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The Altenburg Debate

In an evaluation of Professor Polack's book *The Story of C. F. W. Walther*, which appeared a few years ago, the review editor of the *Theologische Quartalschrift* includes the following remarks: "Important and soul-racking though the later controversies were, they dwindle when compared with the difficulties of Walther and the Saxon immigrants as they came to a head in Altenburg. In Altenburg life and death, faith and despair, hung in the balance. In the later affairs it was Walther firmly grounded in the truth and unshaken in his faith who waged the battles, although he did not succeed in convincing his opponents. He indeed ever fought the error heart and soul, yet his own faith was not stirred up to the deepest depths as was the case in Altenburg. And in spite of the smaller proportions externally when compared with the later controversies, the Altenburg Debate was of most far-reaching consequences. One shudders to think what course Lutheran church history in America might have taken if Walther had not carried the day in Altenburg." (Vol. 32:303.)

That this estimate of the Altenburg Debate is correct, that, as another historian puts it, the outcome of the debate "saved the entire movement from disorganization," will be evident to every unbiased student of history who scans the pages of the diaries and other accounts which present a picture of those momentous days. While we encounter a few difficulties in harmonizing the records of Winter, Fischer, Vehse, Schieferdecker, Koestering, and Walther, it is by no means impossible to present a comprehensive and historically correct account of the events which led up to the Altenburg Debate and of its consequences with regard to the entire history of Lutheranism in the Middle West and even in all America.

Much has been said and written in the last few years about the *physical hardships* endured by the Saxon immigrants during the summer of 1839 and even during 1840. The descriptions given

by G. Guenther, Frederick Ferdinand Winter, the Loebers (Christiana and Gotthold Heinrich), and Mrs. C. F. W. Walther (at that time still Emilie Buenger), agree substantially with that offered by Schieferdecker, from whose book we quote: "Relatively much severer trials [namely, than those endured by the Saxons in St. Louis] struck the congregation in Perry County. Nothing was in order here, for so many people practically had no shelter; only in haste large common sheds or camps were erected, whose possession the families shared as well as this could be done and in which many were obliged to spend even the next winter. Land had been bought, but no one knew what was his property. At first there was a communal management (*Kommunwirtschaft*); but this had to be discontinued because the credit treasury (*Kreditkasse*) had been exhausted. Not only the poorer but also the wealthier ones faced need in view of the approaching winter. The fevers peculiar to the climate soon made their appearance and caused terrible ravages, a fact which was intensified by the lack of sufficient shelter, conveniences, and other necessities of human life as well as by the hardships and labors under a burning sun, the danger of which was not yet appreciated. The new population was soon decimated, death claiming the strongest people; others lay sick with the fever for weeks and months, lacking the most necessary care, because those who would gladly have done the nursing were themselves ill. The present writer remembers that in a rude frame-house on the bank of the Mississippi not only the lower story but the upper story as well was filled with sick people, who, in addition to the heat of the fever, languished with the oppressively hot atmosphere; he remembers that in the following autumn, in one part of the colony, called Seelitz, there was not one of the buildings which had been erected in haste out of logs and in part had to house several families that was not filled with several sick persons suffering with severe cases of fever. The buildings were literally hospitals, and often there was hardly any one in a position to dispense the most necessary care to the sick ones." (P. 15 f.)

But the *spiritual tribulations* which came upon the colony, chiefly in consequence of the false teaching of Stephan, were even more severe and dangerous. The tenets held by him and defended, in part, with great vehemence and bitterness, were laid down in a manuscript bearing the title "Principles of an Ecclesiastical Constitution as It is Prescribed in the Word of God and the Symbolical Writings of the Evangelical Lutheran Church and as It Actually Existed in the Apostolic Church in the First Centuries." The following points are of interest in this connection: "1. The ministry, unlike any other office, is immediately instituted by God,

transmitted by our Lord Jesus Christ to the apostles and by these continued (*fortgepflanzt*) in the manner commanded in the Word of God, i. e., through ordination, until our time. 2. Men cannot transmit this office; God alone can do it, and He does it through the instrumentality of the servants of His Word, who have this office in the manner referred to. . . . 4. Only through the office the grace of God is offered, through the means of grace of preaching, of the Sacraments, and of the cure of souls, through admonitions and threats, and the shepherding of the flock of Christ, and the keys for binding and loosing. 5. The office continues even if no one accepts the preaching of the Word. Those who accept preaching form the flock of Christ and, together with the office, the Church. 6. This office alone has to watch for the maintenance of the pure doctrine, for the best interests of the Church. Questions, and specifically questions concerning heresies, which have reference to considerations of doctrine, are therefore to be decided only by the servants of the Word. 7. In the same way all decisions concerning the liturgy are to emanate only from the office. However, without the consent of the lay congregation no changes may be made in a liturgy as once introduced. 8. In synodical meetings only servants of the Word have full membership (*Sitz und Stimme*). Laymen are indeed also added, but only as witnesses and listeners (*Konzipienten*). . . . 15. Every layman has the liberty to instruct and to edify himself through the reading of pertinent literature, and no one may hinder him by the application of external force; but he must not forget that he is herein to be guided by the advice of his pastor." (Koesterling, p. 37 f.)

Naturally the reaction to these unscriptural sentiments was bound to find its expression. Some of the leading laymen of the colony were particularly vehement in their opposition, namely, Marbach, Vehse, and Jaekel (or: Jaekel). But there were others whose misgivings were almost as serious, men like Sproede, Barthel, the former candidate for the ministry Kluegel, and even Pastor Buerger of the village Seelitz, who even resigned his charge after having issued a treatise in which he expressed his scruples with reference to the entire matter. Treatises were, as a matter of fact, written on both sides of the controversy, one by Loeber, in which he attempted to analyze the whole move of Stephanism with a view of renouncing it, others, in a spirit of pronounced bitterness, by the "Berliner" Sproede and by Magister Wege. The most scholarly and comprehensive discussion from the party opposing the pastors came from the pen of Vehse, whose treatise *Public Protestation*, etc., was later included in his book *Die Stephanische Auswanderung nach Amerika*. His book presented the following points: "Chapter I: Testimonies Concerning the Privileges of

Congregations over against the Clergy in Matters of Religion and of the Church. 1. Scope of these rights. First privilege: Appointment, calling, installing, and removing of preachers. 2. Second privilege: Superintending, judging, and reproving preachers. 3. Third privilege: Superintending, judging, and reproving the members of the congregation. 4. Fourth privilege: Watching over, and judging, the doctrine. 5. Fifth privilege: The supreme decision in matters of religion and the Church. 6. Sixth privilege: The supreme decision in all private controversies which come before the congregation. 7. Seventh privilege: The authority to appear in the councils with the same right as the ministers. 8. Eighth privilege: Application of the Office of the Keys in controversial and important cases, especially where excommunication is concerned. 9. Ninth privilege: The power to regulate adiaphora [matters indifferent], that is, to arrange the entire liturgy and the ceremonies and to establish the ordinances of the Church. 10. Tenth privilege: Preferment in honor before the ministers. 11. The Papacy came into being because these privileges [rights] were not acknowledged. 12. In the Protestant churches these privileges have likewise been disregarded. 13. The complaints of Protestant ministers that their station did not enjoy enough honor and preference are unjustified. 14. The rights of the congregations have been given to them by God; hence they are sacred and inviolable, and the congregations are not to be persuaded to give them up and to delegate them to the ministers. 15. The maintenance of the ancient spiritual priesthood is to be insisted upon as the main bulwark against the reestablishment of papal authority.—

Chapter II. Testimonies against the False System of Stephan, according to which the Congregations are Disregarded and Oppressed. 1. Testimonies concerning the Church. 2. Testimonies concerning the government of the Church. 3. Testimonies against the *ecclesia repraesentativa* [the Church as represented by the ministers]. 4. Testimonies against the episcopal polity, especially against the establishment of a hierarchy. 5. Testimonies concerning the office of the ministry. 6. Testimonies concerning the pastoral care; its exercise and its boundaries.—

Chapter III. Testimonies of Luther and Our Private Opinion Concerning the Legality of the Emigration. This last chapter culminated in the statement: "According to our opinion, which indeed we do not force upon any one, the Stephanite emigration is not the work of God but rather the work of the devil, a work of falsehood and deception." The body of this Protestation is dated at St. Louis, Mo., September 19, 1839, with an addendum dated November 14, 1839. It is signed by Dr. Carl Eduard Vehse, Heinrich Ferdinand Fischer, and Gustav Jaekel.

It is evident that Vehse in this document placed his finger on various sore spots and pointed out some errors of which all the pastors who had followed Stephan were guilty. This fact was openly acknowledged by Pastors Loeber, Keyl, Buerger, and the two Walthers in a declaration drawn up at Wittenberg, Perry County, and dated November 20, 1839. In their great humility the pastors did not at that time point out the obvious mistakes which had crept into the arguments of Vehse and his companions, but acknowledged their own shortcomings in the most unequivocal manner in the following statements: "To us, the Evangelical Lutheran pastors, a document of protest (*Protestationsschrift*) has been sent by Doctor Vehse, Mr. H. F. Fischer, and Mr. Jaekel, dated September 19 and November 9 of the current year, wherein we are charged with attempting to force the 'false papistical and sectarian hierarchical system of Stephan' upon our congregations and still continue to adhere to it.

"In answer to this we are obliged once more, as we have long ago publicly and privately stated, with deep shame of heart, to make the confession that we unconsciously permitted ourselves to be used as tools to assist in carrying out the hierarchical designs of Stephan, as whereby indeed the congregation was hindered in reaching the free exercise of many important privileges which pertain to it.

"However, as it has, from the first moment when the mystery of iniquity in Stephan by God's gracious guidance was made manifest to us, been our serious endeavor correctly to understand the net of lies which was woven about us and to set ourselves and our congregations free from it, so we can confidently testify before the omniscient God and His congregation that we now all the more despise and execrate that and every other kind of impious priestly lordship and tyranny of souls, since we have received more and more light concerning it.

"We hereby, then, in no way conceal the sins which we formerly committed, of which we had in every way made ourselves guilty, and we pray God that He would not pass judgment upon us; those, however, who—and that with a bitterness which is only too evident—wish to burden us with the accusation that we even at present are partakers of those sins may see to it whether they are in a position to justify the condemnation which they have pronounced upon us.

"But whatsoever of false leaven we also in the future may really find in ourselves, may God help us to purge it faithfully at all times, even if our attention should first have to be drawn to it by others.

"As for the rest, we declare that we have unanimously aban-

done an episcopal form of church polity, as planned, although in accordance with the Word of God and the example of the ancient Church, yet for the sake of peace and in order to obviate, as much as in us lies, all mistrust.

"We shall in every way diligently assist our congregations both to reach the right consciousness and to lead them to the proper exercise of their privileges, and to this end we bespeak for ourselves and for all our hearers grace and wisdom, love and faithfulness, power and blessing, from the good hand of God and of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen. Wittenberg, Perry County, November 20, 1839." (Vehse, 151 ff.)

That this deep humiliation on the part of the pastors was not a mere gesture appears from a letter written by Pastor C. F. W. Walther on May 4, 1840, to his elder brother Otto Hermann, who was pastor of the "Saxon" congregation in St. Louis. In it we find the following statements: "The chief questions with which we are now concerned are these: Are our congregations Christian-Lutheran congregations, or are they heretical bands, sects? Have they power to call and to excommunicate? Are we pastors, or are we not? Are our calls valid? Do we still belong over in Germany, especially Pastor Loeber, who did not even get a governmental dismissal from office? Is it possible for us to have a divine call since we left our divine call in Germany and ran off according to our erring conscience? Ought not our congregations now to depose us, since it is only now that they with us appreciate the great offense which we have given? Would it not be better if the congregations would at least dismiss us and then for a while endeavor to maintain themselves by the exercise of their spiritual priesthood, whereupon they might choose either the old pastors or new ones for themselves? It is impossible for me to give you all the various answers to all these questions as they have been given. Mr. Marbach has the strongest doubts that our congregations are Christian-Lutheran congregations, that they may rightfully call and excommunicate, and that we are *pastors*; Mr. Sp. [Sproede] *denies* it most emphatically. Both advise a temporary dissolving of all ecclesiastical and congregational organization (*alles kirchlichen Gemeindeverbandes*), hence no longer visit the public service and confine themselves to worship in the home. In substantial agreement with their thinking is the former Candidate Kluegel and Tax Commissioner (*Steuerrevisor*) Barthel. Similar scruples have assailed Brohm, but more in his innermost soul; he attends public services and does not separate himself. Incidentally all candidates are advancing more rapidly in the recognition of the defects. . . . Since I shall very likely move to the new settlement of the Berlin congregation this week yet,

and since this place is located at some distance from the Dresden congregation, in addition to being separated from it by Apple Creek, which is frequently not passable, I have left it to the discretion of the Dresden congregation whether they would not themselves consider it proper and wholesome to dismiss me and either call their own pastor or to be added to the Altenburg parish. The conclusion has already been reached that it would hardly be feasible to keep me as the assistant preacher (*Filialprediger*) of Dresdenau. For that reason I intend, within the next weeks, to deliver my farewell sermon here. Who is to take my place is still uncertain. There seems to be some inclination to have a candidate ordained; but these could hardly be persuaded to accept a call at this time, since they are in doubt whether it is God's will that the congregation continue because they were clearly not established according to the will of God in the beginning. Here I hit upon points where I differ to some extent from the candidates or am still in uncertainty; orally I hope to explain more. This much I see clearly: Those who emigrated against the will of God and still have duties to perform in Germany are obliged, if this is possible, to return or to be relieved from their duties in a proper way before they may remain here under the blessing and good will of God; but this can obviously be said of only the smallest minority. . . . He [Marbach] discovers in our former sermons — the present sermons he no longer hears — more and more infirmities and awkward division and mutilation of Law and Gospel; in many points I am constrained to accept his verdict. (Still I cannot admit that I have preached actually false doctrine nor a false Christ, of which Sp. wants to accuse me; how many false applications and judgments have occurred God may judge.)" (M. Guenther, p. 36 ff.)

That these tribulations continued during the greater part of the year 1840 is evident from a letter which the older Pastor Walther addressed to his brother in Perry County on November 9, 1840, from which we quote: "You are still very weak, but you are not only spiritually weak but thoroughly miserable, without true comfort, peace, and joy. Alas, my dear brother! On the way which you are following you will not escape, but you will fall ever deeper and must sink down to hell. Why do you constantly torture yourself with your sins? Why do you lament over your unfitness for the office of the ministry, over your being destitute of all weapons of spiritual warfare? Why do you permit the memory of the offense — which indeed was given — to press you down to the ground? Why do you permit yourself to be intimidated, so that your last remnant of courage is taken? Because you do not turn to Christ, because you do not dare things with

Him alone, throwing everything else away, and yield yourself entirely to Him, accepting Him alone as your *Wisdom, Righteousness, Sanctification, and Redemption. One thing is needful!* This is intended also for you. You are lacking only in that one thing wherein everything is given. . . . May God bless this medicine for your strengthening! For this and for every kind of spiritual blessing, light, life, strength, courage, and victory are rising to our merciful High Priest the prayers of your brother, who dearly loves you in Him and bears you in his heart, Hermann Walther." (*Ibid.*, 42 f.)

In the mean time Vehse, at the beginning of July, 1839, had left the colony in Perry County. He remained in St. Louis for a number of months, for his first protest is dated in that city, August 5, 1839, the expanded protest November 14, 1839, and the addendum November 23, 1839. He left St. Louis on December 16, 1839, and took passage on the *Johann Georg* for Germany. On the way over he embodied all these documents in the manuscript of his book *Die Stephan'sche Auswanderung nach Amerika*, the introduction of which, as he himself writes, was finished on board ship in the North Sea, in the neighborhood of Helgoland, on February 21, 1840. But he left behind him a very able successor, the lawyer Marbach, whose attitude towards Walther, as we have seen, was sharply antagonistic. During all these months and into the year 1841 the waves of the discussion surged to and fro, with many pangs of conscience and deep heartaches on the part of all those who were honestly trying to find a way out of the difficulties. The men on the side of Marbach were Magister Wege, Mr. Sproede, Candidate Kluegel, and Pastor Buerger; the men on the defensive were Pastors Loeber, Gruber, Keyl, the younger Walther, and several of the candidates.

It was providential that the younger Pastor Walther, during the spring of 1841, was confined to the home of Pastor Keyl with a stubborn illness, which, however, did not altogether confine him to his bed. The enforced idleness gave him the finest opportunity to study the works of Luther and other sound Lutheran theologians which were in the library of the Wittenberg parsonage. More and more he came to the knowledge of the truth with regard to the doctrine of the Church and the ministry, and the conferences which he attended and which apparently did not yield too satisfactory results caused his judgment to be sharpened until the various sections of the controversy were set before his eyes with the greatest clearness.

Walther finally drew up a manuscript in preparation for a public disputation, from which the following statements will be of interest: "God removed a great destroyer from our midst, to

whom we, against the will of God, had entrusted ourselves as to a guide from heaven. But what would have become of us if God had not had further compassion on us? The poor were still oppressed, and the needy were still sighing, and the fault—it lay with us, it lay in our continuing *blindness*. But God had still not grown weary in having mercy upon us; He awakened men among us who gave public testimony of what they recognized as a remaining corruption. With cordial gratitude I must here remind of that document which, now almost a year and a half ago, Doctor Vehse, Mr. Fischer, and Mr. Jaeckel addressed to us. It was this document in particular which gave us a powerful impulse to recognize the remaining corruption more and more and to endeavor to remove it. Without this document—I now confess it with a living conviction—we might yet have pursued our way of error, from which we have now made our escape, for a long time. I confess this with an even deeper sense of shame, the more ungrateful I showed myself at first over against this precious gift of God. But although many with me handled with great unfaithfulness the light which was granted us, yet God did not cease to cause ever more beams of His truth to fall into our darkness, to tear us away from many a point which we, in our perverseness, sought to hold, to uncover to us great and perilous spiritual injuries, and to lead our hearts more and more in the way of truth. . . .

“But as vividly as I now understand what a great debt of gratitude we owe to God for awaking an ever greater number among us to recognize more deeply the injury which we have received and testify to this effect for the benefit of all, just so much I have become concerned and disquieted because voices are now heard among us whose influence, according to my conviction, may become very dangerous for us. I have chiefly two things in mind that give me cause for not a little apprehension.

“In the first place I find that some of us, in exposing and reproving the sins committed by certain ones, do not make a proper distinction and thereby cause many consciences to be burdened beyond endurance. Do not some now seek to obliterate the distinction between the seducers and those who were led astray? Is a confession of guilt not often demanded of those who were led astray, whereas the guilt rested only on the seducers? Are not some men burdening the consciences of simple souls concerning errors which only the confidential secretaries of Stephan knew? Is not frequently the horrible picture of the most infamous Stephanistic, or rather the Stephanist, Clubs, painted, whereupon the cry is raised: That is the *church* which you comprise? Are not those who yielded to the pressure of those

who did violence to their conscience and therefore accepted many a false point treated as if they were equally guilty with those who first tyrannized them and then foisted the error upon them with force, thereby burdening their consciences? . . .

"The second point that causes serious fears in me is the fact that a goodly number among us now present it either as a consideration or as an established fact that there is in our midst neither the Christian Church nor a congregation nor the ministerial office nor a valid Sacrament nor divine absolution nor the call nor the spiritual priesthood, etc. It is not only presented as a controverted point that there is a *Lutheran* congregation in our midst, but that there is at all a *Christian* congregation and that the treasures of the Church are here administered." (Koes-tering, 42 ff.)

After this clear presentation of the points in controversy Walther proceeded to show from Scripture, from the Lutheran Confessions, and from the testimony of some of the greatest Lutheran theologians just what the correct position of Lutheran Christians should be with regard to the doctrine of the Church, the authority of the Church, the ministerial office, the call, Christian fellowship, the power of the Word and of the divine ordinances. Walther's paper represented the climax, the culmination, of all the discussions, marked by accusations, recriminations, and apologies, which had been occasioned by the defection of the original leader of the group.

For an agreement was finally reached between the contending parties according to which both sides were to present their arguments in the form of a public debate. Marbach and Pastor Buerger represented the one side, while Pastor C. F. W. Walther, together with Pastors Keyl and Loeber, undertook to defend the position which they felt to be correct on the basis of the Bible. The memorable debate took place on April 15 and 20, 1841, in the presence of a large audience, all the members of which were deeply interested in the decision of the questions involved. By the grace of God, as Schieferdecker says in his short description of the event, the victory remained with those who had maintained the presence of the Church even under such adverse circumstances. It was Pastor C. F. W. Walther, in particular, who proved with convincing clearness, especially from the writings of Luther and Johann Gerhard, that the Church might outwardly be badly corrupted and still remain a Church, so long as the essential marks, the Word and the Sacraments, were still present; that even the congregation at Corinth and those of Galatia, although polluted with many sins and offenses, were still called churches of God, namely, on account of the believing Christians who were

still present; that the latter indeed were in reality not only the true Church, but that according to the common figure of metonymy the whole could receive its name from the chief or essential part, so that the name of "church" could be given to the entire congregation. (Schieferdecker, p. 20.)

The text of the Altenburg Theses, which Walther made the basis of his remarks, reads as follows: 1. "The true Church, in the most perfect sense, is the totality (*Gesamtheit*) of all true believers, who from the beginning to the end of the world, from among all peoples and tongues, have been called and sanctified by the Holy Ghost through the Word. And since God alone knows these true believers (2 Tim. 2:19), the Church is also called invisible. No one belongs to this true Church who is not spiritually united with Christ, for it is the spiritual body of Jesus Christ. 2. The name of the true Church belongs also to all those visible societies in whose midst the Word of God is purely taught and the holy Sacraments are administered according to the institution of Christ. True, in this Church there are also godless men, hypocrites, and heretics, but they are not true members of the Church, nor do they constitute the Church. 3. The name 'Church,' and in a certain sense the name 'true Church,' also belongs to such visible societies as are united in the confession of a falsified faith and therefore are guilty of a partial falling away from the truth, provided they retain in its purity so much of the Word of God and the holy Sacraments as is necessary that children of God may thereby be born. When such societies are called true churches, the intention is not to state that they are faithful, but merely that they are real churches, as opposed to secular organizations (*Gemeinschaften*). 4. It is not improper to apply the name 'Church' to heterodox societies, on the contrary, that is in accord with the manner of speech of the Word of God itself. And it is not immaterial that this high name is granted to such societies; for from this follows: (1) that members also of such societies may be saved; for without the Church there is no salvation. 5. (2) That the outward separation of heterodox society from the orthodox Church is not necessarily a separation from the universal Christian Church or a relapse into heathenism and does not yet deprive that society of the name 'Church.' 6. (3) Even heterodox societies have church power; even among them the treasures of the Church may be validly dispensed, the ministry established, the Sacraments validly administered, and the keys of the kingdom of heaven exercised. 7. Even heterodox societies are not to be dissolved but reformed. 8. The orthodox Church is to be judged principally by the common, orthodox, and public confession to

which the members acknowledge themselves to have been pledged and which they profess."

Walther's exposition and defense of these theses, or propositions, won the battle for the truth. They saved the Saxon immigrants from disorganization. As Winter states, the evidence was so clear and convincing that at the conclusion of the first disputation even Marbach declared himself in agreement with the five paragraphs which had been debated and testified to this by subscribing the record of proceedings which was kept. "After the second disputation had been ended, in which the sixth paragraph was discussed, Marbach could not, as it seemed to me, fully come to a decision how to declare his position with regard to this paragraph. But on the following day, when Walther was about to depart for St. Louis to assume the pastorate of the congregation there (his brother having died in January of that year), Marbach calmly expressed himself as follows: '1) I acknowledge that the Christian Church is present here; 2) I have been extricated from my fundamental error; 3) the true Lord's Supper is present here; 4) there only remains for me the question whether I can take part in it.' Pastor Walther immediately instructed him regarding the last point, which instruction was accepted in a kindly manner. Thank God that these church controversies have thus at last come to be aired and that many a soul thereby has been put on the right track again." (In *Concordia Historical Institute Quarterly*, Vol. XII, January, 1940, 126.)

But other blessings were to follow, as the sequel shows. For the studies which Walther made in connection with the controversy at that time and the further studies which he was compelled to make in connection with the attacks made by Grabau (also regarding the doctrines of the Church and the ministry) eventually came to fruition in the two great classics written by this great theologian, namely: *Die rechte Gestalt einer vom Staat unabhaengigen christlichen Ortsgemeinde* and *Die Stimme unserer Kirche in der Frage von Kirche und Amt*.

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