal difficulties in synod in Walther's day. There were. And some of them involved the schools. In 1870 Walther wrote a very frank letter to Dr. Sihler, President of the Fort Wayne college, in which he pleaded:

"O that for God's sake the objectives in Fort Wayne will be to make Christians of the students and to prepare them for theological studies! That by no means a humanistic spirit become evident with its aversion to the spiritual and to Christian simplicity and humility! Not long ago an older student confessed to me that he had become fully paganized. We must be especially careful and painstakingly conscientious with regard to the collateral reading done by our students. What a well-fortified Christian can read to strengthen himself and to sharpen his thinking, is often deadly poison for the youth. Be careful when replacing the books for leisure reading which were burned, that you buy only what is good. Pardon my frankness. Your Walther."⁷

No one will deny that such advice is always in place. We can so easily become intellectual in our approach to the study of theology. To quote Luther, Walther, or Pieper in a day when Barth, Brunner, and Tillich are recognized as leading lights, stamps men as Missourians. But that is a no more shameful label to wear than was the name "Christian" in Antioch in the first century and "Lutheran" in Germany in the 16th century.

To quote Walther once more: "Our treasure is not our greatness, but our unity in the doctrine and our practice in the cure of souls and in church government. If our synod no longer enjoys this treasure, then it is bound to go under and will be swallowed up by the American Lutheran communions that are indigenous here."⁸

Wherefore, dear brother in Christ, "Hold that fast, which thou hast, that no man take thy crown." (Revelation 3:11).

NOTES

1. Carl Ferdinand Wilhelm Walther, "Foreword," *Der Lutheraner*, I, 1 (Sept. 7, 1844), 1.
2. *Ibid.*, I, 2 (Sept. 23, 1844), 2.
3. *Briefe von C. F. W. Walther an seine Freunde, Synodalgenossen und Familienglieder*, ed. Ludwig Ernst Fuerbringer (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1915), I, 6.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 16.
5. *Ibid.*, pp. 577ff.
6. Carl Ferdinand Wilhelm Walther, "Why Should We, Even in this Day, Hold Unflinchingly to the Confessional Writings of our Evangelical Lutheran Church?" *Der Lutheraner*, V, 11 (Jan. 23, 1849), 81 ff.
7. *Briefe, op. cit.*, II, 176.
8. *Ibid.*, p. 35.