

8-1-1939

Festival Address at Academic Service

Theo. Buenger

Concordia Seminary, St. Louis

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholar.csl.edu/ctm>



Part of the [Practical Theology Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Buenger, Theo. (1939) "Festival Address at Academic Service," *Concordia Theological Monthly*. Vol. 10 , Article 61.

Available at: <https://scholar.csl.edu/ctm/vol10/iss1/61>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Print Publications at Scholarly Resources from Concordia Seminary. It has been accepted for inclusion in Concordia Theological Monthly by an authorized editor of Scholarly Resources from Concordia Seminary. For more information, please contact seitzw@csl.edu.

Festival Address at the Academic Service

Commemorating the Centennial of the Founding of Concordia
Seminary, St. Louis, June 3, 1939

Ps. 118:23: This is the Lord's doing; it is marvelous in our eyes.

FELLOW-STUDENTS AND FELLOW-CHRISTIANS:

This text refers, in the first place, to the founding of the Church General on the Corner-stone Jesus Christ, then to the founding of any part of the true Church at any time. Thus we may apply it also to the Church that was built in this country by the Saxon immigrants.

We are not at the beginning of the celebration of this event; for already during the past year we heard and read a great deal about it. We have also heard criticisms about what has been said. It is these criticisms I wish to discuss today. While I shall touch only on such as I have heard regarding my own addresses, I nevertheless think that some objections apply also to the discourses of other speakers. The criticisms have been decidedly constructive as far as I am concerned because they have driven me to reexamine my position, restate it, and bring out facts that I had passed over intentionally or otherwise.

I

The most frequent censure was that not enough credit had been given to Martin Stephan. The tragic end of his career has induced many of the centenary speakers to pass over his achievements quickly. Still every one of them would apply the words of our text to the talents and initial activities of this man and give him credit for really bringing about the emigration. I need not describe the religious atmosphere of Saxony and Germany in general at the beginning of the last century; you all know it. Stephan exerted a telling influence toward true Christianity long before the emigration, and upon a much wider circle in Germany than that which left later. When the British Missionary Society and the British Bible Society had brought a religious revival in some parts of Germany by forming the German Christian societies, it was due to Stephan's influence together with that of Count Detlev von Einsiedel, Secretary of State in Saxony, that these German societies became independent of the Reformed English influence. (It was already at that time, just as it is now, a part of the policy of Downing Street to use the Church for spreading and maintaining the British hegemony.) Furthermore, it must be ascribed to the influence of Stephan that these societies, rather its members, separated themselves from the emotionalism and mysticism of the Moravians (of the Herrnhuter) and from the degeneration and pietism of the State Church, in short, that they were made Lu-

therans again. I ought to mention that the influence of the Moravians on our founders was not inconsiderable. According to an unpublished letter of G. H. Loeber, written to Goehring December 24, 1820, he visited one of their religious communities, that of Ebersdorf, and he is very emphatic in the praise of these people — "Es ist mir, als haette ich aus der Fremde die Heimat besucht." Was it not Stephan's influence that later set him right, as it did many others?

One instance may be cited to show how far Stephan's influence for orthodox Christianity extended. When he published his *Postille* in 1825, he had about 500 advance subscribers from all walks of life in about a hundred different places throughout Germany. How he became the spiritual adviser of some of the Saxon fathers I shall not repeat here; his guidance of them and of hundreds of other men and women must ever be to us "the Lord's doing" and "marvelous in our eyes." He certainly had the characteristics of a leader. In the first place, a leader must have a worth-while idea; in the second place, he must be able to convince others that his idea is good and to induce them to accept it. Stephan had such a talent; he succeeded in having his idea accepted, not by a group of "nitwits" but by men who themselves had the quality of leadership and by several hundred sturdy independent professionals and other laymen. He must have been equipped with other great gifts of mind and with remarkable energy. I have been acquainted with six of his descendants. I remember his son Martin, I was a lifelong friend of two of his grandsons, I had three of his great-grandsons as my pupils; if these were chips of the old block, this must have had an exceptionally fine grain.

As early as the middle of the eighteenth century German churchmen had pointed to the United States as a possible refuge and haven for the Lutheran Church. Settlements of Lutherans had already been founded in the Eastern States. To quote but one of them, Fresenius wrote in the year 1756: "Let us pray for a better planting and extending of the kingdom of God in America; let us in every way help to increase its upbuilding in order that perhaps in time this distant continent may become a refuge and salvation for the few believers when God chastises the European Christians with severe punitive justice because of their ingratitude." I do not know to what extent these and similar words influenced Stephan, but after long consideration, after eliminating Australia with the motivation that he did not care to entrust their fortunes to England, the newly acquired Louisiana Purchase was chosen as goal of the contemplated trek. We acknowledge the wisdom of Stephan's choice and gratefully praise the marvelous doing of God, who raised him up to lead the band of emigrants.

II

The next objection frequently heard is this: You give too much credit to Walther and the Saxons. I answer: No, we do not. In the leadership of Walther we see again the doings of the Lord, marvelous in our eyes. In spite of all that has been written and said we cannot realize the disillusion, the disappointment, the frantic desperation, that came over the colonists when the crozier of Stephan proved crooked and the alb spotted and the seal of the "bischoeffliche Kirche zu Stephansburg" had been engraved in vain. The leading laymen, Vehse, Marbach, and others, returned to Europe, thereby intensifying the impact of the disaster. The clergymen were perplexed and helpless; they were not clear in their minds as to what was right and wrong; they were conscience-stricken; some of the ministers wanted to resign and return to Europe. Loeber, the senior after Stephan, thought he could not administer the holy office. He wrote in erring conscience pitiful confessions of sin to the Duke of Altenburg and to his former congregation and was willing to accept a call from there. The emigration was loudly declared to be the work of the devil and not of God.

Then C. F. W. Walther stepped into the breach. "That we emigrated is not the sin," he said; "we rather sinned in waiting too long." In those trying days of reconstruction he set forth with convincing clarity the right of the Christian local congregation to establish the holy ministry. He showed how to organize a church in a country the government of which did not interfere in matters of religion. For forty years I have made special studies of the history of this immigration. I have tried to see how it was possible for Walther to gain an understanding of the correct principles of church government. All factors, his antecedents and his environment, were conspiring against him. Germany did not know the proper form of church government, Stephan had sinned against it, the Roman Catholics and the Reformed churches in America had a wrong conception of it. One must admit that Vehse, Marbach, and Fischer made valuable contributions in their *Protestations-schrift* toward the clarification of this doctrine; but even here error was lurking under truth, and they themselves deserted what they thought an unseaworthy ship. There is only one solution, one explanation: God gave Walther his understanding. We marvel at His doing.

And Walther stayed at the head of the Church for fifty years. We are not giving him too much credit when we say this. We shall always acknowledge the doings of the Lord in giving him splendid collaborators. With him were eminent minds and self-sacrificing Christians who were eminently equipped intellectually and cul-

turally: Loeber, Fuerbringer, Keyl, Gruber, Schieferdecker, Buegger, Brohm; then those giants in thought and deed Wyneken and Sihler; the array of the Loehe intellectuals: Craemer, Sievers, Roebbelen, Graebner, Hattstaedt, Cloeter, and later Schaller. But you will find, if you take this matter under scrutiny, that Walther was the leader and remained the leader. Some of Loehe's men had been coached by Loehe to oppose Walther's teachings on church government. He wrote in his book *Die kirchliche Lage Bayerns*: "In a way fraught with danger they [the Missourians] often seem to emphasize principles of Luther in regard to the rights of the congregation by not only publishing words of Luther *not written for American conditions* but also their own ideas, which do not foster the love of liberty of a Christian but the American hankering after license. . . . I fear some day a rogue, basing his work on many expressions of Luther, will write a demon's tract entitled 'Luther a Democrat.'" Note the pun on demon and democrat.

Some of the men I have mentioned, fine independent characters, were over here for the express purpose of convincing Walther of the errors of his way. They valiantly defended Loehe in extended debates but were before long won by Walther. They receded from Loehe's position and stood faithfully by Walther until the end.

I wish we had time to discuss how the question of the millennium* was treated by Walther; how he won over leading men of the Buffalo Synod (Hochstetter, v. Rohr, Brand, Wollaeger); how he was "the founder of the Synodical Conference," to use the words of the Synodical Conference's *epikedeion* of Walther; and how he brought the predestination controversy to a successful end. You will not criticize me if I draw a parallel between the role he played for a lifetime and the role played by Luther in translating the Bible. Melancthon, Cruciger, Jonas, Roerer, Foerster, and Bugenhagen gave their opinion on the rendering of a word or a phrase, but Luther had the pen in his hand.

III

The third criticism I heard is this: It would be better not to make so much of the Saxon immigration just now, when we have again that far-flung propaganda against everything German and when the anti-German sentiment is overwhelming many of our fellow-citizens. But just at this time I would shout from the rooftops the record of the Saxons: They rendered not only to God the things that are God's but gave to Caesar the things that are Caesar's. One of the Presidents of the United States said that the Saxon im-

* Millennialism was broadly taught by Stephan in his sermon on Ascension Day, and Loeber had a slight infection of it in his *Explanation of the Augsburg Confession*.

migration was not so well known as it deserved to be known, that a parallel between the coming of the Saxons and the advent of the Pilgrim Fathers could be drawn, and that from this small beginning a great community had developed which had contributed greatly to the material and spiritual welfare and development of our country.

The Saxons were beyond dispute culturally far above the average of the 68,000 immigrants of the year 1839. Consider, for instance, their interest in education. Even during the trip in river boats on the Elbe and on the barks sailing across the Atlantic their children received systematic instruction. This schooling was not interrupted in the first distressful months in America but was carried on while the forests were cleared and the log houses built; regular common schools were opened at once in Altenburg, St. Louis, and elsewhere. The Pilgrim Fathers who landed in 1620 had no common schools at all but enjoined upon the parents the duty of instructing their children in the three R's and the catechism and placed the same obligation upon the masters with respect to apprentices. Secondary schools they opened later, beginning with Boston in 1635 and ending with Roxbury in 1643. In the last-named year there appeared in London a pamphlet, *New England's First-fruits*, in which we read:

"After God had carried us safe to New England
and [after] we had builded our homes
Provided necessaries for our livelihood
Reared convenient places for God's worship
And settled the civil government
One of the next things we longed for
And looked after, was to advance learning
And perpetuate it to posterity
Dreading to leave an illiterate ministry
To the churches when our present ministers
Shall lie in the dust."

Not after this, that, and another thing but in as many weeks as it took those Pilgrim Fathers years the Saxons opened that log-cabin secondary school, in which a course in esthetics was given and the students recited the psalms in Hebrew. — Anent the gaging of the cultural standing of these men, one should mention their fine feeling for the beauties of language in poetry; I think they were children of the Goethe-Schiller age in this respect. The fine poems of C. F. W. Walther are best known; O. H. Walther was the most prolific and, I think, best poet; a large number of unprinted poems of his are still extant. Buenger composed Latin poems until the end of his life. Loeber wrote lyrics of delicate beauty. The first poem published in the *Lutheraner* is from him, a dialog between a wanderer and the migrating birds. I thought I might bring

it closer to the emotional understanding of the younger generation if I would translate a few stanzas:

The Wanderer to the Migrating Birds

Now, welcome, you wanderers on air-lanes,
You hosts in formation on high;
'Way over the plains you are soaring;
Uplifted, you powerful fly.
You hasten with fast-speeding wingings
From North to South, to your home,
And bring to us colorful autumn,
Loud calling: The summer is gone.

Answer:

Yes, listen, you people beneath us,
Who understand this our call;
Swift days of your years are all flying.
The spring of your life turns to fall.
Just as in fast-speeding battalions
You now see us coming and go,
Thus passes your life in a hurry,
And, as we, you also fly so.

Wanderer:

But tell me, you travel companions,
I wondering ask of you now:
I, pilgrim upon this here earthland,
Know when and whereto I must go;
But who may you cranes be a-teaching
The straight lanes of your homeward flight,
And then when so glad you are reaching
Again us in spring's warm delight?

Birds:

We travel under His commandings
Who made us in wisdom so great
That we without your understandings
Know well how to take to our gait.
Ay, crane, turtle-dove, and the swallow
Observe their time when they should come,
But God's humans care not to follow
When He calls them back to His home.

Wanderer:

So travel, rejoicing companions,
Far South to the climate so grand.
May heavenly Father conduct us
From here to the God-promised land!
Then shall we be caught up together
In the clouds from the wide-open grave
And fly in an instant to Father
Henceforth to be with Him all safe.

These men were indeed loyal Americans. Here is an unpublished prayer written by O. H. Walther and used in Trinity

Church every Sunday during the first year after the Saxons' arrival in St. Louis:

"O Lord, heavenly Father, almighty Ruler of the universe, who lookest from Thy throne on all children of men, we pray Thee fervently, regard favorably and bless Thy servant, the President of the United States, and all in authority in our country. Fill them with the grace of Thy Holy Spirit that they may always do Thy will and walk in Thy ways. Clothe them with the abundance," etc.

These were indeed ideal citizens; they were no tax-dodgers. Some years ago I asked for a report on the criminology of Perry Co. No major crime had been committed all these years. There was no need of a jail, and the divorce courts were idle. Into the pages of history we can write that these men cannot be accused of divided loyalty, and they did not dream of making a little Germany, with Pan-Germanistic aspirations, out of a part of America. They cut loose entirely from the German civil and church government. Our ministers never exchanged pulpits with those of the State Church in Germany. The philosophy of Fichte, Schopenhauer, and Nietzsche and the theology of Harnack did not hold them spellbound, while it did fill with awe many leaders of the American churches and undermined the foundations of Christianity among them. They did not grow hysterical with enthusiasm when a representative of the German reigning house came across the ocean (I am not insinuating that other nations do). Walther refused to accept the degree of D.D. from a German university. I need not tell you that Walther's Fourth of July address, delivered in one of those early years (1853), deserves a place of honor among patriotic orations; for faultless presentation of principles and lofty American sentiments it has no superior.

But why did the Saxons — if they were such good Americans — keep the German language as long as they did? They wished to give to our country men who were bilingual with all psychological and cultural advantages that such proficiency implies. They pointed to European borderlands in which the people are able to speak two languages, as is the case, for instance, in Switzerland. True, they did not amalgamate as readily with their fellow-Americans as they might have done had they given up their language sooner. A student of ethnology pointed out to me that a group of superior culture does not mix as readily as a less well-cultured group. While I would not think of saying that no groups in our country were their equal in culture, I do say that they were far above the cultural level of the average immigrant and probably above that of most Americans with whom they came in contact, for an unusually long time.

IV

But this leads us up to what is perhaps the most common criticism of the Saxon fathers, one that has been dinned into my ears many a year: Why did they not start English work sooner? Why did they preach the Gospel in German only? It never was their policy to preach in German only. One of the silliest slanders I ever heard is that our fathers said the Word of God could not be preached in English and retain its purity. They were not such shallow thinkers and not so ignorant of the universality of the pure Gospel and real Christianity. I read in notes of O. H. Walther that were jotted down not later than 1840, in which he mentions it as a most urgent desideratum that at least an excerpt from the Symbolical Books be made in the English language. In 1852 and later Synod discussed the establishing of an English college or at least an English academy in Fort Wayne and got in contact with the citizens of Fort Wayne in the matter, stating "that it was self-evident that such an institution would be needed." In 1857 guiding principles were adopted by our Synod for the founding of English congregations, and dismissal of well-indoctrinated German members to them was recommended. The reason that this advice had meager results and that not more English congregations were established is this, that our Synod did not have enough clergymen to take care of the German Protestant immigrants, whom they were best fitted to serve. In the decennium of 1850 to 1860 two million Germans came to our shores. The German Methodists, under the leadership of Nast in Cincinnati, gathered hundreds of thousands of German Lutherans into their fold, also the Evangelicals in Kentucky. Other denominations reaped a similar harvest. Even as late as the eighties some of our *Reiseprediger* had dozens of places to serve. I myself had thirty in a territory where there are now more than thirty self-sustaining congregations and as many pastors. After a year or so I received a call to an established congregation. I asked Dr. Walther's advice in the matter, and he urged me not to accept the call because our Synod *then was only beginning to catch up in its effort of providing for the tidal influx of immigrants into the frontiers*. Even in the nineties the task of the College of Presidents was a different task by far from what it is today. When they assembled, they did not have to contend with the problem of providing charges for the candidates, but of providing candidates for all the congregations and mission-stations that were to be supplied. Many a year more than one third of the congregations was eliminated from the list. — While we did not do all that might have been done, we are nevertheless justified in claiming that we did supply the spiritual needs of the German Lutheran immigrants. That has been *our historic mission*. It was the Lord's doing that our Synod provided, so to say, for its own household first.

V

Our work in the German language is now almost over. During the next century our task must be to keep with the Church those English-speaking Lutherans whose forefathers we gathered when they still spoke German, but also to gather other English-speaking people into the Lutheran Church, many of them, several millions. Can we do it?

That brings us to the next criticism, the last I shall discuss. It is said that we Missourians are laboring under a delusion if we think that our uncompromising doctrinal standpoint and our strict antilodge and antiunionistic practise can be maintained in the future. But what is the purpose of all this study of history, and why do we marvel at the Lord's doing in the past century if we now deliberately want to abandon everything that the Lord has blessed so abundantly in the past? Is history to bring a curse upon our head? Will our centenary songs stand up as witnesses against us on the Day of Judgment? What has been done in the past is not important as compared with what lies before us. If we are sincere in confessing that we see the Lord's hand in the history of the past one hundred years, we shall not lack courage to uphold the principles for which we have fought; we shall fear no obstacles, no reverses; we shall yield to no temptation; we shall be ready for every sacrifice.

What is the world's greatest need today? That is the burning question. How manifestly wrong are the answers of the average author, editor, columnist, of the philosophers and scientists of our day, of the American pulpit! Do you know what the world's greatest need is? The philosophy, the *Lebensanschauung*, the religion, which the Missouri Synod has had these hundred years and which it *has to this day*. If the ailments of the world, if the ailments of the United States, are to be healed, this is a sure remedy.

It is one of the greatest privileges of my life to stand today before this body of seminarians and to exhort you to continue in the ways of the Saxon forefathers. It would be utterly abhorrent to me if any one of you should think *we must trim our sails, we must change our course*. I cannot believe that, when our two-hundredth anniversary will be celebrated, the same fate will be recorded of us that is recorded of the Swedish Lutheran settlement on the Delaware: In 1838, 200 years after the immigration of the Swedes, only one pastor had kept even the name Lutheran. His six associates were Episcopalians; only one congregation had kept the name Lutheran. A few years later this pastor died, and the name Lutheran was dropped by his successor and his congregation. And last year, at the tercentenary of the founding of the Swedish settlement, the president of the Swedish Lutheran Seminary and

the Bishop of Sweden met in the selfsame church with the Episcopalian bishop to celebrate — what? Well, I presume the death of the Lutheran church that had occurred there a hundred years before.

We of the second and third generations, now fast passing away, stand before you and ask you to forgive us all shortcomings of our life and of our church-work; but we assure you that we have kept undefiled the great treasure delivered to us by the fathers. We entreat you, we implore you, to keep that Gospel which was delivered to you in its truth and purity and to defend it against all foes, especially against rationalism and Liberalism, to carry the torch of truth in this ever-increasing darkness, under ever-increasing demands on you, until the end, when we shall glorify your administration unto the body of Christ with the words, "This is the Lord's doing; it is marvelous in our eyes." **THEO. BUENGER**

Predigtentwürfe für die Evangelien der Thomastus- Perikopenreihe

Neunter Sonntag nach Trinitatis

Matth. 14, 22—34

Welch verschiedenartige Vorstellungen und Hoffnungen vom Messias hatte doch das Volk! Von wie wenigen wurde Jesus als der rechte Messias erkannt! Das gilt heute noch. Den rechten Jesum erkennt man nur zu selten. Wie viele halten ihn für einen großen Propheten, Wegweiser, Märtyrer usw., nicht aber für den Sünderheiland! Viele wollen auch nicht zugeben, daß er der rechte, der wahre Helfer sei.

Jesus ist der rechte Helfer

1. Er lehrt uns, daß das Geistliche, nicht das Irdische, die Hauptsache sei
2. Er zeigt selbst den rechten Wert des Gebets
3. Er sieht unsere Not und hilft uns

1

Jesus wollte mit seinen Jüngern allein sein, aber das Volk gab ihm keine Gelegenheit dazu, Matth. 14, 13; Mark. 6, 33. Weil er ihr Elend erkannte, hielt er ihnen eine lange Predigt („es jammerte ihn“, Mark. 6, 34). Er heilte auch ihre Kranken, Matth. 14, 14. Die Hauptsache aber war die Predigt. Das war das eine, das not ist, Luk. 10, 42. Darauf folgte die wunderbare Speisung der Fünftausend.

Das Wunder hatte auf das Volk einen gewaltigen Eindruck gemacht. Aber die so wunderbar Gespeisten gaben nun eine verkehrte