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Walther and the Scriptures

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Preus: Walther and the Scriptures

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Correction: In the October issue on pages 579 and 664 ("Milestones in Walther's Life") Lewis W. *Smith* should be Lewis W. *Spitz*.

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Walther and the Scriptures

By ROBERT D. PREUS

God's Word is our great heritage,
And shall be ours forever;
To spread its light from age to age
Shall be our chief endeavor;
Through life it guides our way,
In death it is our stay;
Lord, grant, while worlds endure,
We keep its teachings pure
Throughout all generations.

This stanza, written by the great Danish hymnist Grundtvig, can be traced back to Luther himself. It voices our attitude toward God's Word and offers clear direction and impulse for all our church work. Therefore it is fitting that we let this hymn introduce our topic and set the tone for our entire discussion.

God's Word is our great heritage, our Savior's bequest to us (John 17:17, 20). It is the distinction of Dr. C. F. W. Walther that by his preaching and teaching, by his counseling and example, he has kept the church aware of this great fact. In this anniversary year of his birth we do well to remind ourselves also of the precious legacy which God through this man has left us and to stimulate in our hearts gratitude to God for committing to us His Word, the Holy Scriptures.

There are four possible approaches to the subject "Walther and the Scriptures," each one legitimate, each yielding the same results and conclusions.

We might tackle the matter indirectly by studying Walther's approach to the Scriptures, the way he made use of them in public office and personal life. This would involve assessing his sermons, his personal correspondence, and total theo-

logical output. In this oblique manner we could actually come to a complete and fruitful understanding of Walther's position concerning Scripture.

We might repair to those writings in which Walther directly treats the Holy Scriptures. And ready at hand are articles from his pen, mostly in *Lehre und Wehre*, which deal with nearly every aspect of the article concerning the Holy Scriptures.¹

We might also survey all the theological literature of the Missouri Synod during Walther's day. Since he believed that full unity of doctrine should prevail in the

¹ *Lehre und Wehre* (hereafter abbreviated as *LW*), 2 (Jan. 1856), 1 ff. "Vorwort zu Jahrgang 1856" *LW*, 17 (Aug. 1871), 255 ff. "Was lehrt Joh. Gerhard von der heiligen Schrift, insonderheit von der Inspiration der heiligen Schrift?" *LW*, 13 (April 1867), 97 ff. "Vier Thesen ueber das Schriftprinzip," *LW*, 4 (Aug. 1858), 225 ff. "Unterricht wider den Zweifel am goettlichen Wort und dessen Wahrheit," *LW*, 21 (Sept. 1875), 255 ff. "Was ist es um Fortschritt der modernen lutherischen Theologie in der Lehre?" *LW*, 28 (Jan. 1882), 1 ff. "Vorwort zu Jahrgang 1882," *LW*, 32 (Jan. 1886), 1 ff. "Vorwort zu Jahrgang 1886," *LW*, 17 (Feb. 1871), 33 ff. "Was lehren die neueren orthodox sein wollenden Theologen von der Inspiration?" This article, unsigned in the *LW*, was ascribed to Walther when it appeared as a booklet printed in Dresden in 1871. Some have questioned Walther's authorship of this article and booklet (cf. *CTM*, XXXII [July 1961], 421). There is no evidence that Walther disavowed the article. Since he was the editor of *LW*, we may assume that the position taken here had his full endorsement. In quoting from this article we shall therefore make him responsible for its statements. *CTM*, X (April 1939), 254 ff. "The False Arguments for the Modern Theory of Open Questions," trans. W. Arndt and A. Guebert, *Siebzebnter Synodal-Bericht des Westlichen Distrikts* (St. Louis, 1873).

church and since he was the dominant theological figure in our church during its first half century, Walther's spirit and theology will be reflected in the literature of the Missouri Synod, particularly in *Der Lutheraner* and *Lehre und Wehre*, which he edited over the years. Moreover, in this connection we would study the older theological literature which was recommended and cherished by Walther, especially Luther, our Lutheran Confessions, and the great Lutheran dogmaticians. Walther made no bones about being what was contemptuously termed a "restitution theologian" or a "citation theologian" and never tired of quoting the old orthodox Lutheran dogmaticians.² Therefore it is quite proper and important to recognize that his enlarged and, one might add, greatly improved edition of Baier's *Compendium* will definitely represent Walther's theology, also on the article concerning the Holy Scriptures.

We might furthermore learn Walther's position concerning Scripture from his students, from many men who considered themselves his theological progenies, e. g., Pieper, Engelder, Eling Hove of the old Norwegian Synod, all of whom wrote extensively on the subject of the Bible. Pieper, who was chosen by the church to teach dogmatics at Concordia Seminary in Saint Louis and who, while Walther was still his colleague, taught and wrote much on the subject of Scripture, will surely be portraying Walther's views in his utterances.

In presenting Walther's doctrine of Scripture I will employ all the approaches mentioned above, but in the main the sec-

² *L&W*, 21 (Jan. 1875), 1 ff. *L&W*, 23 (May 1877), 129 ff. See "Walther's Letter from Zurich" in the previous issue of this journal.

ond, the direct approach, which will yield the most immediate results.

In regard to the Scriptures there were three issues which Walther considered primary in his day and which are still alive and important today. We will therefore consider Walther's position regarding

- I. The Inspiration of Scripture
- II. The Authority of Scripture
- III. The Inerrancy of Scripture

I. THE INSPIRATION OF SCRIPTURE

The divine origin of Scripture, always a vital matter for the church, was to Walther one of the most burning questions of his day. The reason for this concern was a practical one. Too many trusting Christians were being led by pastors who no longer believed the Scriptures, and the poor people were often unaware of their situation. Therefore Walther issues a warning against any and all scholars who would shake our confidence in the foundation of the apostles and prophets. Beware, he says, of those who oppose their human science to God's revelation and who thereby make theology a science, a matter of the church's self-consciousness, rather than a gift of God.³ From the beginning the theological magazine *Lehre und Wehre* stood for the divine inspiration of Scripture. With growing intensity it continued to defend this cardinal teaching against all falsifications. Its purpose was to protect Christian lay people from being taught to build their faith on the sands of human opinion and thereby to lose their faith, God's grace, and their own souls.

What does Walther mean by the inspiration of Scripture? Again and again he cites

³ *L&W*, 32 (Jan. 1886), 6 ff.

the definitions of old orthodox Lutheran theologians and therewith seems content to rest his case. John Andrew Quenstedt is a particular favorite of his. He quotes with approval one of Quenstedt's strongest statements concerning the direct divine origin of everything in the Bible: "All those things which were to be written in the Scriptures were communicated by the Holy Spirit to the holy writers when they wrote and were dictated to their understanding as one would dictate to a penman. Such things were written under these and under no other circumstances, in this manner and arrangement and in no other."⁴ Walther identifies himself squarely with this position. To him "the entire holy Scripture is a work of the Holy Spirit." With Luther he confesses, "Every letter, yes, every single tittle of Scripture, is of more and greater importance than heaven and earth."⁵

The opinion was quite prevalent in Walther's day that the doctrine of the inspiration of Scripture was not a part of the Reformation faith, that this rigid position was worked out only in the 17th century. The reformers, it was maintained, only taught that somehow Scripture contained the Word of God.⁶ Walther goes to great length to prove that the celebrated theologians of the 17th century, John Gerhard, Abraham Calov, John Quenstedt, were only following the belief of Luther and the Lutheran Confessions. From the *Apology of the Augsburg Confession* (Art. IV, 108)

⁴ *LW*, 21 (Sept. 1875), 257. Cf. Quenstedt, *Systema*, 1715 ed., I, 98.

⁵ *LW*, 32 (March 1886), 66.

⁶ *Siebzehnter Synodal-Bericht des Westlichen Distrikts*, 1873. "Dass nur durch die Lehre der lutherischen Kirche Gott allein alle Ehre gegeben werde," pp. 26 ff.

he quotes Melancthon's insistence that the words of Scripture "did not fall from the Holy Spirit unawares." From these words Walther infers,

the Holy Spirit has inspired the Scriptures and placed everything there deliberately. Here our church confesses that every word, every arrangement of words, every reiteration of words, every summation, the entire way and manner of speaking [of Scripture] has its origin in the Holy Spirit. He has inspired everything, not just the basic truths, not just the sense and meaning, not just the "what" but also the "how." And it was He who has chosen the words which were necessary to reveal correctly to us God's meaning.

And, says Walther,

That this is the teaching of Holy Scripture itself every Christian knows. The Savior Himself says to the apostles: the Holy Spirit will give you "how" and "what" you are to preach (Matt. 10:19, 20). Also the apostle speaks "in words which the Holy Ghost teaches" (1 Cor. 2:13). And without exception the prophets, when they begin writing, say, "Thus saith the Lord." When the New Testament cites the Old it says, "As the Holy Spirit says" (Mark 12:36; Acts 1:16; 28:25). And the apostle Paul testifies that all Scripture is inspired by God (2 Tim. 3:16). As the holy men wrote Scripture, the Holy Spirit inspired it.

And so Walther concludes,

It is not Isaiah, not Moses, not Paul, who speaks in Scripture, but the Holy Spirit. With men it may happen that once in a while an expression falls which is not entirely correct, but this does not happen with the Holy Spirit.⁷

Most of Walther's writing concerning the divine origin of Scripture was polemi-

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 42.

cal. He felt constrained to expose and condemn the manifold assaults leveled against Scripture by the positive theologians of his day, the "neo-orthodox," as he called them.⁸

Scripture Itself Inspired

One of the most prominent errors of the 19th century concerning Scripture was the emphasis on the inspiration of the writers to the exclusion of the inspiration of the Bible itself. The writers of Scripture were inspired, not Scripture itself. Often this inspiration was considered to be no more than a divine guidance. It was merely the poetical imagination of the apostle or prophet. The prophets were stimulated, agitated, pushed by God, similar to the manner in which a person might be stimulated by wine. This was the position of Schleiermacher, Twesten, Thomasius, and others. To Thomasius inspiration was merely regenerate enlightenment.

Walther counters that this position does not take into account that Scripture itself is inspired (2 Tim. 3:16). The question is never answered by these theologians whether this "thrust" of the Holy Spirit upon the writers provides the Scriptures with inerrancy and infallibility.

Furthermore, the theory of person inspiration at best lets the Bible be only partially inspired. This conclusion was clearly reached by the theologian Twesten.⁹ In-

spiration pertains to the words of Scripture only as their use comes into relation with our inner life, he said. The history recorded in Scripture is inspired only as it touches the Christian consciousness. Hence there is no unconditional infallibility in Scripture. In matters of faith and life there are no errors, but in chronology, geography, and other minor matters Scripture may be wrong. God is the Truth, and what comes from Him is truth. But not all Scripture is inspired in the same way.

The far-reaching implications of this exclusive emphasis on person inspiration are clear. The Bible is no longer, strictly speaking, God's Word. And Walther was quick to point out this inference.

Another German theologian who seemed to teach merely an inspiration of persons was the eminent and in many ways conservative Franz Delitzsch. In describing the Psalms he contended that these were merely reports of God's history of salvation (*Heilsgeschichte*) which made their way as songs into the congregation.¹⁰ Walther complains that this is certainly not saying enough about the Psalms. There is not a word in Delitzsch about the Psalms not being human thinking but God's revelation. How are these Psalms inspired? Walther asks. And in what way are they different from the beautiful hymns of Luther and Gerhardt? Are not also these hymns reports of God's history of salvation (*heilsgeschichtlicher Beruf*)? Delitzsch is talking about what the Psalms contain and what position they had in the Israelitish church. But he says nothing about what they are. But finally Delitzsch does say what they are. They are not God's

⁸ Most of Walther's comments on modern theology and its doctrine of inspiration may be found in the little book, *Was lehren die neueren orthodox sein wollenden Theologen von der Inspiration?* (Dresden, 1871). Cf. also *LuW*, 32 (Jan. 1886), 1 ff.

⁹ *Vorlesungen über die Dogmatik der evangelisch-lutherischen Kirche* (Hamburg, 1834), I, 404.

¹⁰ *Commentar über den Psalter* (Leipzig, 1859), I, xvi; II, 234.

Word, as every child knows; no, "they are songs from the human heart." "What an unheard of disclosure! ! ! ! !!" Walther exclaims. Surely the hymns of Luther and Gerhardt are songs from human hearts. Delitzsch adds that "in these songs the heart of God is at the same time reflected in the thankfulness for future redemption." But this is utterly vague, says Walther. What reflects the heart of God? Is it the human heart or the human song? Again we could say the same for Luther or Gerhardt. It is clear that Walther's real criticism of Delitzsch is not that he stresses person inspiration but that he never admits that there is something unique about the Bible, that it is different from all other writing in that it is the Word of God.

Walther also criticizes the subjectivity of the view that inspiration was mere divine enlightenment, an ecstasy, a conviction in the life of the apostle. Hence it would follow that everything in Scripture should be tested by the power of our religious nature. This, says Walther, is enthusiasm pure and simple.

The Human Side

Closely related to the aberration just mentioned was the rather common allegation that the human side of Scripture must be in no way suppressed. Just as today, theologians were then talking about a divine-human Scripture. The human side consisted in this, that Scripture reflects the ideas, the love, the pain, the joy, the grief, the peace of mind, of its human authors. In this sense the Scriptures are thoroughly human, revealing the fears, the joys, the passions, laying bare the souls of their authors. All this is undeniable and clear from Scripture itself. The divine side of

Scripture consists in this, that this book, written in human language and style, is God's Word, expresses God's thoughts, God's message to man. This is the affirmation of Christ and all the apostles. In Walther's day this latter fact was played down or even denied by many theologians.

It was said quite commonly in those days that the old orthodox doctrine of verbal inspiration was Montanistic and Monophysite in depreciating the true human side of the Bible. Lange¹¹ asserted that to preserve this human side of Scripture we can only say that somehow the Word of God is *in* the human words of Scripture, somehow the divine Word is *with* the human word, but this does not imply the *perfection* of the human element. Walther said that such a theory makes the human side of Scripture the chief thing.

Even stronger opposition to the old doctrine of inspiration was registered by Luthardt.¹² He insisted that the modern exegesis and criticism of the day had demolished the dogma of inspiration. Rather smugly he stated (today, almost 100 years later, W. Elert says the same thing¹³) that no reputable theologian could any longer adhere to the inspiration of the Scriptures. Luthardt's reasoning has a remarkably modern ring to it, reminding us of Barth and neo-orthodoxy today. Scripture is a human book, he says, just as the church consists of humans. But the

¹¹ *Die Hauptstellen bei Schwarz: Zur Geschichte der Neuesten Theologie* (Leipzig, 1864), p. 346.

¹² *Compendium der Dogmatik* (Leipzig, 1866), p. 237.

¹³ *Der Christliche Glaube* (Hamburg, 1956), pp. 169 ff.

Spirit of God dwells and makes His influence felt in Scripture even with all its errors, just as He does in the empirical church with her sins and weaknesses. One must not stop with Scripture, Luthardt maintained, but go on to find God's Word and revelation.

Walther was by no means cowed either by these assertions or by the fact that few in Europe any longer shared his convictions concerning a divinely inspired Bible. The divine-human Scripture which Luthardt upholds means really only a human Scripture, and to Walther such a position is intolerable. Listen to what he says:

Beware, beware, I say, of this "divine-human Scripture." It is the devil's mask. For eventually it constructs such a Bible after which I would not wish to call myself a Bible Christian. Henceforth the Bible is nothing more than any other good book which I must read with constant and diligent examination lest I be counseled in error. For if I believe that the Bible also contains errors, then it is no longer a touchstone for me, but needs a touchstone itself. In short, it is unspeakable what the devil tries with the "divine-human Scripture."¹⁴

Not Merely a Record of Revelation

A third aberration which Walther attacked was the doctrine that the Holy Scriptures were not God's revelation but only a record of His revelation. This view was a denial of Scripture as God's Word, so far as Walther was concerned. It was a very popular view on the European continent, although it assumed various forms.

¹⁴ *LW*, 32 (March 1886), 76. Walther here imitates Luther's blast against the alloecosis of Zwingli. Cf. *FC SD VIII* 40; *St. Louis ed. XX* 943; *WA* 26, 319.

Karl Hase¹⁵ taught that the original revelation was in the spirit of man, and Scripture was merely a record (*Bericht*) of this. Nitzsch¹⁶ held that Scripture was only the original attestation to God's revelation (*Offenbarungsurkunde*), and only in this sense could it be called the Word of God. Moreover, anything in the Bible, such as astronomy, physics, geography, which does not touch the way of salvation, is not a part of God's revelation.

Walther feels that there is dishonesty in this view when it calls Scripture God's Word. If Plutarch wrote of the accomplishments of Sulla, surely no one would presume to call Plutarch's account the word of Sulla.

Luthardt taught a slightly different modification of the same view. To him revelation was history, and Scripture tells this history. He says,

The source of our faith is God's revelation. But Scripture is not revelation itself, but only a report (*Bericht*) concerning revelation. Revelation is a history. Scripture tells us this history. We must cull the revelation from the Scripture report.¹⁷

Walther's reply to Luthardt is very bitter, but we can understand his concern.

"The Bible is not God's Word but a record of God's revelation." This is certainly a forceful distinction. For if it is God's Word, then we must believe it, and believe it blindly and without reservation. And we must believe it even if 10,000 professors — together with all those who ape them — teach the opposite. However,

¹⁵ *Evangelische Dogmatik* (Leipzig, 1842), pp. 408 ff.

¹⁶ *Akademische Vorträge über die christliche Glaubenslehre* (Berlin, 1858), pp. 57, 58.

¹⁷ *Zeitschrift für Protestantismus und Kirche*. 43 (1862), 176.

if it is not God's Word but only a human report, a record of revelation, then we must test it.

No, once one concedes that the Bible is not the Word of God but only a gathering of human reports in which here and there lies hidden a nugget of God's Word, then the gate and door is opened to the wild boar who destroys God's vineyard.

And what is the basis of Luthardt's theory? Facts, he says. But they are not facts at all but pure hypotheses and bombast.

The view which Walther attacked with such vehemence was a popular one. Essentially it was the same as that articulated by Kahnis.¹⁸ Kahnis felt that the doctrine of verbal inspiration meant a hardening against the truth. God could not truly be called the Author of Scripture, he asserted. Then, says Walther, Jesus hardened Himself against the truth when He speaks of the words of Scripture as proceeding from the mouth of God (Matt. 4:4). But what is this truth which Kahnis speaks of? It is a fraudulent claim born in hell and a fabrication of the devil. Kahnis said that the old doctrine of inspiration absorbs revelation. Revelation must be considered as prior to Scripture; Scripture is only a record (*Urkunde*) of revelation. Such a view, says Walther, which regards Scripture as neither God's Word nor revelation but only a "house of Jewish writings" would make it impossible for one even to begin the work of dogmatics.

Two questions might be asked at this point. First, does Walther, when he discusses the origin of Scripture, have anything to say to us in 1961? Or is he simply out of date? We must answer that

if Walther has been faithful to the Holy Scriptures, to their testimony concerning themselves and concerning Christ, he will always be contemporary. Furthermore, it is quite clear from the observations we have made above (and will become clearer as we proceed) that Walther did not live in a vacuum or in a precritical age. And he was quick to grapple with contemporary issues. Work was being done in those days to undermine the Scriptures and their testimony concerning themselves.

The second question is this: Why does Walther use such bitter invective against his adversaries? We hesitate to use such language today. The reason is not just that people spoke more harshly in those days. No, Walther's severe language reveals deep and pious concerns. What are these concerns?

With Walther it was of supreme importance that all glory must be given to God in all our lives and activities. This is the essence of God's commands and of true worship. And this requirement is met fully only when we adhere to pure doctrine, and this involves holding to the divine authorship of Scripture. No one who sets himself above God's Word is giving all glory to God.¹⁹

A second reason for Walther's strong language and concern in the matter of inspiration was that he saw clearly the fatal consequences of a denial of the inspiration of Scripture. Almost invariably such a denial will influence a theologian's attitude also toward the properties of Scripture. In Walther's day Vilmar

¹⁹ Cf. *Siebzebnter Synodal-Bericht des Westlichen Distrikts*, 1873. "Dass nur durch die Lehre der lutherischen Kirche Gott allein alle Ehre gegeben werde," pp. 26 ff.

¹⁸ *Der innere Gang des deutschen Protestantismus* (Leipzig, 1860), p. 241.

questioned the essential clarity of Scripture; von Hofmann undermined the authority of Scripture, averring that one could not quote individual Scripture passages as having the authority of Very God. Together with Kahnis and Luthardt these theologians and others had abandoned the doctrine of Scripture's inerrancy. All this because they no longer believed that Scripture was God's Word.²⁰ And von Hofmann's rejection of direct predictive prophecy and of the atonement can also be traced to his low view of Scripture.²¹

Walther maintains that the theologian's whole attitude toward Christian doctrine is affected when he places himself above the Scriptures.²² In such an event doctrine is no longer drawn from the Scriptures, but from the "Christian consciousness" (Luthardt) or the "consciousness of the church" (Kahnis). Harless went so far as to assert that the power of the theologian lies in his own rational spirit, in his own capacities. This claim is simply placing reason above Scripture.

Another tragic result accruing from disbelief in the divine origin of Scripture is the tendency to make the church's symbols or the consensus of the church the source of doctrine. Thus the church is placed above rather than under the Scriptures. This inversion, says Walther, is the "first lie" of modern Protestantism, the daughter of rationalism wearing a Christian garb, the sister of Romanism with a Protestant mask. But it is the logical result when one sets aside the inspiration of Scripture.²³

The third and most important reason for Walther's firm stand on the divine origin of Scripture is purely practical. He desires poor sinners through patience and comfort of the Scriptures to have hope. But there can be no comfort, no certainty, in the church when theologians have forsaken the doctrine that Scripture is God's revelation. The liberal attitude of his day therefore filled Walther with a deep sadness. When Thomasius²⁴ argued that we can no longer use the words "dictation," "hands," "penmen," and apply them to the human authors of Scripture, Walther could only reply,

With his scientific denial that the Holy Spirit has dictated the Scriptures Thomasius has in fact destroyed the whole Christian religion. For where am I to find my God if not in His Word? Shall I dream Him up like the Anabaptists? Or shall I turn myself over to Pope Pius IX as my vice-regent? No? But if I cannot catch my God in the Vatican or in my dreams and if He does not come to me as He did to Abraham on the fields of Mamre—where in all the world am I to find Him? Is a Lutheran to seek Him at all? Yes, it is said, in His Word. But what if this Word [of Scripture] is not literally, not truly, God's Word? What if it is only a human word which was caused by some sort of activity of the Spirit? Then I cannot find my God. Then I have no God. For what good does it do me that the Biblical writers tell me *about* Him? I want to have Him myself. I want to hear from His lips, Thy sins be forgiven thee. Be of good cheer. There was once a child who lost his father on the way from New York to the West. With great sorrow he sought him. Then

²⁰ *L&W*, 21 (Nov. 1875), 326 ff.

²¹ *L&W*, 17 (March 1871), 72.

²² *L&W*, 21 (June 1875), 161 ff.

²³ *L&W*, 21 (Dec. 1875), 374 ff.

²⁴ *Christi Person und Werk* (Erlangen, 1862), III, I, 449.

he met some fine, pious people who told him about his father. One had seen him in Buffalo, another somewhere else. But as much as the poor child traveled here and there, he never found his father. It was said that he finally drowned in one of the Great Lakes. And indeed, if these theologians proceeded in such a way they would drown innumerable souls. For the souls of sinners are not satisfied with a report which tells them *about* their Father. They thirst after God, after the living God. And since they cannot get this peace from their own lips, they go under.²⁵

II. THE DIVINE AUTHORITY OF SCRIPTURE

Walther believed that the Missouri Synod, and he as the chosen leader of this church body, had a mission. The spirit of his day was the spirit of skepticism, a Pilatelike spirit, which asks sneeringly, "What is truth?" Opinions and theories are popular; the claim to have any final truth is seldom made, particularly in matters theological where religions and parties within religions cannot come to any agreement.

But it is Walther's cry that there is theological truth, and this truth is worth fighting for, even though the world call it "foolishness." "Out of divine conviction," he says,²⁶ "we believe that there is such a thing as truth, and this truth is God's Word. That is to say, it is contained in the inspired Scriptures of the apostles and prophets." Again he says,

The truth is not a Tower of Babel upon whose structure we must labor till the last

²⁵ *Was lehren die neueren orthodox sein wollenden Theologen von der Inspiration?* p. 23.

²⁶ "Vorwort zu Jahrgang 1856," *L&W*, 2 (Jan. 1856), 2 ff.

day. But we believe it is a heavenly building long since completed, completed by the hands of the apostles and prophets.

The words of our Savior Himself prompted Walther to make these strong claims. Jesus said, "If ye continue in My Word, then are ye My disciples indeed, and ye shall know the truth; and the truth shall make you free." (John 8:31,32)

Walther's mission and the mission of our church was to bring the truth of God to people sitting in darkness and in the shadow of death. This was his platform for the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America.

Walther believed that this platform could be carried out, that people could be shown the truth based on the foundations of Scripture. He had confidence in the power and divine authority of the Sacred Scriptures.

Precisely what was the authority of Scripture to Walther? Here again we find him following the older theologians of the Lutheran Church very closely. He draws primarily from Luther, our Confessions, John Gerhard, and John Quenstedt.²⁷

The Scripture Principle

Walther speaks of the Scripture principle, or formal principle, of theology, in contrast to the so-called material principle, the doctrine of justification by grace for Christ's sake through faith. The word "principle" means foundation. God's justification is the foundation of our salvation; God's Scriptures are the foundation of our theology, our language about God, our doctrine.

The Scripture principle involves two

²⁷ For what follows see *L&W*, 13 (April 1867), 97 ff.

things, according to Walther. 1. The canonical Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments are the one source of religion and all our theological knowledge. In Scripture alone are the passages or truths (*Wahrheiten*) from which theological conclusions can be made. Our theology is Christian therefore only insofar as it is drawn from Scripture. 2. Scripture is the only rule and norm by which all teachers and teachings are to be judged — not experience, not the consensus of the church, not reason, not the assured results of modern scholarship.

Every discipline, Walther points out, has its first principles, whether mathematics, or physics, or ethics. For instance, in ethics it is a principle that we should love good and hate evil.²⁸ So it is also in theology. Here we follow the old theological axiom: "Whatever is revealed by God in these written words [of Scripture] is incontrovertibly true and worthy of faith." The Scriptures have every characteristic of a proper source or principle of theology. They are the primary witness we have of God, they come directly from Him, they are self-authenticating and unassailable.²⁹ Moreover, it is the claim of the Scriptures themselves that they are the only source and authority for theology in the church (cf. Deut. 4:2; Josh. 23:6; Is. 8:20; Luke 16:29; 2 Tim. 3:16, 17). In all their teaching and preaching Christ and the apostles make Scripture the source of all their doctrine.

Walther was careful to insist that not

²⁸ Cf. D. Hollaz, *Examen theologicum acroaticum*, 1750 ed., p. 61.

²⁹ Walther is drawing from Aristotle [Anal. Post. I, 2, 72a, 19-36], who uses the terms πρώτον, ἀμεσον, ἀναπόδεικτον, αὐτόπιστον, ἀνυπεύθυνον, ἀναντίρρητον.

only the express words of Scripture are binding and authoritative but also a conclusion drawn from Scripture. What Scripture says by inference (*implicite*, κατὰ διάνοιαν) we are obliged to believe and follow. This axiom is clearly demonstrated by the example of Christ who validly infers the doctrine of the resurrection from the words of Scripture: "I am the God of Abraham and the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob" (Ex. 3:6; Matt. 22:32). Walther is not merely attacking Sadducean literalistic interpretation at this point, but is asserting that doctrine drawn legitimately from Scripture must be considered true and binding. As mentioned above, there were too many of Walther's contemporaries who did not believe in the possibility of true doctrine in the church.

Other Norms Ruled Out

The Scripture principle, according to Walther, rules out every other criterion or norm of doctrine. This was a rather constant refrain which one may tire of hearing, but in every age there are those who would draw their teaching from the wrong sources. Against those who would make reason, even regenerate reason, a judge in theological matters Walther quotes:

1 Cor. 1:21: For after that in the wisdom of God the world by wisdom knew not God, it pleased God by the foolishness of preaching to save them that believe.

1 Cor. 2:4, 5: And my speech and my preaching was not with enticing words of man's wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power: that your faith should not stand in the wisdom of men, but in the power of God.

1 Cor. 2:14: But the natural man receiveth not the things of the Spirit of God:

for they are foolishness unto him: neither can he know them, because they are spiritually discerned.

Col. 2:8: Beware lest any man spoil you through philosophy and vain deceit, after the tradition of men, after the rudiments of the world, and not after Christ.

Against tradition as a source of theology Walther cites Christ's tirade against the Pharisees in Matt. 15. No doubt he has in mind such statements as Matt. 15:9: "But in vain they do worship Me, teaching for doctrines the commandments of men." In rejecting tradition as a source of theology Walther includes the so-called consensus of the early church and the fathers (Calixt) and also the articles of our faith which are not a source of theology but are derived from the source of theology, viz., Scripture. Private revelations must also be refused as a source of theology, Walther asserts. Christ tells the church to teach those things which He has commanded (Matt. 28:19, 20). The church and her theology is built on the foundation of the prophets and apostles (Eph. 2:20), not on all sorts of private revelations.

Corollaries

When we profess that the canonical Scriptures are the one source of theology, we are at the same time affirming several other things about these holy writings. We are declaring that these writings are God's Word, breathed from His mouth in both content and form. We are declaring that these Scriptures are perfect, or sufficient, that is to say, they contain everything a poor sinner needs to know for salvation. We are declaring finally that the Sacred Scriptures are clear, and clarity means that everything necessary to be

known for salvation and a godly life is revealed in Scripture in such a manner that an attentive reader of sound mind and some skill in language can understand it. It is important to note how Walther links all these ideas. The divine origin of Scripture, its power and authority, its perfection and perspicuity — these things all hang together. Scripture itself does not closely distinguish between these various properties which it possesses. Hence if one aspect of the doctrine of Scripture is undermined, the entire doctrine is often overthrown. Such has been the case, Walther observes, among those theologians who teach that only the content (not the words of Scripture) are God-breathed or who teach degrees of inspiration. Such opinions invariably shake the very authority of the Scriptures.

Sufficiency

The authority of Scripture becomes fully meaningful to us only when we learn to appreciate how practical this Word of God is, when we see that it has been written to help and direct us in every aspect of our Christian life. This practical purpose of Scripture our old Lutheran theologians have called its sufficiency. Scripture fits us, equips us, sufficiently and perfectly for our Christian sojourn. It provides wisdom and guidance, strength and comfort in every issue of life. As St. Paul says, "It is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness, that the man of God may be perfect, thoroughly furnished unto all good works" (2 Tim. 3:16, 17). But the purpose of Scripture also is to bring us to faith in our Lord Jesus Christ. (John 20:31; 5:46, 47; Heb. 1:2)

Clarity

Like Luther, Walther is vitally concerned to maintain the clarity of Scripture. And his interest in this matter is by no means academic. The authority and clarity of the Scriptures go hand in hand. When the perspicuity of Scripture is questioned, the authority of Scripture is ultimately undermined. For then the church must enter in to interpret these allegedly dark and obscure writings to the common people, or else higher scholarship and scientific exegesis must be consulted before the common Christian can be sure of Scripture's meaning. Thus the church or the interpreter become the authority. Walther is wary of anyone who would make the Bible a vague or ambiguous book.

Walther believes in the clarity of Scripture because of the testimony of Scripture itself. Scripture is called a lamp and a light which shines; it is called true (Ps. 119:105, 130; 19:9; Prov. 6:23; 2 Peter 1:19). Of course, there are difficult passages in Scripture, but Walther denies that any of these passages run counter to the analogy of faith. By the analogy of faith Walther seems to mean the clear passages of Scripture, or what we would term proof passages. In other words, our best recourse when we encounter difficulties in reading Scripture is to interpret puzzling and obscure passages by the clear ones which speak of the same subject. And Walther has confidence in this method. He concurs with St. Augustine, who said (*De doctrina Christiana* II, 6): "The Holy Spirit has not set forth anything obscurely which is not found to be stated very clearly somewhere else in Scripture."

It must also be admitted that there is

darkness and obscurity when the unregenerate man sets about to interpret the Scriptures. But the darkness is in him, not in the divine Word. In fact, such a person cannot grasp any of the saving doctrine of Scripture unless the Spirit of God enlightens him through the Word. Without such enlightenment everything is foolishness to him (Jer. 8:8, 9; 1 Cor. 1:23; 2:14; 2 Cor. 4:3, 4). It is of course true that the unregenerate man can understand the words of Scripture in their grammatical order and sense, but not the intended meaning of the Holy Spirit — not without the enlightenment of the Spirit. With Luther Walther holds to a double clarity and obscurity. Outwardly there is nothing obscure or doubtful, but everything is set forth clearly in Scripture. But inwardly not a tittle of Scripture is understood by anyone who does not have the Spirit of God. When Walther speaks so often of our dependence upon the Holy Spirit for our interpreting and believing the Scriptures, he is emphasizing a truth which is often forgotten in our day of serene confidence in man's mind, man's objectivity, man's insights, man's scholarship. We too need always to pray for the enlightenment of the Holy Spirit when we read and study the Sacred Scriptures.

Walther was fully convinced that outside the church, people would regard the Bible as ambiguous and unclear. What disturbed him greatly was that in the church, even the Lutheran Church, so many would dispute the lucidity of Scripture. At best such people do not believe in the divine origin of the Bible; at worst they do not believe in God at all.

Who of us [he says] will deny that God, the Creator of human speech, is able

to speak clearly? Who will deny that God, the eternal Truth, Wisdom, and Love, intended to speak clearly? Who will deny that God actually did speak clearly, yea, was obligated to speak clearly, in that Scripture which He inspired for just one purpose — to tell man what he must know in order to be saved? . . .

Even though a person has no knowledge of, or only an imperfect knowledge of, historical data and related facts, yet he is able to find and walk the way of salvation under all circumstances without any hindrance.³⁰

To Walther, then, it was a simple denial of God's universal grace to imply that Scripture does not clearly teach all the articles of our Christian faith. He quotes Luther:

No book on earth is so clear as the Holy Scriptures. It excels every other book just as the sun excels every other light. . . . It is a shocking disgrace, blasphemy against the Holy Scriptures and all Christendom, to say that the Holy Scriptures are obscure and not clear enough to enable everyone to understand and then to teach and prove what he believes.³¹

Why is it that many in the church regard Scripture as vague and unclear? Because they do not *search*, Walther replies (John 5:39). Because they are half asleep or their minds are 1,000 miles away when they read. One must read Scripture attentively and with a proper submissive spirit. "Is it not shocking," he asks, "when people ascribe to the alleged obscurity and ambiguity of the Scriptures what is merely the result of human blindness and malice or at any rate of human weakness?"³²

³⁰ *CTM*, X (Nov. 1939), 827 f.

³¹ St. Louis ed. V, 334.

³² *CTM*, X (Nov. 1939), 831.

Interprets Itself

Closely related to the clarity of Scripture is the principle that Scripture is its own interpreter and is not open to various private interpretations. To Walther the very authority of Scripture stands or falls on this maxim.

What does this mean, that Scripture interprets Scripture? Walther briefly enunciates rules which can all be inferred from the principle that Scripture interprets Scripture.

1. If God has inspired both the Old Testament in Hebrew and the New Testament in Greek, then all interpretations must be based upon the original text, and no church has the right to establish an authoritative translation above original texts.

2. God has adjusted the communication of His revelation to human speech (cf. Deut. 30:11-14; Rom. 10:5-8). God's Word has assumed the form of human speech (in Scripture) without error, just as the Son of God took on a human nature without sin. Hence we must accept only that interpretation which corresponds to the grammatical sense of Scripture.

3. God has given His revelation in Scripture in such a way that the sense is gotten at through the words. Thus the correct meaning of Scripture can only be found in its literal sense, that is, the sense which the Holy Spirit intended to convey in Scripture. The sense of Scripture always is the sense of the author, the sense which the author intends. Here it seems clear that to Walther a false interpretation of Scripture would tend to destroy its authority.

4. We are told by St. Paul that the Word of God can be "taught" (Titus 1:9).

Only deceivers incorporate more than one meaning in each single statement. Statements with more than one meaning would spell the end of all knowledge. For this reason Walther will recognize only one meaning of a specific passage in its specific setting (*in einer Stelle*). The so-called typical, allegorical, or parabolic sense is not a second sense in addition to and apart from the literal sense. Rather the sense of the contents of Scripture is that which is first disclosed by the words themselves. This is the sense of the words, or the literal sense.

For instance, the words in Ex. 12:46, "Neither shall ye break a bone thereof," do not have a double sense in that no bone of the passover lamb *and* of Christ would be broken. Rather it had only one sense, that no leg of the passover lamb was to be broken. But action referred to is typical. In the New Testament, however, where the fulfillment of this typical action of Christ, the antitype, is reported (John 19:36), the verbal or literal sense becomes what in the Old Testament was the sense only of the action or event (*Sache*). *LW* 13 (April 1867), 105.

Walther warns us not to impose allegorical or parabolic meaning where no such interpretation is warranted.

5. Just as in the case of other literature we must recognize that the true meaning of the words of Scripture is often to be found obliquely through forms, such as metaphor, synecdoche, metonymy, irony, etc.³³

6. The many figures of speech (such as the forms mentioned above) are to be

³³ Strangely Walther concludes by saying, "Den Tropus der Hyperbel koennen wir in Gottes gewissem Worte nicht anerkennen." *Ibid.*, p. 106.

taken as such only when the context or parallel passages or the analogy of faith clearly demand it. We must be careful not to reject passages of Scripture or reinterpret them figuratively simply because they appear difficult or absurd to us.

7. The clarity of Scripture demands that those passages (*sedes doctrinae*) which prove the articles of our faith be clear passages. If we draw conclusions from passages which only incidentally deal with an article of faith, our conclusions must agree with the so-called proof passages (*sedes*). On the other hand one must not depart from the plain meaning of the words in proof passages in order to make his exegesis fit the analogy of faith. For in the Scriptures there may be two different mysteries, both taught in clear words, which are contradictory according to the premises of our reason. In such cases it is not for us to deny either mystery, either article of faith, but to hold both in tension and take our reason captive in obedience to faith. As surely as Scripture is God's Word, there are no actual contradictions there.

8. In the Scriptures there are abundant passages which set forth the articles of faith, passages as clear as the sun and open to the understanding of any child. "Therefore," Walther concludes, "we will accept only that exposition of a Scripture passage which agrees with the clearly revealed articles of our faith, and we reject and condemn beforehand every exposition of a Scripture passage which stands in opposition to the analogy of faith." It is clear that by such a statement Walther does not wish to impose any foreign outline or structure upon the Scriptures, but is merely asserting that

Scripture interprets Scripture. To him the analogy of Scripture was those passages which proved specific articles of faith (Rom. 12:6). And one must interpret Scripture according to this analogy. This is the "first hermeneutical rule," he says. Jesus Himself employed it (Matt. 4:5-7) against the temptations of Satan.³⁴

9. Our faith and our theology rest on the correct exposition of Scripture. It is most important that only that be held in the church which is based upon clear, positive exegesis. Any other position overthrows the authority and clarity of Scripture. What Walther is saying here is obvious to all of us. But it has significant implications. Walther would hold that it would be wrong to believe the theology of the Lutheran Confessions unless this theology is drawn clearly from the Scriptures. In other words, you cannot accept the Lutheran Confessions unless you accept also the manner in which these writings interpret the Scriptures. Otherwise you deny the Scripture principle and make the church or our confessions a source of theology.

10. Walther says that according to the prophecy of Christ the holy apostles would be preserved from all error. This means that we are to accept the exposition of the Old Testament which the New Testament gives as the authentic one. When the New Testament interprets the Old, that interpretation is correct.

Subversive Views

There were two views, prevailing in his day, which Walther considered particu-

larly subversive and hurtful to the authority of Scripture. The first, an opinion popular mainly in Europe, would allow one to receive or reject what Scripture says on matters which seem unimportant. To Walther this was an impossible position. "What human being, what angel, has the right to excuse us from obedience to the Word of God?"³⁵ he asks. A man may be ignorant of the stories of Solomon or David, and no great injury will be done to his faith. But to deny these stories is to attack the truthfulness of God in His Word. It is to offend God and provoke His wrath. Such a denier becomes a schismatic or a heretic according to Walther, and there can be no fellowship with him so long as he persists in his error.

A slightly modified version of the above opinion reasoned in the following manner. One may accept or reject what Scripture says on those matters concerning which the church has not yet spoken and given a decision. Walther is shocked that Lutherans could express such views. Put concretely, this would bind Lutherans to what was in the confessions, but only to those things. Such a doctrine is opposed to the clarity, the power, the authority and perfection of Scripture, and betrays a total lack of confidence in that Word. It substitutes the church for Scripture.

Scripture [says Walther] is the only criterion for determining the Christian religion and theology, the only source of Christian truth from which we can actually draw reliable facts, the only rule and norm of all faith and life, and the supreme judge, rendering the final decision in all controversies on any points of faith.³⁶

³⁴ The rule is good. But we might doubt whether the Romans passage proves it.

³⁵ *CTM*, X (May 1939), 355.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, (Aug.), pp. 587 f.

Walther rightly points out that our confessions do not make doctrines but reflect and confess doctrines. He says,

The doctrines embodied in the Symbols were not included in the various articles in order that they might become doctrines of the Church but were included because they already were doctrines of the Church.^{36a}

The opposite view would place the confessions above the Bible and make the Lutheran Church a sect.

The second theory, prominent in his day, which Walther considered insidious and baneful to the authority of Scripture was the idea that new doctrines develop from time to time in the church. That new doctrines are revealed as the church grows to adulthood was not just the allegation of Rome and the *Schwaermer* but more recently of Lutherans. Thus, it was said that we are not the children of the older teachers and fathers of the church, but they are like children to us. We must criticize them in the light of modern wisdom and insights. It is not difficult for Walther to demonstrate that this theory overthrows the very possibility of an orthodox visible church which has and confesses pure doctrine.

On the basis of this promise (John 8:31, 32), that saving truth is not a problem which men must first of all solve, but it is already contained clearly and distinctly in the words of Christ, saving truth is not a kind of philosophy which would require or at least be capable of continual forward development, reconstruction and improvement, but rather something lying before us present and ready in Scripture.³⁷

^{36a} *Ibid.*, (April), pp. 656 f.

³⁷ *LW*, 5 (Jan. 1859), 1 ff.

Throughout all his discussion of the authority of Scripture and his polemics against opposing views, two definite, practical concerns are always foremost in Walther's thinking. First, he wishes to maintain that a Christian can be sure of his doctrine. Second, he wishes to maintain the possibility of an orthodox visible church. Such concerns make it impossible for him to entertain any theory of doctrinal development which is but veiled skepticism and condemns the church to the dreary life of seeking but never finding the truth, like Sisyphus, who was condemned to roll a great stone up a mountain only to see it plummet down.

Walther's childlike confidence in the authority of Scripture as God speaking was sometimes interpreted as a mark of pride and cocksureness. And there are reasons for such judgment. First, he was often very severe with other Lutherans when he suspected them of being disloyal to the divine Word. Second, he was undisturbed by the claims of scholars that the result of scientific research had blasted the authority of Holy Writ. To him God's Word towers as high as heaven over these earthbound activities of men. He says,

Though science may consider the results of its research as absolutely certain truths, we do not regard science, but Scripture as infallible. If the results of scientific research contradict the clear Scriptures, we are a priori certain that they are nothing but positive error, even though we are not able to prove them erroneous except by an appeal to the Scriptures.³⁸

Such an ingenuous, assured attitude was no doubt irritating to many of his contemporaries and was construed as haughty and

³⁸ *LW*, 21 (Jan. 1875), 2.

condescending toward science. But really all this only reflects Walther's single-hearted loyalty and submission to the Holy Scriptures, a submission which will always be taken by some as either arrogance or obscurantism.

III. THE INERRANCY OF SCRIPTURE

The question of the inerrancy of Scripture is a relatively modern problem in the Christian church. Of course, there had always been those who assailed the veracity and reliability of the Sacred Scriptures, but they had been outside the church. Not until the late 17th century did Christians seriously express doubt concerning the absolute infallibility of Scripture, and then there were only a few such questioning spirits. The next century saw the rise of rationalism, which militantly attacked the authority and truthfulness of Scripture. C. F. W. Walther was well acquainted with this movement. He grew up and was educated among the rationalists. The 19th-century German theology had not been able to throw off rationalism altogether.

Throughout his ministry Walther faced an almost unbroken phalanx of theologians assaulting the fortress of Scripture. In his Foreword to *Lehre und Webre* of January 1886 he takes note of a statement of Professors Volck and Muehlau of Dorpat denying the inerrancy of the Bible. Had this statement been made in the 17th century a storm of protest would have arisen. But Walther observes in 19th-century Germany not one word of protest from any theological faculty. And why this silence? Because the statement represents the persuasion of modern theology. But such a view, Walther insists, denies the inspiration of Scripture. The Bible

then becomes a book which I must judge. I must distinguish the true from what is deceptive. I must separate the unessential from what belongs to the history of salvation. In short, to question the inerrancy of Scripture undermines all confidence in the foundation of the apostles and prophets.

The Meaning of Inerrancy

Precisely what does Walther mean when he speaks of the inerrancy of Scripture? Does he mean merely a material inerrancy, merely that Scripture is reliable? No, he means more than this. You may have a friend whom you consider reliable; yet on occasion he will make mistakes and say things which are untrue. Does Walther mean by inerrancy this, that Scripture unerringly teaches us concerning Christ and leads us to Him? No, as much as he would agree that Scripture never fails in its purpose, this is not what he means when he says that Scripture is without error (*frei von Irrthum*).³⁹ Does Walther perhaps mean that Scripture is inerrant and infallible because it says what God wants it to say? This would indeed comprise a part of his meaning. But he has something far more specific in mind. The fact that Scripture says exactly what God wants it to say may be considered the reason or the ground or the basis of the inerrancy of Scripture. But it does not tell us what inerrancy is.

What, then, does Walther mean by the inerrancy of Scripture? He means what the church has always meant, that all the declarative statements of Scripture are true, that they correspond to fact, that they correspond (as the case may be) to what

³⁹ *LW*, 13 (April 1867), 103.

has happened or to what will happen or to what obtains. Everything which is presented in Scripture as factual *is* factual. There can be no falsehood, no mistake, no slip, in Scripture. A correlate of the above is that there are no contradictions in the Holy Scripture.

Walther applied inerrancy to all of Scripture, and what he means is quite definitely factual inerrancy, formal inerrancy. At this point he identifies himself with the older teachers in our church, who had grappled with the entire problem and spoken strongly on the matter. He quotes with favor, for instance, the much-maligned statement of Quenstedt, and makes that statement his own confession,

The holy canonical Scriptures in their original text are the infallible truth and free from every error. That is to say, in the sacred canonical Scriptures there is no lie, no deceit, no error, even the slightest, either in content or in words, but every single word handed down in the Scriptures is most true, whether it pertains to doctrine, ethics, history, chronology, topography, or onomastics; and no ignorance, lack of understanding, forgetfulness, or lapse of memory, can or should be attributed to the amanuenses of the Holy Spirit in their writing of the Holy Scriptures.⁴⁰

Like the old orthodox Lutherans Walther believed that the inerrancy of Scripture must be accepted *a priori*. With all due respect for scientific endeavor, we must say the investigations of science cannot disprove the Bible, nor is science necessary to support the Bible's truthfulness. If the

conclusions of science disagree with statements of Scripture, the conclusions of science must be false.⁴¹ In other words, it is impossible for Scripture to err: We must believe what Scripture says on all points, before any empirical proofs are offered.⁴² And why must this be our attitude? Because Scripture is God speaking. "Whoever believes with all his heart that the Bible is God's Word cannot believe anything else than that it is inerrant (*irrtumslos*)."

Since inerrancy is due to the divine origin of Scripture, Walther realized that a weak position toward the doctrine of inspiration would usually involve a denial of the inerrancy of Scripture. This happens, for instance, when Hase and Beck make inspiration a matter of poetic genius only. It occurs also when Twisten restricts inspiration to only parts of the Scriptures.⁴³ On the other hand, Walther maintained that when the inerrancy of the Bible is questioned the divine origin of Holy Writ is certainly vitiated. The two hang together: the inspiration and the inerrancy of Scripture.

Inerrancy also touches the matter of interpretation. Walther believed that the New Testament interpretation of the Old was necessarily correct, for it was an inspired interpretation. To him any suggestion that the apostles took liberties or did not fully understand its meaning when interpreting the Old Testament was an outright denial of Scripture. There were many theologians in those days who did not hesitate to criticize the exegesis of the apostles in the New Testament. Meyer,

⁴⁰ *LuW*, 21 (Sept. 1875), 257. Cf. also Baier-Walther, *Compendium Theologiae Positivae*, St. Louis, 1881, I, 96. The statement is from Quenstedt, *op. cit.* I, 77.

⁴¹ *LuW*, 21 (Feb. 1875), 35.

⁴² *Was lehren, etc.*, p. 44.

⁴³ *LuW*, 17 (Feb. 1871), 33 ff.

for example, accused St. Paul of improper and Rabbinic exegesis in Gal. 3:16, where the apostle claims that the singular "seed" in Gen. 12:3 points to Christ.⁴⁴ Tholuck taught that Matthew (1:22) was mistaken when he made Is. 7:14 ("Behold, a virgin shall conceive . . .") refer to the birth of Christ.⁴⁵ Walther felt that such a spirit betrayed a lack of faith in God's Word, Scripture.⁴⁶ Christ promised that His apostles would be preserved from all error. Therefore their exposition of the Old Testament was authentic.⁴⁷

Arguments Against the Infallibility of Scripture

Let us now consider some of the specific arguments against the infallibility of Scripture. What sort of evidence did Walther's adversaries marshal? How did he reply to these charges?

Human Failings

It was said that there were human failings apparent in Scripture. This was the opinion of Kahnis, Luthardt, and others.⁴⁸ There was barbarous language in Scripture, bad grammar and logic. Purely personal judgments and differing viewpoints were also quite obvious. Walther actually offers little answer to this charge. It was an old canard, going back to the 17th century, and has often been answered. Bad grammar and different approaches, uncritical expressions, simply do not mean error. But all such picayunish charges annoy Walther

⁴⁴ *Kritisch exegetisches Handbuch über den Brief an die Galater* (Goettingen, 1862), p. 134.

⁴⁵ *Das Alte Testament im Neuen Testament* (Gotha, 1861), p. 42.

⁴⁶ *Was lehren, etc.*, p. 12.

⁴⁷ *LuW*, 13 (April 1867), 110.

⁴⁸ *LuW*, 21 (Sept. 1875), 259.

apparently when they are offered as factual evidence against the inspiration and inerrancy of Scripture.

Conflicts with Science

It was said that scientific facts often showed the Bible to be in error. Walther at this point merely denied the possibility of scientific facts being at variance with Scripture. They were not facts, he said, but suppositions.

No, not facts but suppositions which have been invented to explain the facts are what contradicts the Bible. But if there were even one point in which the Bible contradicted the assured and sober results of modern science, a Christian would simply reserve the solution of the difficulty for the school of heaven and stick with the word of Scripture rather than arrogantly try to become the master over Him who has created him and all other creatures together with all their knowledge.⁴⁹

Walther possessed a very high regard for science. "How could we call ourselves Lutherans, yes, even Christians, if we were despisers of science?" he asks.⁵⁰ Scripture certainly does not urge upon us a negative position toward science (cf. Moses, Solomon, Paul, Luke). But true science will never contradict the Bible. Walther recognizes that there will be many areas where gaps will exist between the findings of science and Scripture. When this occurs, he urges the Christian to be cautious and not to be overly disturbed if a solution is not at hand. Our faith does not depend, it cannot depend, upon our harmonizing all of Scripture with the findings of modern science.

Walther's counsel on this point is still

⁴⁹ *Was lehren, etc.*, p. 30.

⁵⁰ *LuW*, 21 (Jan. 1875), 4.

very timely and significant. He took a very dim attitude toward apologetics which would endeavor to demonstrate the truth of Scripture or Christianity. This is not the way to strengthen the church or to save the apostate world. Such an approach would betray an uneasy lack of faith in us, and it simply could not solve all the problems which loom up in continued succession. In other words, Walther feels that we will just have to live with many tensions; what we must do is place ourselves under the Scriptures and there to take our stand. Permit me to quote him at some length on this concern:

We are certain [he says] that there cannot be or ever is a real contradiction between Christian theology and true science, science *in abstracto*. But we are equally certain that it is not nor can it be the task of a theologian to reconcile our Biblical theology and science *in concreto*. The charge is indeed valid that in our efforts to lead the present unbelieving generation back to faith we make no attempt to demonstrate to the world the harmony of faith with science. But we see no reproach in this charge; rather we glory in it, and we will not, by the grace of God, permit anyone ever to rob us of this glorying. For we are very certain that it is not possible to help the present apostate world with the lie that the divinely revealed truth is in perfect accord with the wisdom of this world; only the preaching of the divine foolishness, of the old unaltered Gospel, can help the world. Paul as well as the history of the church of all ages and of every Christian testifies that the "foolish Gospel" is the power of God unto salvation to all that believe, to the Jew first and also to the Greek (Rom. 1:16). A person who has been won for Christianity by showing him that Christianity

can pass the sharpest probe of science is not yet won; his faith is no faith.⁵¹

Contradictions

A third claim against the inerrancy of Scripture was that there were definite contradictions in the Bible. Such a claim Walther, purely on a priori grounds, will not grant. If the Bible contradicted itself there would be error. But in fact the Bible does not contradict itself. Walther is wholly aware of the many discrepancies and difficulties one encounters in reading Scripture and in trying to harmonize passages and sections. Enormous tomes, attempting to solve many of these vexing problems, have been written. And many of these discrepancies, Walther was fully convinced, would persist and never be satisfactorily reconciled. When such difficulties arise Walther felt that the older Christian theologians had done the right thing. These old pious Christians regarded it as their duty to solve difficulties in Scripture in order to strengthen and confirm troubled consciences. "But when they came to certain difficulties which they could not solve, they humbly doffed their little doctor's hat, bowed before Holy Scripture, admitted that they were but poor students with the Holy Spirit as their Teacher and said, This difficulty will be fully solved; if not before, then certainly in eternity."⁵²

Erred in Minor Matters

A very common opinion in Walther's day was the notion that Scripture was infallible merely in presenting the message

⁵¹ *LW*, 21 (Feb. 1875), 41, 42. Translated in Francis Pieper, *Christian Dogmatics* (St. Louis, 1950), I, 164.

⁵² "Walthers Verdienst um das *sola Scriptura*," *LW*, 57 (April 1911), 157.

concerning Christ and the way of salvation. This was its purpose. However, when Scripture touched upon minor matters which did not concern faith and life (matters such as details of history, chronology, etc.) it often erred. And who will deny, it was declaimed, that much in the Bible is unimportant and peripheral? But such slips and accidents do not matter, just as it makes no difference when a poet makes mistakes.⁵³

Walther refuses to grant the assumption behind this whole argument. He believes that nothing is unimportant in Scripture, where the Holy Spirit Himself is the Reporter. There is purpose even in matters which may seem peripheral to us. If the order of events is sometimes *hysteron proteron* or apparently confused, all this has its foundation in the wisdom of God and cannot be called error. And whatever Scripture says concerning the order of nature, even in passing, God Himself says.⁵⁴ Commenting upon the theologians who have espoused the opinions mentioned above Walther has these strong words to say,

These, then, are believing theologians! May God have mercy upon their faith. For according to their words they don't believe half of what they ought to. Furthermore, by their course of action they do not distinguish themselves from so-called unbelievers in any way, but only by the degree of their concessions. One thing they have in common with each other: the Bible is neither inspired in the sense in which the Christian church has always

meant, nor is it, properly speaking, God's Word.⁵⁵

In a similar vein Walther says on another occasion,

Whoever thinks that he can find one error in holy Scripture does not believe in holy Scripture but in himself; for even if he accepted everything else as true, he would believe it not because Scripture says so but because it agrees with his reason or with his sentiments.⁵⁶

Higher Criticism

What was behind the many attacks against the inspiration and inerrancy of Scripture was higher criticism. The higher critics had been nursed with the milk of the prevailing and overweening rationalism of the day. Many of them disclaimed the possibility of miracles and entertained no predisposition toward the divine origin of Scripture. The Bible was a purely human product. The various books of the Bible were often considered to be a hodgepodge of different human records. The so-called positive, or conservative, theologians that Walther is primarily concerned with seldom went all the way with the higher critics. But Walther felt that they had conceded far too much to what he considered rank unbelief.

Kahn had denied the authenticity of the Book of Daniel, saying that it had been written hundreds of years after the prophet during the reign of King Antiochus Epiphanes. He brought forth many examples of what he thought evidence from the book itself to prove his point. The book, then, was a pious fraud; it was passed off as being written by Daniel.

⁵³ Johann Beck, *Einleitung in das System der christlichen Lehre* (Stuttgart, 1838), pp. 241 ff. This was roughly the position of Twisten and others.

⁵⁴ *LW*, 32 (March 1886), 65 ff.

⁵⁵ *Was lehren, etc.*, p. 17.

⁵⁶ *CTM*, X (April 1939), 255.

Moreover, it did not give actual history at all. Walther replied that according to Matt. 24:15 Christ believed that Daniel did write the book by his name, for Christ quotes certain words contained in the book as having been written by Daniel himself. This alone settled the question of authorship for Walther. No other evidence of any kind could assail the inference from Christ's words. Of Kahnis Walther has these very sharp words to say, "Whoever holds that Jesus is the Son of God will hold that Kahnis' statement to the contrary is blasphemous. Yes, blasphemous. I am not using too strong an expression."⁵⁷ Walther charges that a later writer assuming the name of Daniel would be guilty of the same crime as the popes who claimed to have their authority from the fraudulent Donation of Constantine. To him there is no such thing as a "pious fraud." Kahnis' position he calls "down-right unbelief" (*platteste Unglaube*).

Walther assumes the same attitude toward such an evangelical theologian as Delitzsch, who denied the Mosaic authorship of the Pentateuch. Delitzsch projected a rather unique view concerning the authorship of the first five books of Scripture. He said there were five sources, or factors, going into the writing of these books. First, there was the author who was called the Jehovist. Second, there was the basic source material which he used. Third, there was the framework given the book itself. Fourth, there were certain other sources which were brought in and used. Fifth, there was the historical method. To all this Walther replies,

Who then of these five was really inspired? Was it the Jehovist, or the source

material, or the building of the framework, or the historical method, or the notations brought from other sources? Perhaps all five. But if it was all five, then in any case the poor Bible in this matter is in error for it designates Moses as the author of all the books.⁵⁸

Walther in the last sentence is no doubt thinking of the statements of Christ which indicate that He believed in the Mosaic authorship of the Pentateuch. It is clear that matters of authorship and authenticity do often touch the problem of inerrancy so far as Walther is concerned.

Delitzsch also believed that there were errors of thought and arrangement in Scriptures inasmuch as the writers' spiritual ability was not always perfect. Walther does not relish taking issue so strongly with such a pious theologian as Delitzsch, but he must.

How in all the world [he says] is it possible that a man like Prof. Delitzsch, so undoubtedly God-fearing, could in such a way place himself over the Word of the living God? I believe there is only one explanation for it. Like hundreds of others of his kind he has not been content to remain in the simplicity of our faith. He has desired to say and to be something special.⁵⁹

Practical Concerns

Walther's concerns in defending the truthfulness of Scripture are the same as those which prompt him to fight for Scripture's inspiration and authority. They are practical.

If we conceded that only the least error could be present in the Bible, then it is

⁵⁸ Ibid. 31. Cf. Franz Delitzsch, *Die Genesis* (Leipzig, 1853), p. 234.

⁵⁹ Ibid. 35.

⁵⁷ *Was lehren, etc.*, p. 42.

up to man to separate the truth from the error. Man, then, is placed above the Scriptures, and Scripture ceases to be the source and norm of faith. Human reason is made the norm of truth, and Scripture sinks to the position of a *norma normata*. The least deviation from the old inspiration doctrine introduces a rationalistic germ into theology and contaminates the whole body of doctrine.⁶⁰

And Walther is prepared to show that a low opinion of Scripture or doubt concerning its inerrancy will usually result in many aberrations and false teachings. When von Hofmann implies that there are errors in Scripture, it is by no means surprising that he denies also the vicarious atonement, the Biblical Christology, and other points. Walther believes that to build all our theology upon Scripture is the only sound platform for Christian action. And this involves an inerrant Scripture. To this we will surely wish to voice our hearty Amen.

Lessons from Walther

There are, I believe, two lessons we might learn from Walther's discussions and emphasis upon the authority and infallibility of Scripture. First, we might recall what he once said about theology moving as the waxing and waning of the moon. In other words, old errors and opinions have a way of cropping up in new dress. We today have seen this. The old heresies which Walther opposed in his day are still being advanced. Present neo-orthodoxy is saying something about Scripture and revelation quite like what those old positive theologians said. In a very true sense the neo-orthodox theologians today are re-purification theologians; they are not very

original. In opposing this theology we will find Walther can be of great help to us. He faced many of the same problems we face. And he manifested a firm confidence in the God of Scripture, a confident spirit which will serve as a mighty example to us all when we become confused or hesitant in confessing the truth. Today we must speak forthrightly as he spoke. For nothing has happened, nothing can happen, to make us change our stand on the inspiration and infallibility of Scripture.

Second, we might learn from Walther that conviction regarding the divine origin and inerrancy of Scripture does not lead anyone into legalism and atomistic exegesis but to a correct use of the Bible. And such a conviction springs from a true love and devotion to the Bible and from the correct use of the Bible. Listen to Walther,

As we ask in reference to all doctrine: What saith the Scripture? so we ask also in respect to the doctrine of inspiration: What does Scripture itself say in regard to its majesty and origin? And what Scripture says we believe, teach, and confess. From Scripture, and only from Scripture, have we constructed our knowledge concerning inspiration; therefore we bow to the Scriptures.⁶¹

In other words, our position regarding the origin and infallibility of Scripture is Scriptural, and it leads us to a true appreciation and love of the Bible. And so with Walther we confess,

We believe and are sure that this despised book is the truth, the Word of the living God.⁶²

St. Louis, Mo.

⁶¹ *LW*, 57 (April 1911), 157.

⁶² *Casual-Predigten und -Reden* (St. Louis, 1889), p. 304.

⁶⁰ *LW*, 34 (July-Aug. 1888), 196.