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Walther's Contribution to Lutheranism

By LEWIS W. SPITZ

Walther neither inaugurated another Reformation, nor did he supplement that of Luther. Some people in the 16th century insisted that Luther did not go far enough in reforming the church, because he refused to disturb the church by introducing changes which were not demanded by the Word of God. Luther was not an iconoclast. Neither was Walther, who had no intention of going beyond Luther, but was satisfied with being a humble disciple of the great Reformer. As such he was loyal to Luther's theology, which he gathered from Luther's writings and the Lutheran Confessions. He would also have others merely to be humble disciples of Luther.

Walther's loyalty to Lutheranism also appears in his copious use of orthodox Lutheran sources. He was called a re-pristinating citation theologian because of it. Such criticism he bore patiently. As a fervent Lutheran he had no choice except to be faithful to the Scriptures and loyal to the Lutheran Confessions. It must have encouraged him to see that not only in America but also in Europe his firm position on the Scriptures and faithfulness to the Confessions strengthened others in their determination to stand with him. This was his contribution to Lutheranism.

In the controversy concerning predestination Walther reminded his opponents that Lutherans are guided only by the Scriptures and the Confessions. He said:

The principal means by which our opponents endeavor to support their doc-

trine consists in continually quoting passages from the private writings of the fathers of our church, published subsequent to the Formula of Concord. But whenever a controversy arises concerning the question whether a doctrine is *Lutheran*, we must not ask: "What does this or that 'father' of the Lutheran Church teach in his private writings?" for he also may have fallen into error. On the contrary, we must ask: "What does the *public CONFESSION of the Lutheran Church* teach concerning the controverted point?" For in her confession our church has recorded for all times what she believes, teaches, and confesses in reference to certain doctrinal points, or [sic] that such controversy may at least be adjusted without difficulty. Thus, for instance, the Formula of Concord in its second part expressly declares as its object that in setting forth its views "a public and *positive* testimony might be furnished, *not only to those who are now living, but also to posterity*, showing what the *unanimous opinion and judgment* of our churches were, and PERPETUALLY OUGHT TO BE concerning those controverted articles."¹

Walther never forgot that he swore a solemn oath of loyalty to the Symbolical Books of his church at his ordination. In the same controversy he said:

I solemnly promised our church, whose services I was entering, by my soul's salvation, to be a faithful watchman over this precious treasure. Therefore I would be a damned perjurer if now that the doc-

¹ *The Controversy Concerning Predestination*, trans. Aug. Crull (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1881), p. 6.

trine of our confession, to which I am pledged, is being decried as Calvinism, I would be ashamed of it and would not rather bear all the shame that is heaped upon me than to deny it and fall from it in my old age, when I have already come to the gates of eternity. No, I will rather depart from the world pronounced a heretic and damned by men for holding fast the doctrine of our confession and be graciously received by God as His faithful steward than die, praised and honored by men for yielding, and hear the dreadful voice of God: "I have never known thee; depart from Me, thou wicked one." It requires no skill to abide by the confession when this brings praise and honor, but if one is declared unfaithful for so doing, indeed is decried as one who has rejected the confession because one is faithful to it, then it is necessary to pass the test and prove one's faithfulness to it in deed. Although they [the opponents] therefore cry like the papists, "Fathers! Fathers!" a true Lutheran will say: "God's Word and Luther's doctrine pure will now and evermore endure!"²

To commemorate the tercentenary of the Formula of Concord the Synodical Conference resolved to have Walther publish the first part, or Epitome, with comments and a historical introduction. He regarded it an honor to do this, though he felt that he did not have sufficient time to do it well. In this book he pleads for well-instructed Christians and hopes that his little book will help to that end. Prophetically he declares:

Our Formula of Concord is truly worthy to be unfolded for our Lutheran Christian

² *Die Lehre von der Gnadenwahl in Frage und Antwort dargestellt aus dem elften Artikel der Concordienformel der evangelisch-lutherischen Kirche* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1881), pp. 4 f.

people as their banner of faith, which was kept folded so very long, and that the treasures of godly knowledge in it be shown them. For doubtless it is, as orthodox teachers called it 300 years ago, probably the last clear-sounding trumpet of this last time.³

For Walther loyalty to the Lutheran Confessions meant loyalty to Luther's Reformation. This conviction he shared with Martin Chemnitz, Johann Gerhard, and all the great teachers of the Lutheran Church up to the age of Pietism. But loyalty to Luther's Reformation was important to Walther only because Luther was loyal to the Scriptures. For that reason he insisted that Lutheran pastors, teachers, and professors should subscribe unconditionally to the Symbolical Writings of the Lutheran Church.⁴

In 1880 Walther delivered the jubilee sermon in "Old Trinity" Church commemorating the 350th anniversary of the Augsburg Confession. Basing his sermon on Ps. 119:106, he preached on the theme: "Why can and should we today gladly swear to the Lord that we will faithfully abide by the confession of our church in our own time?" He gave three reasons: "(1) because the confession of our Evangelical Lutheran Church is nothing else than the confession of God's own pure Word; (2) because this confession is so necessary for the church and God has hitherto through it so richly blessed and

³ *Der Concordienformel Kern und Stern*, 3d ed. (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1887), pp. v—viii.

⁴ See his essay, "Why Should Our Pastors, Teachers and Professors Subscribe Unconditionally to the Symbolical Writings of Our Church?" trans. and condensed by Alex Wm. C. Guebert, *CONCORDIA THEOLOGICAL MONTHLY*, XVIII (April 1947), 241—253.

so marvelously preserved our church; (3) because we have the sacred duty to preserve and to hand this confession down to our children and our grandchildren pure and undiminished as a treasure committed to us."⁵

This anniversary reminded Walther of the religious conditions in Saxony in the days of his youth and in the Lutheran Church of America at the time of his arrival in Missouri. In Saxony Rationalism had largely replaced the faith of Luther. Walther reminded the members of "Old Trinity" that the abomination of desolation stood almost everywhere in the land of their fathers. He also pointed to the sad state within the Lutheran Church of America. Both in Germany and in America the Saxon pilgrims had been subjected to ridicule. When the Saxons in Missouri emphasized Luther's doctrine, everyone, including people who bore Luther's name, cried out: "In the West a new sect has arisen!" They were mistaken. Walther rejoiced:

With gladness our little ship hoisted the church banner of our Evangelical Lutheran Church. For on the basis of our official confessions we proved that the doctrine which we held is not new, but the doctrine of Luther, the doctrine of the Reformation, the doctrine of the Evangelical Lutheran Church. And, behold, not only did the cry that we are a new sect gradually die down, but from year to year more and more of those who had previously opposed us became our brothers.⁶

To appreciate more fully what Walther

did for Lutheranism, one must take a closer look at what was to be done for it at that time. Much of Lutheranism was such in name only. The Lutheran Confessions were in many instances either ignored entirely or received mere lip service. This was true in America as well as in Germany. Walther himself learned to appreciate Luther's writings and the Lutheran Confessions in the school of bitter experience. Sickness compelled him to interrupt his studies at the University of Leipzig for one semester. During that time he read Luther's works, which he found in his father's study. He remained a student of Luther ever after. Having been guided through severe spiritual tensions by a certain Kuehn, an elder candidate of theology, and by Pastor Martin Stephan of Dresden, he learned to value the Lutheran Confessions, in which he found a true evangelical emphasis on justification by grace through faith. Dedicated to God's Word and Luther's doctrine, Walther, upon entering the ministry at Braunsdorf, Saxony, was sure to get into trouble with his rationalistic superiors, who enjoyed the service of the rationalistic teacher of the parish school as a malicious informer. Maligned to his superintendent, Walther was hailed into court and fined for substituting Christian textbooks for the rationalistic books which the authorities had selected for the school. Like Luther, Walther could apply to himself the words *Per aspera ad astra!*

Describing the sad religious conditions in Germany at the time of the Saxon emigration, J. F. Köstering said:

The Lutheran Church in Germany had then been in a most serious state of decay for quite some time. Instead of the Gospel of Christ Crucified the most miserable ra-

⁵ *Jubelfestpredigt, am 350. Gedächtnisstage der Augsburgerischen Confession den 25. Juni 1880 in der Dreieinigkeitskirche, St. Louis (Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1880), p. 7.*

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 13.

tionalistic religion held sway nearly everywhere under the name of the Enlightenment. God, virtue, and immortality were regarded as the only firmly established articles of faith. . . . The doctrines of the inspiration of Sacred Scripture by the Holy Spirit, of the Holy Trinity, of the deity of Christ, of the reconciliation of the sinful world through Christ's suffering and death, of Christ's vicarious active and passive obedience, of original sin, of a poor sinner's justification before God by grace through faith alone, of the gracious activity of the Holy Ghost to work contrition and conversion, of regeneration by Baptism, of absolution through the Gospel, of the presence of the body and the blood of Jesus Christ in the Holy Supper, of the time of grace in this life only and of the eternal damnation of those who die in unbelief, of the existence and the works of the devil — all of these specifically Christian doctrines were regarded as antiquated doctrines of earlier superstitious times. Whoever still proclaimed them as truth was called an obscurant or unenlightened person, and anyone who gave any evidence of a living Christendom was dubbed a mystic, that is, a mysterymonger, or a Pietist, that is, a bigot, and the preachers who still aroused souls to repentance by their sermons were viewed as dangerous men who made people crazy. The old Christianity was regarded as having been overcome long ago. It would soon disappear from the face of the earth altogether, and a new enlightened age would dawn in which the religion of common human reason would reign. . . . Indeed, in Saxony, where a Catholic king reigned, who had to swear not to introduce the Catholic religion by force or craft, but to keep hands off the Lutheran state church with its public confessions and organization and to defend it — here in Saxony no union was formed for that

reason. However, here Rationalism devastated even more dreadfully the church which still bore the Lutheran name and the externally Lutheran form. The worst enemies of the church were in power. At the state university most of the professors did not teach their students how at some time to preach the Gospel to the people for their salvation, but how they could take it out of the people's heart without being detected. The pulpits proclaimed almost nothing but a pagan teaching of virtue, whereas Christ was praised as the wise man of Nazareth and as the most glorious example of virtue, who died merely on account of His doctrine. In the elementary schools nothing but a miserable religion of nature was impressed upon early youth as the doctrine of Jesus. As long as the old agendas, the old hymnbooks, and the old Catechism were still in use, the holy Christian faith still survived in a small measure in the case of many, chiefly because most of the preachers and teachers did not dare to come right out with their barefaced unbelief, but still tried to clothe their false doctrine with Christian terminology. But eventually even the sparse light which had still been burning was extinguished, and gradually rationalistic agendas, hymnbooks, and schoolbooks were introduced almost everywhere. Thus a pitchdark night set in over more and more persons in Germany. True Christianity became not only scarcer but also more and more unknown.⁷

Addressing the Saxon immigrants and their children, Walther explained why he and others left Germany. His description of the religious conditions in Germany, however, also shows in what sense it was

⁷ J. F. Köstering, *Auswanderung der sächsischen Lutheraner im Jahre 1838* (St. Louis: Druck und Verlag von A. Wiebusch und Sohn, 1866), pp. 1 ff.

possible for him to make a real contribution to Lutheranism. He doubtless made some contribution to Lutheranism in Germany by his writings, though it would be difficult to measure its extent. His task was to be performed in America rather than in Europe. The people whom he was to lead to a truer Lutheranism were the immigrants who came from the deplorable religious conditions which are described above and who were gathered into Lutheran congregations by the men whom he helped prepare for the Lutheran ministry and whom he assisted with his books, convention essays, and articles in *Lehre und Wehre* and *Der Lutheraner*.

Religious conditions in America were also far from ideal when the Saxons arrived. Immigration from Europe brought both the good and the bad. As a result, rationalism and unionism were rampant on this side of the ocean as well. Some Lutheran churches, preachers, and professors were Lutheran only in name. Calvinism had made serious inroads in many Lutheran churches. Religious indifference was widespread. Frederick Henry Quitman's *Evangelical Catechism* was in use in various Lutheran churches.⁸

Quitman came to America as an avowed disciple of John Semler, the "father of Rationalism." Elected president of the New York Ministerium in 1807, he held the position of the presidency for 21 years. His catechism, prepared and published with the consent and approval of the synod, denied the inspiration and authority of the Bible and the validity of

the Apostles' Creed and of the chief Lutheran confessions. Quitman's catechism, which was intended to supplant Luther's, symbolizes the ravages of Rationalism in American Lutheranism at that time.

It is not surprising that men who seriously wanted to be true Lutherans found the constitution of the newly organized Evangelical Lutheran General Synod inadequate because it did not pledge this body to the Lutheran Confessions. A committee of Lutheran pastors who had reviewed the constitution declared:

This body, indeed, may call itself *Evangelical Lutheran*, and yet not be such. The constitution does nowhere say that the Augsburg confession of faith or Luther's catechism or the Bible, shall be the foundation of doctrine and discipline of the General Synod. . . . It is an easy thing to prove that some of the founders of this General Synod have openly denied some of the important doctrines of the Augsburg confession of faith and Luther's catechism.⁹

At the time Walther became the recognized theological leader in the Midwest, S. S. Schmucker was the acknowledged spokesman of the General Synod in the eastern part of the United States. His theological writings were widely read. His *Elements of Popular Theology* appeared in its fifth edition in 1845. In it he said:

The Lutheran divines of this country are not willing to bind either themselves or others to anything more than the fundamental doctrines of the Christian revelation, believing that an im-

⁸ Frederick Henry Quitman, *Evangelical Catechism or a Short Exposition of the Principal Doctrines and Precepts of the Christian Religion* (Hudson: William E. Norman, 1814.)

⁹ *Report of the Transactions of the Second Evangelical Lutheran Conference: Held in Zion's Church, Sullivan County, Tennessee, the 22d of October, 1821* (New Market, Va.: S. Henkel's Printing-office, by Ambrose Henkel, 1821), pp. 19 f.

mense mass of evil has resulted to the Church of God from the rigid requisition of extensive and detailed creeds. The Savior and His apostles have left no other creed than that contained in the Scriptures, and although experience and the nature of the case require some mutual agreement as to the doctrines to be inculcated by the ministry in any portion of the Church of Christ, lest one should demolish what the other is laboring to build up, yet we can see no sufficient warrant for any Christian Church to require as a term of admission or communion greater conformity of view than is requisite to harmony of feeling and successful cooperation, in extending the kingdom of Christ.¹⁰

What Schmucker regarded as "requisite to harmony of feeling and successful cooperation" he demonstrated in the publication of his so-called *Definite Platform*.¹¹ Schmucker stated that he prepared the *Definite Platform* "by consultation and co-operation of a number of Evangelical Lutheran ministers of Eastern and Western synods belonging to the General Synod, at the special request of Western brethren, whose churches particularly need it, being intermingled with German churches, which avow the whole mass of the former symbols." In this revision, Schmucker said, he omitted "those several aspects of doctrine . . . which have long since been regarded by the great mass of our churches as unscriptural, and as remnants of Romish error."¹² The *Definite Platform* repre-

sents a determined effort to bring Lutheranism into concord with Calvinism.

It should be said, however, that not all Lutherans were ready to follow the leadership of Schmucker. As a matter of fact, though B. Kurtz, editor of the *Lutheran Observer*, 1833—1861, championed the *Definite Platform*, it was never officially adopted by the General Synod as an accepted synodical policy. It did, however, point up a theological condition in the General Synod which two years before caused J. Wagenhals, the president of the Ohio Synod, to advise against joining it. In his presidential address he said:

If one may rightly assume that those who occupy high and responsible positions in the General Synod and who were present when the constitution was drawn up are intimately acquainted with its sense and aim and that their view expresses the view of a large part of the members of the General Synod, then one can very well draw the conclusion on the basis of various articles which appeared in the *Lutheran Observer*, that the General Synod either has no doctrinal basis or, at least, does not make use of it in practice.¹³

Indeed, there were loyal sons of Luther in America. When Friedrich Wyneken, pastor of St. Paul's Church in Fort Wayne, Ind., saw the first issue of *Der Lutheraner*, in 1844, he exclaimed with joyful appreciation: "Thank God, there are yet more Lutherans in America!" It was Walther's task to strengthen them in their loyalty to true Lutheranism and to gather Lutherans to the banner of the Lutheran

¹⁰ *Elements of Popular Theology*, 5th ed. (Philadelphia: S. S. Miles, 1845), p. 50.

¹¹ *Definite Platform. Doctrinal and disciplinary, for Evangelical Lutheran District Synods; Constructed in Accordance with the Principles of the General Synod*, 2d ed. (Philadelphia: Miller & Burlock, 1856).

¹² *Ibid.*, pp. 2 ff.

¹³ *Verhandlungen der ausserordentlichen Sitzung der Allgemeinen Evang. Luther. Synode von Ohio und angrenzenden Staaten, gehalten zu Columbus, O., A. D. 1853* (Columbus: Druck von Reinhard und Frieser, 1853), pp. 10 f.

Confessions. At this task he labored incessantly by preaching, teaching, and writing.

For 46 years he was pastor of "Old Trinity." After synodical duties and his teaching at the seminary had increased his burden, he no longer preached every Sunday, but usually delivered the festival sermons and frequently preached at synodical conventions. His published sermons fill several large volumes. For over 40 years he wrote articles and editorials for *Der Lutheraner*, which he founded, and for over 30 years he did the same for *Lehre und Webre*, which expressed his concern for true Lutheranism. But not only did he himself preach, teach, and write, but for 37 years he took a prominent part as professor at Concordia Seminary in preparing young men for that task. He put the impress of his loyalty to Scripture and to the Lutheran Confessions upon generations of students. As President of The Lutheran Church — Missouri Synod, from 1847 to 1850 and again from 1864 to 1878, he exerted a profound influence on the life and policies of that body, which, in turn, by its theological position and firmness in doctrine, strongly influenced other Lutheran bodies in this country.

Walther, a truly humble man, was fully aware of his privilege as well as of his responsibility to exalt Christ by proclaiming in his new fatherland the glorious Gospel as it is confessed and proclaimed by the Lutheran Church. In view of his sad experiences in Germany and in the face of the sad condition of the Lutheranism which he found in America, he never tired to exhort his fellow Lutherans to confessional loyalty. His

Reformation Day sermons eloquently voiced his concern. In one of them, based on Rev. 3:7-13, he preached on the theme: "Why should we not permit anything to move us to fall from our Evangelical Lutheran Church?" He answered: "(1) Because the Evangelical Lutheran Church is the true church of Jesus Christ on earth, and (2) because faithful adherence to this church brings an ineffable blessing, but apostasy from it an inevitable curse."¹⁴ Walther did not believe that the Lutheran Church is the only saving church. On the contrary, he severely condemned such an opinion.¹⁵

Commenting on one of the problems for Lutheranism at the time, Walther laments:

At no time and in no country, my hearers, has the manifest apostasy from our church been so common as in this our new fatherland. Thousands of Lutherans who immigrated hither from our fatherland here either soon cast off all religion and join the scoffers or permit themselves only too soon to be ensnared in the nets of enthusiasm and indifference, which are everywhere spread out in this glorious land of political and religious liberty. For thousands of inexperienced Lutherans are here only too soon so blinded by the fine Christian appearance of the sects that they soon change their religion with their fatherland, fall from the faith of their ancestors, and turn their back on their mother church, which bore them spiritually in Baptism and to which they pledged themselves with an oath at their confirmation.¹⁶

¹⁴ *Lutherische Brosamen* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1876), p. 209.

¹⁵ *The Proper Distinction Between Law and Gospel*, trans. W. H. T. Dau (Concordia Publishing House, 1928), pp. 334 ff.

¹⁶ *Lutherische Brosamen*, p. 209.

Walther was, of course, fully aware of the guilt of the mother church in Germany for the sad spiritual state of many nominal Lutherans who came to America.

Walther's concern was not limited to those who spoke only German. In 1872 a meeting of pastors of the Missouri Synod was held with J. R. Moser, P. C. Henkel, and A. Rader, pastors of the Tennessee and Holston synods. According to C. L. Janzow, it was mainly due to Walther's encouragement that in the spring of 1879 the Southeastern District Conference of Missouri and, in the fall of the same year, the Western District of the Missouri Synod expressed their willingness to take up English mission work conjointly with the members of these synods, and that, in 1880, a board for English missions was elected by the Western District. In 1879 the Synod had appointed a pastor to visit the English-speaking Lutherans assembled at Niangua, Mo. This man hesitated to embark on the new task of ministering in the English language, but Walther encouraged him with these words:

Dear pastor, God has brought us into this country and without our merit has given us the pure doctrine also for this very purpose that we should proclaim it in the language of this our country, the English. But alas! so far we have not done what we ought to have done, and I fear God may punish us on account of our ungrateful negligence and take away from us Germans the great blessing bestowed upon us till now, because we have not done in the English language what we ought to have done in our country.¹⁷

¹⁷ C. L. Janzow, *Life of Rev. Prof. C. F. W. Walther, D. D.* (Pittsburgh: American Lutheran Publication Board, 1899), pp. 48 ff.

Though various causes may be enumerated, Luther's Reformation was chiefly religious or theological. All other causes were secondary and merely coincidental. Thus Walther's contribution to Lutheranism was likewise chiefly in the area of theology, though his talents as an organizer and other outstanding gifts with which God endowed him must be gratefully acknowledged. It is not difficult to present Walther's theology. It is that of the Lutheran Confessions and can be culled from his many sermons, essays, articles, and books. His contribution to Lutheranism has been widely acclaimed. Dr. Adolph Spaeth wrote of him:

From every part of the Lutheran Church in the Old World and the New his death elicited the testimony "A great one in Israel is fallen!" . . . His was, indeed, an epoch-making personality, and from his activity mighty impulses radiated to Lutherans in all parts of the world. "I bow my head to him in humility," said the President of the General Lutheran Conference, Dr. Kliefoth, at the convention in Hamburg, in 1887 [the year of Walther's death].¹⁸

Indeed, at Walther's death the Lutheran Church mourned the departure of a spiritual father. A very particular mission to the Lutheran Church of this century had been entrusted by God to this man. That was the tribute spoken at his bier, on May 15, 1887, as his body was about to be transferred from Concordia Seminary to "Old Trinity."¹⁹

St. Louis, Mo.

¹⁸ "Ferdinand Walther," *Realencyclopädie für protestantische Theologie und Kirche*, 3d ed., ed. Albert Hauck (Leipzig: J. C. Hinrichs'sche Buchhandlung, 1908), XX, 848.

¹⁹ *Der Lutheraner*, XLIII (1887), 85.