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Carl S. Meyer

Concordia Seminary, St. Louis

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Walther's Theology of the Word

CARL S. MEYER

C. F. W. Walther (1811—1887), the premier theologian of the Missouri Synod, was a dogmatician who relied heavily on the writers of Lutheran Orthodoxy of the 16th and 17th century. He made little use of the historical-exegetical method. John Philipp Koehler, the historian of the Wisconsin Synod, points out, for instance, regarding the proposal to have one joint theological seminary within the Synodical Conference in 1878: "Walther's hobby, the Latin disputation, with Latin the medium of instruction, as embodied in the Missouri proposals for the joint seminary was as antiquated scholasticism and besides would have kept the whole study of theology still more in subjection to the 17th century theologians of the Lutheran church."¹ One needs only to consult works like his *Die Stimme unsrer Kirche in der Frage von Kirche und Amt*, not to mention his edition of Baier, to see the truth of the contention that Walther relied on dogmatic expositions.

How did this stance affect his theology of the Word? The present article is the result of an investigation of this question. It is evident that Walther did rely heavily on the writers of Lutheran Orthodoxy for his formulations. His preoccupation was with the questions that they had dealt with. True, he knew the dictum of Christ that said that the Scriptures testified of Him. True, he knew that the Scriptures were

¹ *The History of the Wisconsin Synod*, ed. Leigh D. Jordahl (St. Cloud, Minn.: Sentinel Publishing Co., printed for the Protestant Conference, 1970), p. 153.

given to make men wise unto salvation through faith in Christ. However, his preoccupations often looked in other directions. His theology of the Word, evident even from his sermons, was not wholly Christocentric but tended toward biblicism. Only after investigation did this become evident to this writer. He did not begin with a proposition to be proved, but a question to be probed. The answer to the question, What is Walther's theology of the Word? points to the dogmaticians of the 16th and 17th centuries.

I. THE BIBLE IS THE WORD OF GOD

Walther used the terms Bible and Word of God interchangeably. To him the Bible is the Word of God.² Word of God, the

² He said: "Die Bibel ist doch Gottes Wort!" [C. F. W.] W[alther], "Einige Gedanken über die Herrlichkeit und Kostbarkeit des heiligen Bibelbuchs," *Der Lutheraner*, XXVIII (15 Dec. 1871), 46. All articles or books cited hereafter unless noted otherwise are by Walther.

In a prayer he said: "Sobald Du Dein geschriebenes Wort dem Menschen geschenkt hattest . . ." *Ansprachen und Gebete gesprochen in den Versammlungen der ev.-luth. Gesamtkirche und ihres Vorstandes* (St. Louis: Lutherischer Concordia-Verlag, 1888), p. 75.

He said in a sermon: ". . . die Bibel ist das Buch, welches Gott selbst geschrieben hat." *Lutherische Brosamen: Predigten und Reden, seit 1847 theils in Pamphletform, theils in Zeitschriften bereits erschienen, in einem Sammelband aus Neue dargeboten* (St. Louis: M. C. Barthel, 1876), p. 296.

". . . dass die heilige Schrift Gottes Wort sei . . ." *Die rechte Unterscheidung von Gesetz und Evangelium*, ed. C. L. Janzow (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1901), p. 321.

For evaluations of Walther's theology of the Word see: F[ranz] P[ieper], "Dr. C. F. W.

Bible, the Holy Scriptures, the Scripture are altogether synonymous to him; his favorite term, nonetheless, was *das Wort Gottes*. He speaks of the heavenly fire of God's Word,³ the bright star of the Word of God,⁴ God's saving Word, the Word of revelation.⁵ By these terms he means the Bible, the Scriptures of the prophets and the apostles, the canonical books of the Old and New Testaments.⁶ He scored the papacy for forbidding the laity to read the Bible in the vernacular, contrary to the explicit exhortations of the Word of God.⁷ To him it was the Book of books.⁸

When on 26 April 1872 Trinity Congregation in St. Louis celebrated the 25th anniversary of the founding of the Missouri Synod, the speaker for the occasion was the then president of Synod, Prof. C. F. W. Walther. Acknowledging that

Walther als Theologe," *Lehre und Wehre*, XXXIV (July and August 1888), 193—204; *ibid.*, XXXIV (September 1888), 264—67; Joh. Ph. Koehler, "Zum Gedächtnis von C. F. W. Walther." *Theologische Quartalschrift*, VIII (October 1911), 193—209, esp. p. 204; Th. E[ngelder], "Walther a Christian Theologian," in Wm. Dallmann, W. H. T. Dau, and Th. Engelder, editors, *Walther and the Church* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1938), pp. 10—41; Robert Preus, "Walther and the Scriptures," *CONCORDIA THEOLOGICAL MONTHLY*, XXXII (November 1961), 669—91.

³ *Brosamen*, p. 1.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 49.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 40.

⁶ *Jubelfestpredigt am 26. April 1872, als am Gedächtnisstage des fünfundzwanzigjährigen Bestehens der ev.-luth. Synode von Missouri, Ohio u. a. St., . . .* (St. Louis: Druckerei der Synode von Missouri, Ohio und anderen Staaten, 1872), p. 7.

⁷ "Das antichristliche päpstliche Verbot, die heilige Schrift in der Muttersprache zu lesen," *Der Lutheraner*, XXIX (15 Feb. 1873), 73 ff.

⁸ "Das Buch aller Bücher," *ibid.*, XXIX (15 March 1873), 95.

the Lord had done great things for this church body, he pleaded, using Ps. 119:43 as his text: "And take not the word of truth utterly out of my mouth, for my hope is in Thy ordinances" (RSV). He cited the provisions of the Synod's constitution which asked for subscription to the Scriptures as the rule and norm of faith and life and to the Symbols as the pure explanation and interpretation of the divine Word. He emphasized the Synod's acceptance of the Bible as a public avowal of the writings of the prophets and apostles as the revealed Word of God. *Gottes Wort und Luthers Lehr vergebet nun und nimmermehr* was written large on its banner, he said, and gave light and fire to its heart. This Synod has fully retained its conviction that the canonical writings of the Old and the New Testament are from the first to the last letter the Word of the great God inspired by the Holy Spirit Himself, the only standard of doctrine and practice, the only judge in religious controversies. This Synod, he said, has remained firm in the doctrine of the means of grace, teaching that the Word of God and the sacraments offer and convey grace and salvation. The Word of God is the power of God to save all those who believe; Baptism is the water of regeneration; the Lord's Supper is the supreme pledge of the forgiveness of sins.⁹ Those teachings of this Synod, which others regarded as new, are clearly revealed in the Word of God.¹⁰ To him the "word of truth" and the "Word of God" were identical, as they were to the Missouri Synod. The taunts of the enemies, *reine Lehre*,

⁹ *Jubelfestpredigt am 26. April 1872*, pp. 6—7.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 9.

reine Lehre, were answered with conviction:

Pure doctrine is the pure Word of God, the pure bread of eternal life, the pure seed of the children of the Kingdom, the pure source of faith and love, the pure well of divine comfort, in a word, the pure, sure, straight way to Christ and to heaven.¹¹

These attitudes are evident in the collection of prayers which Walther compiled, but which remained unpublished at the time of his death. It contains prayers which deal with God's Word.¹² In them he expressed thanks for the gift of the Word; he petitioned that this gift ever be regarded as a precious one.¹³ He prayed for fidelity to that Word.¹⁴ He asked for the Spirit's grace rightly to understand that Word.¹⁵ He pleaded in prayer that this Word might have free course for the salvation and edification of many who did not know it.¹⁶ He prayed that the officials of this blessed land of freedom in which his congregation now lived might be guided by the Word of God.¹⁷ Fervently he petitioned that he and his congregation might believe, follow, and cling to this Word and through it finally obtain everlasting salvation.¹⁸

In these prayers Walther showed that he

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 12.

¹² *Ansprachen und Gebete*, pp. 74—84.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 74, No. 1; p. 77, No. 7; p. 79, No. 10.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 75, No. 2, No. 3; p. 76, No. 5; pp. 80—81, No. 13.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 76, No. 4.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 77—78, No. 8; p. 81, No. 14.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 76—77, No. 6.

¹⁸ In each one of the prayers he comes to one or the other of these thoughts. See esp. *ibid.*, p. 82, No. 15; pp. 82—83, No. 16; p. 83, No. 17.

valued the Gospel of the grace of God as the Word of God. *Sola gratia* and *sola Scriptura* were not far apart in his theology, for he was, and that unashamedly, a faithful student of Luther's.

II. THE INSPIRATION OF THE WORD OF GOD

What about the characteristics of the Bible? There are primary and secondary characteristics of the Word of God and the Holy Scriptures. Their primary characteristics or properties, Walther pointed out in the words of the 17th-century theologian, Quenstedt, are: divine authority; infallible truth; sufficiency or perfection, i.e., they contain everything necessary to carry out their end and aim; perspicuity, i.e., intelligible clearness; the ability to do their own interpreting; the office to be rule and norm as well as judge; efficacy. Their secondary characteristics are: necessity, immutability, correctness of their sources, genuineness, and accessibility for everyone.¹⁹ Walther knew that the German theologians, among them A. F. C. Vilmar, von Hofmann, Kahnis, Delitzsch, Luthardt, opposed such an approach to the Word of God.²⁰ Those who maintained the new theories on revelation and on inspiration, the views evolved from an emphasis on the *Gottmenschlichkeit*, the divine-human characteristics, of the Scriptures were decidedly rejected by him.²¹

¹⁹ Quoted from Quenstedt, *Theol., didact.-polem.*, P. I. c. 4. s. 1. th. 8. fol. 86, "Was ist es um den Fortschritt der modernen lutherischen Theologie in der Lehre?" *Lehre und Wehre*, XXI (November 1875), 320.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 320—29.

²¹ "Vorwort," *Lehre und Wehre*, XXII (Jan. 1886), 3—5. It is possible that Walther stimulated the essay which was presented at the Pas-

Walther defined inspiration in the words of Baier, again, a 17th-century theologian, as the process by which God gave not only the concept but the words of everything He wished to have expressed by the sacred writers. This supernatural process transmitted the concepts and words to the intellect of the writer and motivated his will to commit them to writing.²²

Walther cited Quenstedt, who distinguished between inspiration and revelation. Revelation transmits the message in vari-

toral Conference of Missouri, G. St[oekhardt], "Was sagt die Schrift von sich selbst? (Mit Berücksichtigung der gerade auch neuerdings erhobene Entwürfe der neueren Theologie)," *Lehre und Wehre*, XXII (June 1886), 161—68; *ibid.*, XXXII (July and August 1886), 205—15; *ibid.*, XXXII (September 1886), 248—57; *ibid.*, XXXII (October 1886), 281—88; *ibid.*, XXXII (November 1886), 313—23; *ibid.*, XXXII (December 1886), 345—55.

According to F. P[ieper], "Dr. C. F. W. Walther als Theologe," *Lehre und Wehre*, XXXIV (July and August 1888), 193, Walther is *not* the author, although he agreed with it, of the article, "Was Lehren die neueren orthodox sein wollenden Theologen von der Inspiration?" *Lehre und Wehre*, XVII (February 1871), 33—45; *ibid.*, XVII (March 1871), 65—76; *ibid.*, XVII (April 1871), 97—106; *ibid.*, XVII (May 1871), 129—41.

See Walther's review of K. F. A. Kahnis' *Der innere Gang des deutschen Protestantismus in Lehre und Wehre*, I (August 1855), 247 to 248.

"Vorwort," *Lehre und Wehre* (January 1886), 1—12, attacked the position of Luthardt and Cremer, who wished to enlist Luther on the side of the new theories of inspiration.

Gesetz und Evangelium, p. 283.

²² "Was ist es um den Fortschritt der modernen lutherischen Theologie in der Lehre," *Lehre und Wehre*, XXI (September 1875), 257, as the thesis for the question, "Was ist die Inspiration?" Quoted from Baier's *Compend. th. positivae, Prolegomen.* c. 2, Par. 4. See Joh. W. Baier, *Compendium Theologiae Positivae*, ed. C. F. W. Walther (St. Louis: Lutherischer Concordia-Verlag, 1879), I, 93.

ous ways, e. g., by visions and dreams; inspiration is the action of the Holy Spirit which, as it were dictates (*in die Feder dictiert*) the words of the record. The sacred writers were the *manus, calami, notarii, tabelliones* of the Spirit.²³ Revelation always precedes inspiration; inspiration is always connected with the act of writing.²⁴ So, for instance, God revealed Himself on Mt. Sinai.²⁵ Jesus' entry into Jerusalem was a revelation of His divine majesty, both of His omniscience and of His omnipotence.²⁶ The record of God's revelation is given by the inspiration of God. This Word of God is the revelation of God's person, His work, His way of salvation.²⁷

In acknowledging the canonical writings of the Old and New Testaments as God's revelation, Walther confessed his adherence to verbal inspiration (*inspiratio realis et verbalis*).²⁸ The Bible of the Old and New Testaments is God's unchangeable, eternal Word, inspired word for word by the Holy Spirit, from Genesis to Revelation.²⁹ Wal-

²³ *Lehre und Wehre*, XXI (September 1875), 259.

²⁴ Quoted from Quenstedt, *Theol. didactico-polem.*, P. I. c. 4. s. 2. q. 3. fol. 98, in Baier, *Compendium*, ed. Walther, I, 94; and in *Lehre und Wehre*, XXI (September 1875), 257.

²⁵ *Licht des Lebens: Ein Jahrgang von Evangelien-Predigten aus dem Nachlass des seligen D. Carl Ferdinand Wilhelm Walther*, ed. C. F. Otto Hanser (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1905), p. 26.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 259.

²⁷ *Gnadenjahr: Predigten über die Evangelien des Kirchenjahrs von Dr. C. F. W. Walther*, ed. C. L. Janzow (St. Louis: Lutherischer Concordia-Verlag, 1890), p. 265. See also *Licht des Lebens*, p. 185.

²⁸ "Vier Thesen über das Schriftprincip," *Lehre und Wehre*, XIII (April 1876), 100.

²⁹ "Vorwort des Redacteurs zum vierten Jahrgang des Lutheraner," *Der Lutheraner*, IV

ther recognized the allegation that such a view of inspiration is a product of the 17th century. This doctrine, it was said, can no longer be accepted, although it may be maintained that the Bible contains the Word of God. "If this is so," Walther said, "then man must search out for himself what is God's Word, then man must stand above the Scripture, he must decide. Then when he decides, he stands above God, at least above His Word."³⁰ In support of his position Walther cited Article 4 of the Apology:

Truly, it is amazing that the adversaries are in no way moved by so many passages of Scripture, which clearly ascribe justification to faith, and, indeed, deny it to works. Do they think that the same is repeated so often for no purpose? Do they think that these words fell inconsiderately from the Holy Ghost?³¹

Here is the key sentence as Walther gave it in German: *Meinen sie, dass der Heilige Geist sein Wort nicht gewiss und bedächtlich setze, oder nicht wisse, was er rede?* — "Do they think that the Holy Spirit does not establish His Word surely and consciously, or that He does not know what He is saying?"³² In these words of the Apology, according to Walther, we must

(8 Sept. 1847), 1; *Gesetz und Evangelium*, p. 224; Walther's lecture on 13 March 1885, where he speaks of "die wörtliche Eingebung der Heiligen Schrift."

³⁰ "Dass nur durch die Lehre der lutherischen Kirche Gott alle Ehre gegeben werde, ein unwidersprechlicher Beweis, dass die Lehre derselben die allein wahre sei," Mo. Synod, Western District, *Synodal-Bericht*, 1873, p. 42.

³¹ *Triglotta*, p. 153.

³² Translation by the present writer. *Book of Concord*, ed. Tappert, p. 122: "Do they suppose that this is repeated so often for no reason? Do they suppose that these words fell from the Holy Spirit unawares?"

give very careful consideration to the fact that the Holy Ghost inspired these writings consciously. The Apology says in this article — so Walther interpreted it — that every word, every word-usage, the repetition of any word, every abbreviation, the style of the writers ("die ganze Art und Weise zu reden") had its origin in the Spirit of God, who inspired everything, not only the concepts or truths, not only the general meaning or intent, not only the "what" but also the "how." The Holy Spirit chose the very words which were necessary so that God's meaning would actually be revealed to us.³³

According to Walther, Holy Writ itself teaches this doctrine of inspiration (Matt. 10:19, 20; 1 Cor. 2:13; Mark 12:36; Acts 1:16; Acts 28:25; 2 Tim. 3:16).³⁴ Walther claimed that he did not base his doctrine of inspiration on the Confessions of the Lutheran Church, but on the Word of God. He maintained that the Lutheran Church had taught this doctrine already in the 16th century; Luther, he said, taught that the Holy Spirit inspired the words of Holy Writ; Johann Gerhard, too, taught that the Scriptures are inspired.³⁵

Emphatically Walther repudiated the denial of verbal inspiration by Kahnis, Dieckhoff, Philippi, R. F. Grau, von Hofmann, Thomasius, Luthardt, Delitzsch, Kurtz, and others.³⁶ These modern theologians, who maintain that no book of the Scripture is to be relied on as the infallible Word (*unfehlbares Wort*), he said, are undermin-

³³ Mo. Synod, Western District, *Synodal-Bericht*, 1873, p. 42.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 43.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 43—45.

³⁶ *Lehre und Wehre*, XXI (September 1875), 258—62; Baier, *Compendium*, ed. Walther, I, 100—5.

ing the Scriptures by their critique.³⁷ Using rationalistic argumentations, Walther said that if there were only one error in the Bible, the entire Bible would be false; whoever does not accept every verse of the Bible overthrows the entire Bible; whoever does not believe every truth contained in the Bible, rejects all of the truths; if *one* word is unreliable, *no* word is reliable.³⁸ Those, therefore, who find *lacunae*, inaccuracies, contradictions, and errors in the Bible slander the Word of God.³⁹ With Quenstedt Walther believed:

The canonical Holy Scripture in the original is infallible truth and free from every error, or, what is the same, in the canonical Holy Scripture there is no lie, no falsehood, no error, not even in the least, whether in things or in words. But each and every thing (*omnia et singula*), whatever is recorded in it, whether these things are dogmatic or ethical or historical, chronological, topographical, onomastical, is absolutely true (*verissima*). To the amanuenses of the Holy Spirit, too, in the writing of the sacred writings, no ignorance, lack of knowledge, or forgetfulness, no lapse of memory can or dare be ascribed.⁴⁰

Since the Holy Scriptures are the Word of

³⁷ Mo. Synod, Northwestern District, *Synodal-Bericht*, 1876, p. 22; Mo. Synod, Western District, *Synodal-Bericht*, 1873, pp. 49—51.

³⁸ *Licht des Lebens*, pp. 566 f.; F[rantz] P[ieper], "Dr. C. F. W. Walther als Theologe," *Lehre und Wehre*, XXXIX (July and August 1888), 196—97, with reference to "Abendvorlesung über die Lehre von der Inspiration am 27. November 1885."

³⁹ "Inspiration der heiligen Schrift," *Lehre und Wehre*, XXIV (October 1878), 316; "Modern-gläubige Inspirationslehre," *ibid.*, XXVII (May 1881), 218.

⁴⁰ *Lehre und Wehre*, XXI (September 1875), 257—58, from Quenstedt, *Theol. didactico-polem.*, P. I. c. 4. s. 2. q. 5. fol. 112; Baier, *Compendium*, ed. Walther, I, 96.

God, the only *principium cognoscendi*, they must instruct us also, according to Walther, in matters of natural science.⁴¹

What about the difficulties in the Scriptures? No true, absolute contradictions can occur in God's Word, Walther said. If there seem to be such to a Christian, he must take his reason captive and believe both contradictory doctrines or statements.⁴²

In a Reformation Day sermon (1847) Walther said:

That principle that no deviation from the letters or the words of the Scriptures dare be made has built the Lutheran Church; she stands and falls with it. This principle stands at the masthead of her Confessions. This principle is the guiding star in all her battles. She operates according to this principle in all things. In a word, this principle is her heart and soul. If you ask, "What is a Lutheran?" you cannot answer more succinctly than by saying, A Lutheran is a Christian who clings tenaciously to the letters of the Scriptures (*an den Buchstaben der Schrift*). That is the characteristic which distinguishes him from every other Christian.⁴³

⁴¹ "Einladung zur Subscription," [a preview of Eirich's *Das Hexaemeron und die Geologie*], *Lehre und Wehre*, XXIV (February 1878), 48—51. See his lecture on 14 Nov. 1884, *Gesetz und Evangelium*, p. 55: "Daher ist es rein unmöglich, wenn man bei den Worten der Schrift bleibt, einen Irrthum oder gar einen Widerspruch aus der Schrift zu beweisen."

⁴² "Was soll ein Christ thun, wenn er findet, dass zwei Lehren, die sich zu widersprechen scheinen, beiderseits klar und deutlich in der Schrift gelehrt werden?" *Lehre und Wehre*, XXVI (September 1880), 257—70.

⁴³ "Predigt, gehalten am Reformationsfest, den 31. October 1847 in der Dreieinigkeitskirche der deutschen ev.-luth. Gemeinde Ungeänderter Augsburgischer Confession zu St. Louis, Mo.," *Der Lutheraner*, IV (16 Nov. 1847), 43.

Walther emphasized that the Old Testament, too, was given by inspiration of God; therefore it is the Word of God. This emphasis was made because of those who were ready to accept the New Testament as inspired of God, but not the Old Testament. Every sentence, yes, every word in the Old Testament, he said, has been given for a purpose,⁴⁴ for he accepted the verbal inspiration of the Holy Scriptures — *die wörtliche Eingebung der Heiligen Schrift*.⁴⁵ When objections are made that the Bible is a human book, *ein Menschenbuch*, and therefore not free from errors, fables, and untruths, and verbal inspiration is denied, reliance is made on natural religion, which claims no need for the revelation in the Word of God.⁴⁶ Those who claim to find even one error in the Sacred Scriptures do not really believe in the Bible as the Word of God; they believe what their reason or their heart tells them.⁴⁷

Even if almost all of Christendom has abandoned the doctrine that the entire Bible has been inspired by God, as we prize the glory of God so let us cling with Luther also in our day to the belief that not one word of Scripture is man's word, but that all words are the Holy Spirit's words, the wisdom of God without any

⁴⁴ *Epistel Postille*, pp. 13—14; *Lehre und Wehre*, XXI (September 1875), 262. Walther regarded the question of whether or not the vowel pointing of the original Hebrew text was inspired as a question of textual criticism, not a dogmatic question.

⁴⁵ *Gesetz und Evangelium*, p. 224.

⁴⁶ *Brosamen*, pp. 103—4.

⁴⁷ "Die falschen Stützen der modernen Theorie von den offenen Fragen," *Lehre und Wehre*, XIV (April 1868), 101. See also *Licht des Lebens*, pp. 218—19; *Gnadenjahr*, p. 572.

error, not a dead letter, but spirit and life.⁴⁸

The plea for the "free development" of evangelical theology Walther found horrible, because it placed a greater premium on liberal theology than on the Word of God.⁴⁹

In upholding the inerrancy of the Word of God, Walther acknowledged that there is a human side of the Scriptures. The Bible is not written in the language of heaven, but in languages spoken on earth (*dass das Wort Gottes sich in unsere Menschensprache und Menschenschrift eingekleidet habe*). As the Son of God became man, yet without sin, so the Word of God is clothed in the words of man, yet without error (*aber ohne Irrthum*). These words are truly words of men, not merely a simulation of men's words. This does not mean, however, said Walther, that these words are fallible; the Bible is the Book of Truth.⁵⁰ Nor will insistence on this point jeopardize or destroy the work of the Lord; a firm and unwavering insistence on the literal truth of the Word of God belongs to the ways of God.⁵¹ All pastors must stand in such awe of the Word of God that they will not deviate from one letter of it.⁵² Those who look to anything else for the pure doctrine than

⁴⁸ "Synodalpredigt, gehalten im Jahre 1873," *Der Lutheraner*, XXIX (1 Aug. 1873), 163.

⁴⁹ In "Kirchlich-Zeitgeschichtliches," *Lehre und Wehre*, XI (June 1865), 188.

⁵⁰ F[ranz] P[ieper], "Dr. C. F. W. Walther als Theologe," *Lehre und Wehre*, XXXIV (July and August 1888), 195—96, with reference to "Abendvorlesung über die Lehre von der Inspiration am 18. Dec. 1885" by C. F. W. Walther.

⁵¹ *Licht des Lebens*, p. 38.

⁵² *Gesetz und Evangelium*, p. 82.

to the clear words (*auf den klaren Buchstaben*) of the Word of God will be deceived.⁵³

Those who accept the Scriptures as infallible and inerrant (*unfehlbar und irrtumsfrei*) and remain with the letter of the Scriptures cannot err. "All articles of faith are clearly revealed in the Scriptures, and inasmuch as our church confesses these doctrines, she is the infallible mouth of God."⁵⁴ Walther regarded the doctrine of inspiration as a cardinal doctrine of Christianity.⁵⁵

Not so with the question of the canonicity of the antilegomena, for this, he held, did not belong to the articles of faith.⁵⁶ In the controversy on chiliasm in 1857 Schieferdecker called attention to Karl Roebbelen's article in *Der Lutheraner*, in which he expressed misgivings about the canonicity of the Book of Revelation. Roebbelen had written that he did not regard the Book of Revelation as canonical.⁵⁷ Walther did not agree with him. In spite of that he would not in any way brand

⁵³ *Licht des Lebens*, pp. 451—52; *Epistel Postille*, p. 70.

⁵⁴ "Thesen über Abendmahlsgemeinschaft mit Andersgläubigen," Mo. Synod, Western District, *Synodal-Bericht*, 1870, p. 27.

⁵⁵ "Vorwort," *Lehre und Wehre*, XXXII (January 1886), 6.

⁵⁶ "Ist derjenige für einen Ketzer oder gefährlichen Irrlehrer zu erklären, welcher sich nicht alle in dem Konvolut des Neuen Testaments befindlichen Bücher für kanonisch hält und erklärt?" *Lehre und Wehre*, II (July 1855), 204—16; Baier, *Compendium*, ed. Walther, I, 149—53.

⁵⁷ [Karl] Roebbelen, "Die Offenbarung St. Johannis," *Der Lutheraner*, XII (22 April 1856), 140. See the defense that Revelation is "ein untrügliches Gotteswort," by G. Schieferdecker. "Die canonische Ansehen der Offenbarung St. Johannis," *Der Lutheraner*, XII (1 July 1856), 177—80.

anyone, he says, who doubted the canonicity of one or the other antilegomena as an irresponsible teacher of false doctrine. This would be un-Lutheran. The Lutheran church fathers of the 16th century generally regarded the antilegomena as uncanonical without being guilty of rashness or wantonness.⁵⁸ Walther explained:

I confess that I believe the Apocalypse to be the work of an apostle and God's revealed Word from beginning to end. However, I have neither the right to force my conviction on Synod as a law nor, I believe, [the right] to dare to refuse the essay of a brother for publication in the *Lutheraner*, who harbors the same doubt as Luther about the Book of Revelation, without calling into question the prophecies contained in it.⁵⁹

Walther followed Luther in the latter's teachings about the Scriptures.⁶⁰ Luther, he was convinced, taught the verbal inspiration (*die wörtliche Inspiration*) of all of the canonical books of the Old and New Testaments. There was no difference between the "young Luther" and the "old Luther" on this point.⁶¹ Luther believed in plenary inspiration, its sufficiency, its inerrancy also in matters of science and of chronology. Here are the 13 generalizations which Walther supported with quotations from Luther's writings:

⁵⁸ "Ist derjenige für einen Ketzer oder gefährlichen Irrlehrer zu erklären, welcher nicht alle in dem Konvolut des Neuen Testaments befindlichen Bücher für kanonisch hält und erklärt?" *Lehre und Wehre*, II (July 1856), 204; see pp. 204—16 for the entire article.

⁵⁹ Mo. Synod, *Synodal-Bericht*, 1857, p. 33.

⁶⁰ "Warum sollen wir Lutheraner noch heute, wie einst Luther, ohne alles Wanken beim Wort bleiben?" *Der Lutheraner*, XXVII (15 Nov. 1870), 41—44.

⁶¹ "Vorwort," *Lehre und Wehre*, XXXII (February 1886), 33.

1. The entire Bible is the work of the Holy Spirit.
2. There is a specific difference between a prophet in the actual sense [of the term], and a man of worldly wisdom, and a pure teacher who has been illuminated mediately.
3. There is nothing superfluous in Holy Writ.
4. Holy Writ is free from error.⁶²
5. Nowhere is Scripture in contradiction with itself.
6. Immeasurably much is dependent on every letter and tittle of the Scriptures, and the entire Church is bound to every one of them.
7. The characteristic, simple presentations of the Scriptures, also the descriptions found in them of matters in themselves insignificant, have God the Holy Spirit Himself as the author.
8. Also when the Scriptures report sexual matters which are offensive to the natural feelings, the Holy Spirit Himself is the reporter.
9. Also here and there the seeming lack of proper order which appears in the Scriptures has its reason in the wisdom of God the Holy Spirit.
10. Also that which Holy Writ says about natural history, God the Holy Spirit Himself says.
11. Also the chronological matters in Holy Writ are of divine origin.
12. The interpretations of the Old Testament which Christ and the apostles give are the authentic interpretations of the Holy Spirit Himself.
13. Also when a person cannot understand the Scriptures, he must regard

⁶² Ibid., pp. 36—43.

[treat] them with holy awe and acknowledge his ignorance.⁶³

III. THE WORD OF GOD, THE PRINCIPIUM COGNOSCENDI

In four theses on the *Schriftprincip* or the *principium cognoscendi*, Walther set forth the formal principle of theology. The canonical Scriptures, he reiterated, of the Old and New Testaments are the only source of religious and theological knowledge. Out of them alone principles or truths can be drawn from which the theologian can make conclusions which are essentially or specifically Christian or theological (*in esse suo specifico et proprio constituitur*). These are the only source and norm by which all doctrines and doctors, all teachings and teachers, should be judged and the only criterion in doctrinal controversies.⁶⁴

Walther refused to accept human reason, scholarship, or scholarly methodology as the formal principle of theology. Christian theology must be based on the Word of God and only on the Word of God.⁶⁵ With Johann Gerhard of the 17th century he held: "The only principle of theology is the Word of God; therefore, whatever is not revealed in the Word of God, is not theological."⁶⁶ He agreed with Quenstedt:

⁶³ Ibid., XXXII (March 1886), 65—77.

⁶⁴ "Vier Thesen über das Schriftprincip," *Lehre und Wehre*, XIII (April 1867), 97. Walther repeated this thought frequently in line with the first paragraph of the Epitome of the Formula of Concord. See *Der Concordienformel Kern und Stern*, part. II, 3—4. *Brosamen*, pp. 315—16.

⁶⁵ "Vorwort," *Lehre und Wehre*, XXII (February 1875), 39.

⁶⁶ Ibid., p. 40, quoted from par. 2 of Gerhard's *Loc. de creatione*.

The only and fitting [lit: belonging to the household], unique, proper, adequate and orderly principle of knowledge (*principium cognoscendi*) of sacred theology and of the whole Christian religion is the divine revelation contained in the Sacred Scriptures, or, what is the same, only the canonical Holy Writ is the incomplex (i. e., formal) principle of theology, as that from which all doctrines of faith are to be proved and deduced. The complex principle, however, is this proposition: Everything that Holy Writ says is infallibly true (*infallibiter verum*), to be believed and accepted reverently.⁶⁷

He took issue with F. A. Philippi, von Hofmann, Luthardt, and other German theologians who wanted to set up other principles of theology.⁶⁸

The acceptance of the canonical Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments as the only *principium cognoscendi* meant just that to Walther. Reason cannot be the source of eternal truths, not even the enlightened and regenerated reason of the believer. The world in its wisdom has failed to know God (1 Cor. 1:21); man's cleverness is no substitute for the Gospel, the power of God (1 Cor. 2:4-5, 14); intellectualism (Col. 2:8) can spoil faith. The Word of God, therefore, must be the source of religious and theological knowledge.⁶⁹ Nothing should be added or sub-

tracted from it, nor should any deviation be made from one letter of the same, whether to the right or to the left. Everything in it, Walther stressed, should be accepted in a childlike, humble, simple faith, as the words require.⁷⁰

Tradition cannot be the source of religious knowledge (Matt. 15:1-13). This, according to Walther, does not deny the worth of the *consensus* of the early church and of the church fathers of the first four centuries, of the Apostles Creed or the other ecumenical creeds of Christendom and the *articulis fidei*. These are *principiata* but not *principia*, subordinate to and not coordinate with the Scriptures.⁷¹ In the period before the Reformation the church did not regard the Scriptures as the only source from which all saving truth was to be drawn, nor the only rule and norm and judge of doctrines. It relied on the writings of the Fathers and the scholastics and thus, in effect, placed them above the Word of God. To Walther this was one of the chief factors which caused the corruption of the Church of Rome before the days of Luther.⁷²

During the Predestinarian Controversy Walther presented an essay to the Synodical Conference in which he maintained that it was reprehensible to base articles of faith on the authority of the Fathers. Such a procedure had to be rejected because it was against Scripture and against the doctrine of Scripture, which stated that faith

⁶⁷ Quoted from Quenstedt's *Theol. dedactico-polem.*, P. I. c. 3. s. 2. fol. 48, "Was ist es um den Fortschritt der modernen lutherischen Theologie in der Lehre," *Lehre und Wehre*, XXI (August 1875), 225, as the thesis for the question, "Was ist das Princip der Theologie?" Cited also in J. W. Baier, *Compendium Theologiae Positivae*, ed. Walther, I, 80.

⁶⁸ See the article in *Lehre und Wehre* cited in the previous footnote.

⁶⁹ "Vier Thesen über das Schriftprincip," *Lehre und Wehre*, XIII (April 1867), 98-99.

⁷⁰ "Vorwort des Redacteurs zum vierten Jahrgang des Lutheraner," *Der Lutheraner*, IV (8 Sept. 1847), 1.

⁷¹ "Vier Thesen über das Schriftprincip," *Lehre und Wehre*, XIII (April 1867), 99.

⁷² "Vorwort," *Lehre und Wehre*, XXVIII (January 1882), 1-6.

must be based on the Word of God in order to be a sure faith.⁷³

New revelations are not to be expected (Heb. 12:25-28; Matt. 28:19-20; Eph. 2:20). Walther rejected the thought that God would in any way reveal new articles of faith not clearly revealed in the Word of God.⁷⁴ There was a time when there were no written Scriptures. This was during the days from the beginning of the world until the time of Moses. As soon as God gave His written Word this written Word became the only rule, norm, and standard of true faith. From that time on every true prophet had to prove that his doctrine was in conformity with the Old Testament. The apostles, yes, Christ Himself, appealed to the Old Testament Scriptures to verify their revelation.⁷⁵

This does not deny God's revelation of Himself in His Son. God did reveal Himself in His Son, Walther maintained, in a perfect, clear, glorious revelation. The very angels had to leave heaven in order to see God in His clearest, most glorious, most perfect revelation. God revealed Himself in an act, not in words, in revealing Himself through His Son. This act is louder, more powerful, more mighty than all words, for it is an act of God (*eine Gottesthat*).⁷⁶ God revealed His essence, His love, in Christ Jesus, and this

⁷³ "Wie verwerflich es sei, Sachen des Glaubens aus den Schriften der Väter begründen und die Gewissen an die Lehrentscheidungen derselben binden zu wollen," Synodical Conference, *Verhandlungen*, 1884, pp. 5—75.

⁷⁴ "Vier Thesen über das Schriftprincip," *Lehre und Wehre*, XIII (April 1867), 99 f.

⁷⁵ *Epistel Postille*, pp. 345 f.

⁷⁶ *Festklänge: Predigten über Festtexte des Kirchenjahrs*, ed. C. L. Janzow (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1902), p. 91.

revelation is decisive for time and for eternity.⁷⁷ No new revelation is to be expected or sought. God's Word and the true religion are immutable and unchanging.⁷⁸

In maintaining the *principium cognoscendi* of the canonical writings of the Old and New Testaments, Walther upheld, too, their sufficiency (*perfectio, sufficientia scripturae*). They contain everything necessary for salvation. The Word of God itself speaks of its sufficiency (Deut. 4:2; 2 Tim. 3:15-17; John 20:31; John 5:39; John 5:46-47; Heb. 1:1-2; Heb. 12:26-28).⁷⁹ The Lutheran Church gives God all glory in teaching that everything that man needs to know for his salvation is contained in the Scriptures; we need nothing further. Holy Scripture is so constituted that every person can himself take everything out of the Scripture necessary to become sure of his salvation.⁸⁰

Consider earnestly: the Bible is that book which God Himself wrote, namely, with the hand of His holy prophets and apostles. . . . The Bible is the sun for the souls of men. . . . The Bible is the great well for the world, filled with the water of eternal life. . . . The Bible is the revelation which God has given us in the darkness in which men languished concerning Himself and that [eternal] life. . . . The Bible is the letter which God addressed to all men. . . . Yes, even more, the Bible is the divine Book of the Law, as all Christians admit, which God presents to mankind and wherein He has caused to be recorded what

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 148.

⁷⁸ *Licht des Lebens*, p. 37.

⁷⁹ "Vier Thesen über das Schriftprincip," *Lehre und Wehre*, XIII (April 1867), 100—1.

⁸⁰ Mo. Synod, Western District, *Synodal-Bericht*, 1873, p. 45.

He requires of every one and according to which He will, therefore, once judge all men.⁸¹

The *principium cognoscendi*, the Word of God, is clear. Everything that man needs to know for his salvation is revealed in it and every attentive reader of normal intelligence can readily grasp its grammatical sense (*claritas, perspicuitas scripturae*). The perspicuity of Scripture is definitely taught in clear passages of the Scriptures (Ps. 119:105; Ps. 119:130; Ps. 19:9; Prov. 6:23; 2 Peter 1:19).⁸² In the Scriptures every article of faith is clearly set forth in at least one passage.⁸³ *Scriptura in iis, quae ad salutem pertinent, perspicua est.*⁸⁴ To safeguard himself from error the believer must hold tight to the recognized fundamental truths of the Gospel and remain with the clear letter (*Buchstabe*) of the Scriptures. "What is written?" is the question he asks. The clarity of Scriptures enables him to stand firm as a rock, undisturbed by the wisdom or the cleverness of men.⁸⁵ The devil has always tried to make the clear Word of God obscure, to trick men out of their salvation.⁸⁶ The Bible

may appear dark and obscure at first; however, it is like the heavens. At first there seem to be only a few stars in the heavens. The closer and more intensively a person studies the stars, however, the more stars he sees and recognizes, until finally he cannot count the stars.⁸⁷

That there are some dark passages in the Scriptures must be granted. This obscurity, however, is a subjective one, not an objective one. Man, not God, obscures God's Word.⁸⁸ In the dark and obscure passages nothing different is or can be revealed than that which God revealed in the clear passages of His Word or which will become evident in its fulfillment. The unregenerate may indeed find the Bible difficult to understand; to him it is a scandal and foolishness, unless he is enlightened by the Spirit of God, who has given this Word to men (Jer. 8:8-9; 1 Cor. 1:23; 2 Cor. 4:3-4; 1 Cor. 2:14; Luke 24:27). This does not mean that he will not understand the grammatical sense of a passage.

Walther cited Luther on the twofold clarity and obscurity of the Scriptures and again referred to its objective and subjective perspicuity.⁸⁹ The Church of Rome teaches incorrectly that the Bible is not clear.⁹⁰ Indeed, the Scriptures seem to

⁸¹ *Brosamen*, p. 296.

⁸² "Vier Thesen über das Schriftprincip," *Lehre und Wehre*, XIII (April 1867), 100—1.

⁸³ "Wird Röm. 11, 25.26.27. eine noch zu erwartende solenne Judenbekehrung gelehrt," *Lehre und Wehre*, V (October 1859), 307—9.

⁸⁴ "Theologische Axiome," *Lehre und Wehre*, VII (January 1861), 9 (III, 1). According to E. A. Brauer in "Vorwort," *Lehre und Wehre*, XI (January 1865), 1, Prof. Walther was responsible for the series of "Axiome."

⁸⁵ *Epistel Postille*, pp. 349—52; "Warum sollen wir Lutheraner noch heute, wie einst Luther, ohne alles Wanken beim Wort bleiben?," *Der Lutheraner*, XXVII (15 Nov. 1870), 43.

⁸⁶ *Amerikanisch-Lutherische Evangelien Postille: Predigten über die evangelischen Pericopen der Sonntage und Hauptfeste des Kirchen-*

jahrs, 8th ed., (St. Louis: Druckerei und Stereotypie der Synode von Missouri, Ohio u. a. St., 1882), p. 147.

⁸⁷ "Einige Gedanken über die Herrlichkeit und Kostbarkeit des heiligen Bibelbuchs," *Der Lutheraner*, XXVIII (15 Dec. 1871), 46.

⁸⁸ "Wird Röm. 11, 25.26.27. eine noch zu erwartende sollene Judenbekehrung gelehrt?" *Lehre und Wehre*, V (October 1859), 307—9.

⁸⁹ "Vier Thesen über das Schriftprincip," *Lehre und Wehre*, XIII (April 1867), 101—3.

⁹⁰ Mo. Synod, Western District, *Synodal-Bericht*, 1873, p. 45.

be filled with contradictions to anyone who does not know the distinction between Law and Gospel.⁹¹ Not everyone, much less every one to a high degree, has the charisma of Biblical interpretation, said Walther, pointing to Rom. 12:6-7 and 1 Cor. 12:30 (cf. vv. 4, 10) as proof. To him, therefore, it was entirely permissible to go to the orthodox writers of the church to learn from them what they had to say about the Scriptures; this, however, did not preclude but included going to the Scriptures themselves to learn what the meaning of God's Word is.⁹²

Walther recognized the objection that men have interpreted the Scriptures in various ways and doubtless many have erred. It is possible to misinterpret the Word of God, he admitted, but not in those matters in which faith is based on the Word of God. God's Word is not obscure and open to misunderstanding, but clear and precise and sure in all articles of faith. St. Peter says that we have a sure prophetic Word. That believers of God's Word err in articles of faith is due to the fact that they follow their reason, their ideas, their feelings, their prejudices, or the opinions of other people, instead of the clear Word of God. The Bible is not a collection of oracles and riddles, which can be solved only by human ingenuity and cleverness. God's Word is clearer than the light of the sun; it enables the blind to see. God's Word is the infallible ecumenical council, the convocation of the

⁹¹ *Gesetz und Evangelium*, p. 56.

⁹² *Lehre und Wehre*, VI (July 1860), 193 to 197. See "Walther's Letter from Zurich: A Defense of Missouri's Unity and Confessionalism," trans. and ed. Carl S. Meyer, *CONCORDIA THEOLOGICAL MONTHLY*, XXXII (October 1961), 654—55.

prophets and apostles in which Christ Himself utters the deciding, unequivocal Word.⁹³ The Word of God is clear.⁹⁴ If the Scriptures were obscure and another authority were needed to determine the interpretation of those passages on which the articles of the Christian faith are based, they could not be the Word of God.⁹⁵ Blind reason cannot interpret the Word of God, nor can the perverse human heart. The Word of God interprets itself.⁹⁶

The divine authority (*auctoritas*) of the Scriptures is based on the witness of the Holy Spirit which they themselves give (1 John 5:6; John 7:17). This testimony connected with the historical witness of the early church proves their canonicity, authenticity, and integrity.⁹⁷ There are many powerful, incontrovertible proofs for the divinity of the Sacred Scriptures. The miracles, the acceptance of the Bible by countless numbers, the martyrs it has made, its wide dissemination are proof of its divinity. The most certain means for acquiring a firm conviction of the divinity of the Scriptures is the personal experience of the believer. This personal experience is based on the diligent reading, the ready acceptance, and the finding of Christ in the Bible.⁹⁸ The miracles are one pledge of the eternal verity of the Gospel of Christ; a second are the fulfilled prophecies. Walther maintained:

⁹³ "Erste Synodalpredigt im Jahre 1870," *Der Lutheraner*, XXVII (1 Sept. 1870), 3.

⁹⁴ *Gesetz und Evangelium*, p. 27.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 54.

⁹⁶ "Vorwort des Redacteurs zum vierten Jahrgang des *Lutheraner*," *Der Lutheraner*, IV (8 Sept. 1847), 1.

⁹⁷ "Vier Thesen über das Schriftprincip," *Lehre und Wehre*, XIII (April 1867), 103.

⁹⁸ *Brosamen*, pp. 305—9.

The first seal of the deity of Christ and the divinity of His Gospel and of His church are the miracles, by which everything has been substantiated. . . .

A second seal of Christ and His Word are the miracles, which are found in all parts of the Sacred Scriptures and which in part already have been substantiated as revelations of God by their wonderful fulfillment and which in part are yet being substantiated before our eyes. If the Bible were not the Word of God, how could its writers, in part more than a thousand years previously, have proclaimed the Savior who was to come, and have described beforehand most exactly even the incidental circumstances of His family, as we call them, His birth, His life, His suffering and death, His resurrection and ascension? . . . Did not Christ prophesy everything so plainly that now even the enemies of the Gospel must view the literal fulfillment of His words with wonder and amazement? Where is there another book in the world which has such a seal of its divine origin as has our Bible? The peoples of other religions also have their Bibles: the Muslim calls his Bible the Koran; the Hindu calls his the Vedas; the Persian calls his the Zend-Avesta. However, although all of these religious books are set forth as divine revelations, no miracle has occurred to substantiate them, not one genuine prophecy of an incidental nature has been fulfilled, while our Bible points to countless ones.

To this must be added that the teachings of the Scriptures have demonstrated a power on the hearts of men which no human word can have.⁹⁹

To every Christian the Word of God must be infallibly certain.¹⁰⁰

⁹⁹ *Licht des Lebens*, pp. 636—38.

¹⁰⁰ Mo. Synod, Northwestern District, *Synodal-Bericht*, p. 25.

By acknowledging the canonical Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments as the only source of religious truth (*principium cognoscendi*), we acknowledge that the Scriptures can be interpreted only by themselves, not from an individual's interpretation of the truth, ἰδίας ἐπιλύσεως (2 Peter 1:20). The prophets had to prove the authenticity of their prophecies by an agreement with Moses (Deut. 13:1-5). The Holy Spirit as the author (*Urheber*) of the Bible is its authentic interpreter. Therefore we acknowledge, Walther taught, only those interpretations to which we are compelled by the Holy Scriptures.¹⁰¹

Therefore we recognize no person as an authentic interpreter and no interpretation as correct because it has been given us by someone, or persons of some social class, or the church, be it the collective church (*ecclesia collectiva — synthetica*) or the representative church (*representativa — in Concilien vertretene*) in councils, but only because it has been *proven out of the Scripture* by the interpreters that it is the only correct [interpretation].¹⁰²

*Scriptura semet ipsam explicat.*¹⁰³ Walther was not an exegete; he was a systematician; above all, he was a preacher. He applied this rule in his sermonizing. He told his hearers this. A genuinely Lutheran church or congregation, he said, does not accept human reason, tradition, or new revelations as the foundation of its faith. It accepts only the writings of the apostles and prophets. Therefore, it does

¹⁰¹ "Vier Thesen über das Schriftprinzip," *Lehre und Wehre*, XIII (April 1867), 103—4.

¹⁰² *Ibid.*, p. 103.

¹⁰³ "Theologische Axiome," *Lehre und Wehre*, VII (January 1861), 10 (III, 9).

not make reason or tradition or new revelations the basis for interpreting the Scriptures. Even if something in the Bible seems to contradict reason, even if there seems to be centuries-long unanimity, even if a new revelation seems to be substantiated by miracles and signs, if it contradicts the clear, plain words of Scriptures, it must be rejected as erroneous. No one, no priest, no bishop, no church father so-called, no council, no synod, no ministerium, no ecclesiastical assembly can be regarded as the highest interpreter of Scripture. Scripture alone can be its interpreter, that is, the Holy Spirit who Himself speaks in the Scriptures. "*Schrift durch Schrift*", so lautet auch ihr höchster Auslegungs-Grundsatz."¹⁰⁴

Walther deduced a number of corollaries out of the proposition that the Scriptures must be their own interpreter. They may be summarized as follows:

- a. The interpretation must be based on the original;
- b. It must be grammatical (as God took on human nature without sin, so God's Word took on human language without error);
- c. It must be literal, that is, it must give the sense which the Holy Spirit intended;
- d. It must give only one sense to one word or sentence (not typical, allegorical, or parabolical);
- e. It must accord with the purpose and context (*scopus et nexus*) of the passage;
- f. It must recognize, if called for, figures of speech;
- g. It must not arbitrarily postulate a figure of speech, but it must be substan-

¹⁰⁴ *Brosamen*, p. 316.

tiated by the context, a parallel passage, or the analogy of faith;

- h. It must be based on clear passages of the Scriptures when it deals with dark and obscure passages;
- i. It must not establish an article of faith by an incidental phrase or with obscure passages;
- k. It must be in conformity with the *analogia fidei* (according to Rom. 12:7 the chief hermeneutical rule);
- l. It must establish itself as the undoubtedly correct one;
- m. It must give the meaning of the Old Testament in the light of the New Testament.¹⁰⁵

IV. THE WORD AND THE MEANS OF GRACE

In his theology Walther established a close nexus between his theology of the Word and his theology of the means of grace. The saving power of the Word of Christ was to Walther¹⁰⁶ the clearest proof for its divinity. In those who accept it, the works of the devil are destroyed; it is mightier than all the powers of the prince of this world. Those who accept it must give themselves wholly to Christ, its author; if they fall away from it, they are worse than before. Such a word can be only the Word of the almighty and holy God.¹⁰⁷

¹⁰⁵ "Vier Thesen über das Schriftprincip," *Lehre und Wehre*, XIII (April 1867), 104—11.

¹⁰⁶ No author is given for the sermon outline on the theme "Die heiligende Kraft des Wortes Christi, der deutlichste Beweis der Göttlichkeit desselben," *Lehre und Wehre*, XVII (March 1871), 83. The style is similar to Walther's. The outline, however, is not used in any sermon of Walther's known to this writer. Walther at the very least saw and approved of this outline before it was printed.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 83—84.

Walther in his teaching and preaching emphasized that the Word of God is a means of grace, the power of God unto salvation to all that believe (1 Cor. 1:18). He could speak of "the power of the Word of God and of all means of grace."¹⁰⁸ The Word of God gives spirit and life.¹⁰⁹ The written Word of God is the only source of saving truth, he said, a position which Luther maintained until his death.¹¹⁰

Consider: the Word is the only light of truth . . . the only foundation of faith . . . the only spiritual weapon . . . the only source of comfort . . . the only anchor of hope. . . . For if you remain in the Word, then no might of flesh and sin, world and the devil can overcome you, then you are Christ's true disciple, a member of His true church; the truth will be the sun of our soul, eternal liberty will be your portion.¹¹¹

The only means by which true Christianity can be engendered in a person is the preaching of the mighty acts of God for salvation of the world.¹¹² Walther pointed out that the first and most important step to eternal salvation is to hear, read, and meditate on the Word of God. If a person does not want to do that, he said, there is no help for him. The Holy Spirit does not work immediately, without means; He works mediately, through means. The *Word*, he emphasized, is the only means

¹⁰⁸ *Brosamen*, p. 65. See also *Gnadenjahr*, p. 446.

¹⁰⁹ *Gesetz und Evangelium*, p. 152.

¹¹⁰ "Vorwort," *Lehre und Wehre*, XXVIII (February 1882), 54.

¹¹¹ "Warum sollen wir Lutheraner noch heute, wie einst Luther, ohne alles Wanken beim Wort bleiben?" *Der Lutheraner*, XXVII (15 Nov. 1870), 44.

¹¹² *Epistel Postille*, p. 270.

through which the Spirit of God operates — also in Baptism and the Lord's Supper. This Word of God points men the way to heaven. It awakens those who are spiritually dead, giving them spiritual life; it enlightens them, so that they know themselves and Jesus Christ aright. The Word of God produces faith in Christ. Faith comes by preaching, he said, in obvious reference to Rom. 10:17, and preaching from the Word of God. So long as a person hears the Word of God there is still hope for his conversion; if an unconverted person refuses to hear God's Word and stubbornly maintains this refusal, he will not be saved, although even on his death-bed he could be converted by a Word of God that he has heard previously.

As vital as the hearing, reading, and meditating on God's Word is for conversion, so vital are they for perseverance. The Word of God is the believer's food and drink, the fuel of his spiritual fire, the water for his tree of faith. But it is not enough to be a hearer of the Word only; one must be a doer of the Word. By the Word is meant the Gospel and by the doing of the Word is meant believing in it. The Word of God is the power of God unto salvation to them that believe.¹¹³ The Word of God is of no consequence to the individual, if it is not believed; so, too, the Sacrament of Baptism, the *verbum visibile*, is of no consequence, nor is the Sacrament of the Altar, if faith is not there.¹¹⁴

Mere affiliation with an orthodox congregation and, therefore, a good acquaintance with the Christian faith are not

¹¹³ *Epistel Postille*, pp. 243—49; see especially the introduction of the sermon.

¹¹⁴ *Gesetz und Evangelium*, p. 336.

enough. An erring Christian, on the other hand, who relies entirely on Christ, will certainly obtain eternal life.¹¹⁵

Walther emphasized that Christ enters the hearts of the believers through the Word and Sacrament and thereby strengthens faith and increases love.¹¹⁶ This is the most glorious thing about the Word of God that those who receive and accept that Word have the forgiveness of sins and are redeemed from the bitter consequences of sin; they are freed from the wrath of God; hell and damnation are locked to them. Grace, forgiveness, the peace of God, quietness of conscience, adoption as children of God, and salvation are given them.¹¹⁷

The Word of God is the hand which offers men spiritual treasures, Walther taught. The Gospel is a spoken absolution, which everyone receives who believes it.¹¹⁸ The means of grace *really* bring grace. The entire Scriptures are replete with statements that the Word and sacraments bring the Holy Spirit.¹¹⁹ The Holy Spirit comes only through the Word of God.¹²⁰ In simple trust in the Word of God I receive, said Walther, the Spirit of God.¹²¹ The Spirit or the Gospel gives life.¹²² The Gospel calls us to Christ. As soon as we hear the Gospel and acknowledge that we have gone astray, no longer

withstanding the voice of the Good Shepherd, then are we His sheep indeed.¹²³ By the grace of God we acknowledge that the Bible is the Word of God, that the Gospel is the power of God to all who believe unto eternal life, that we have a sure anchor of our souls and a sure foundation of our faith.¹²⁴ The Gospel is a power to be experienced.¹²⁵

Walther dealt specifically with the doctrine of the means of grace in a presentation to the Western District in 1876. The doctrine of the Lutheran Church, he maintained, concerning the establishment, validity, power, and unchangeableness of the means of grace gave God all glory.¹²⁶ God ordained specific means in which He has placed His grace and by which He transmits this grace. These means are the Word of God, absolution, Baptism, and the Lord's Supper. When God's Word comes to us, God Himself speaks with us and gives us His grace. By Holy Baptism, He (God) says, we are saved. In the Holy Supper we have the forgiveness of sins.¹²⁷

God does not permit Himself to be grasped except by means of the Word. Whoever is of the opinion that he has grasped God, enfolded Him in his arms so to say, without the Word, perhaps with

¹¹⁵ *Gnadenjahr*, p. 480.

¹¹⁶ *Licht des Lebens*, pp. 1—19; see especially p. 14.

¹¹⁷ *Epistel Postille*, p. 393.

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 93.

¹¹⁹ *Gesetz und Evangelium*, p. 145.

¹²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 147: "Der Geist kommt nur durch das Wort."

¹²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 154.

¹²² *Ibid.*, p. 142: "Der Geist aber oder das Evangelium macht lebendig."

¹²³ *Gnadenjahr*, p. 256.

¹²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 436; *Epistel Postille*, p. 93.

¹²⁵ *Licht des Lebens*, p. 29; *Gesetz und Evangelium*, p. 184.

¹²⁶ "Dass nur durch die Lehre der lutherischen Kirche Gott allein alle Ehre gegeben werde, ein unwidersprechlicher Beweis, dass sie die allein wahre sei," Mo. Synod, Western District, *Synodal-Bericht*, 1876, pp. 18 ff. Thesis III, point 8 read: "Es erhellt dies unter anderem aus ihrer Lehre: von der Stiftung, Giltigkeit, Kraft und Unveränderlichkeit der Gnadenmittel." *Ibid.*, p. 19.

¹²⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 21—22.

his emotions, has put his arms around a cloud and is defrauding himself. Yes, he is making himself God, since he is making himself a means of grace which God has not made one. God alone can create the means of grace, because He Himself alone can give grace.¹²⁸

In keeping with the Smalcald Articles¹²⁹ Walther taught that the Word of God alone sets up articles of faith. Since God alone can set up articles of faith, it follows that God alone can establish the means by which we are brought to faith and kept in the faith.¹³⁰

The doctrine of the means of grace is inseparably connected with the doctrine of justification. Where the latter doctrine is not taught correctly, there the former, too, will be perverted. To find a difference in the efficacy of Word and Sacrament is a phantasy.¹³¹

The Word of God connected with the visible elements in the sacraments makes of the sacraments means of grace. There is no special power in the waters of Baptism apart from the Word of God.

We Lutherans learn from the Word of God and therefore we also believe, teach, and confess that the holy sacraments, Baptism and the Lord's Supper, are *means* of grace through which we are actually offered and given what God has thereby promised those who use them in faith.¹³²

The Word of God, "He that believes and

is baptized shall be saved" (Mark 16:16), is connected with the water of Baptism; this Word makes them more precious than heaven and earth and all the treasures of this world.¹³³ God's Word and promises are in and with the water of Baptism; therefore, Baptism works the forgiveness of sins, delivers from death and the devil, gives eternal life to all who believe. The Word of God connected with the water makes the water divinely powerful and makes it into a stream which flows out of the grace and mercy of God.¹³⁴ Naaman, Walther pointed out, experienced the difference between water and water connected with the Word of God.¹³⁵ The Word of God is combined with the bread and wine in the Lord's Supper to make this sacrament a means of grace. To the means of grace belong the Word of God and the sacraments, but only the Word and the sacraments.¹³⁶

To the Word of Christ belong also His holy sacraments, for the sacraments, Baptism and Supper, are nothing but the visible Word which Christ gave His church to be a pledge of His written Word (*das geschriebene Wort zu versiegeln*). Therefore, wherever Baptism is performed according to the ordinance of Christ, there the doors of the church are opened to the one being baptized. Where the Holy Supper is celebrated according to Christ's institution, there Christ comes and feeds and gives drink to His believing guests with His true body and blood for eternal life.¹³⁷

Walther gladly quoted Augustine, "The

¹²⁸ Ibid., pp. 23 f.

¹²⁹ *Book of Concord*, ed. Tappert, p. 295.

¹³⁰ Mo. Synod, Western District, *Synodal-Bericht*, 1876, pp. 25—29.

¹³¹ "Unterschied der Wirkung des Wortes und der Sacramente," *Lehre und Wehre*, XXVI (September 1880), 281—83; *Gesetz und Evangelium*, p. 258.

¹³² *Gnadenjahr*, p. 313.

¹³³ *Gesetz und Evangelium*, p. 171.

¹³⁴ *Gnadenjahr*, p. 316.

¹³⁵ Ibid., p. 319.

¹³⁶ *Gnadenjahr*, p. 446; *Pastoraltheologie*, p. 183.

¹³⁷ *Festklänge*, p. 298.

Sacraments are the visible Word."¹³⁸ The Word of God, the Gospel, can be heard; the sacraments can also be seen, for they are activities connected with visible things. What can be postulated of the Word of God can be postulated also of the sacraments, for they, too, are means of grace.¹³⁹

Walther had to examine carefully the question whether Baptism produces faith; the question resulted from a minor controversy within the Missouri Synod. Pastor E. G. W. Keyl and his Baltimore congregation took exception to a citation from Joh. Gerhard in *Der Lutheraner*¹⁴⁰ which, they claimed, contradicted the Lutheran Confessions.¹⁴¹ Walther found only an apparent disagreement between Gerhard and Luther. God's Word may come immediately from heaven, as when it came to Saul of Tarsus, or mediately through means of grace. Baptism has its power through the Word.¹⁴² In another connection Walther said that Baptism is God's Word and work (*Gottes Wort und Werk*).¹⁴³

Regeneration and faith are worked in every child that is baptized. Faith is kept alive in the child by the Word of God

¹³⁸ *Gesetz und Evangelium*, p. 149.

¹³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 148.

¹⁴⁰ [C. F. W. Walther ??], "Die Wirkung und die Notwendigkeit der heiligen Taufe," *Der Lutheraner*, XI (2 January 1855), 76.

¹⁴¹ "Einige Aeusserungen Johann Gerhards über die heil. Taufe," Mo. Synod, Eastern District, *Synodal-Bericht*, 1855, p. 21; *ibid.*, 1856, p. 28. "Bedenken über etliche im 'Lutheraner' mitgetheilte Aussprüche Joh. Gerhards, die Wirkung der heil. Taufe etc. betreffend," Mo. Synod, *Synodal-Bericht*, 1857, pp. 52—53.

¹⁴² "Referat des Herrn Professor Walther," *ibid.*, 1857, Appendix E, pp. 95—100 (subscribed "C. F. W. Walther").

¹⁴³ *Gesetz und Evangelium*, p. 18.

and early in life he is to be taught this Word of life.¹⁴⁴ God gives us parents and preachers for our comfort and for the forgiveness of sins. "Gott hat," Walther says, *sein Wort in ihrem Mund gelegt*.¹⁴⁵

The validity of the means of grace depends on God, not on man. The means of grace are only there where the Word of God is actually present.¹⁴⁶ The worthiness or the unworthiness of the officiant does not add to or subtract from the work of God. The character or the intention of the minister does not change the character or the intention of the means of grace, so long as God's Word is proclaimed or connected with them.¹⁴⁷ The right to speak the words of absolution are given not only to every pastor but to every Christian.¹⁴⁸

The power of the means of grace, therefore, does not depend on man, but on God. "Grace is already in the Word, in absolution, in Baptism, in the Supper; faith does not put it into them, but faith takes it out of them."¹⁴⁹

Although some Lutherans teach incor-

¹⁴⁴ *Gnadenjahr*, p. 320.

¹⁴⁵ *Gesetz und Evangelium*, p. 174.

¹⁴⁶ Mo. Synod, Western District, *Synodal-Bericht*, 1876, p. 38: "Hierbei ist jedoch zu bedenken, dass *die Gnadenmittel nur da sind, wo Gottes Wort auch wirklich ist.*" (Italics in the original)

¹⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 29—32. See p. 30: "*Die Frömmigkeit des Menschen macht die Handlung nicht gut, und die Gottlosigkeit des Menschen macht die Handlung nicht schlecht. Thun wir, was Gott geboten hat, so thut er, was er verheissen hat.*" (Italics in the original)

¹⁴⁸ *Casual-Predigten und -Reden von Dr. C. F. W. Walther*, ed. H. Sieck (St. Louis: Lutheranischer Concordia-Verlag, 1889), pp. 431 to 433.

¹⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 43. In the original a part of this statement is in italics.

rectly regarding absolution, it must be noted that according to the Word of God absolution is not merely the proclamation, but the extending (*Darreichung*) of the forgiveness of sins,¹⁵⁰ and may not be spoken conditionally.¹⁵¹ According to the Word of God and the Lutheran Confessions the sacraments actually give the forgiveness of sins.¹⁵² Absolution is not merely a declaration of the forgiveness of sins but a means (*ein Mittel und Organ*) by which grace and forgiveness are imparted to the penitent sinner. In private absolution God Himself speaks to the penitent sinner in the voice of the Gospel, by means of which without doubt God is active and forgives those who believe.¹⁵³ In his Word, the Gospel, in Baptism, in the Lord's Supper, in absolution God tells us He forgives us our sins. In everything that God does to assure us of forgiveness the Word has first place. This is true also of absolution. It all depends on the Word of God.¹⁵⁴

According to the Scriptures Baptism is not merely a bath in earthly water, but the Spirit of God is connected with it; yes, Jesus is there with His blood to wash me clean from my sins. . . .—According to the Scriptures the Holy Supper, too, is not an earthly, but a heavenly meal on earth, in which we are given not only bread and

¹⁵⁰ Ibid., p. 46.

¹⁵¹ "Ist die Absolution kategorisch oder hypothetisch zu sprechen?" *Lehre und Wehre*, XXII (July 1876), 193—97.

¹⁵² Mo. Synod, Western District, *Synodal-Bericht*, 1876, pp. 54—56.

¹⁵³ "Von der Kraft und Wirksamkeit der Absolution," *Lehre und Wehre*, XXIV (March 1878), 79. Walther's authorship of this article may be questioned. However, he was in full agreement with it.

¹⁵⁴ *Gesetz und Evangelium*, pp. 172—73.

wine, not only the body and blood of Christ, but with them we are offered and sealed the forgiveness of sins, life, and salvation. . . .—And finally, according to Holy Writ the absolution of a poor preacher is not his absolution, but the absolution of Jesus Christ Himself, for he absolves in accordance with Christ's command, in Christ's stead, in Christ's name.¹⁵⁵

The unchangeableness or immutability of the means of grace depends on the unchangeableness of the Word of God (Matt. 5:18-19).¹⁵⁶ Modern theologians who do not believe that every word of the Scriptures is the Word of God, who deny inspiration, who do not accept the Bible as the Word of God, are robbing God of His glory.¹⁵⁷

So, too, those who would make a prayer a means of grace are not according God the glory due Him. The Lutheran Church teaches, Walther said, that grace is not obtained by anything that a person does, but only by means of the Word of God and the sacraments. Prayer is neither a means of grace nor a meritorious act; it is an exercise of faith which acknowledges God's gifts of grace.¹⁵⁸

Walther spoke of the collative power of the Word of God. Perhaps calling it the "conferring" or "bestowing" power of the Word of God will make the meaning of this term plainer. Baptism not only prom-

¹⁵⁵ Ibid., pp. 142—43; see also pp. 162 f.

¹⁵⁶ Mo. Synod, Western District, *Synodal-Bericht*, 1876, p. 59.

¹⁵⁷ Ibid., pp. 62—63.

¹⁵⁸ "Dass nur durch die Lehre der lutherischen Kirche Gott allein alle Ehre gegeben wird, dies erhellt zehntens aus ihrer Lehre von der Anrufung und Anbetung Gottes," Mo. Synod, Western District, *Synodal-Bericht*, 1882, pp. 62—71 (Thesis IV).

ises the forgiveness of sins, it bestows this forgiveness. The pastor in absolution not only pronounces absolution, but by his words God imparts, confers, bestows the forgiveness of sins.¹⁵⁹ Walther could therefore plead with his hearers: "Do not despise my voice. I am not really the one who is speaking to you. It is God who through His Word stands before your hearts."¹⁶⁰

The Word of God is the true source of comfort and consolation.¹⁶¹ The Old Testament, too, has been given for the comfort of the Christian and for hope; in it, too, the Gospel is to be found, a firm foundation for a lively hope.¹⁶² In times of trial and temptations, *Anfechtungen*, the believers must turn to the sure and certain Word of God, "the Word of the God of heaven and earth, who has promised them salvation." Not the emotions and feelings but the Word of God can give light, life, power, certainty, and comfort, for the Word of God, particularly the Gospel, is the Christian's guiding star.¹⁶³ Only that faith which is grounded in the Word of God is a true faith; such a faith produces fruits, among which is a certainty of the truth of God's Word.¹⁶⁴ The written Word of God is the proper weapon for believing Christians for overcoming the temptations and trials (*Versuchungen und Anfechtungen*) of their faith, whether they be to-

ward unbelief, false belief, or little faith.¹⁶⁵ Through this Word of God the temptations to doubt and to false doctrine can be overcome.¹⁶⁶ In all doubts and temptations the believer must rely on the promises in the Word of God, the promise of God's grace, the promise of heaven, the promise of eternal bliss. The protestations of a doubting heart or of an uneasy conscience cannot cancel out the clear, sure promises of the Word of God.¹⁶⁷

Walther's theology of Law and Gospel has its origin and its validation in the Word of God. Twenty of the twenty-five theses which he set up on the proper distinction between Law and Gospel begin with the words "*Das Wort Gottes*" or "*Gottes Wort*."¹⁶⁸ Anything said, therefore, on this aspect of Walther's theology or of his doctrine of the Word can be only a recapitulation of what he says in his *Die rechte Unterscheidung von Gesetz und Evangelium*.¹⁶⁹

The Old and New Testaments in their doctrinal content, Walther taught, are made up of two diametrically opposed doctrines, the Law and the Gospel.¹⁷⁰ The ability to distinguish properly between the Law and the Gospel is a characteristic of an orthodox teacher.¹⁷¹ It is a difficult task, however, to distinguish between the

¹⁵⁹ *Gesetz und Evangelium*, p. 139.

¹⁶⁰ *Gnadenjahr*, p. 528.

¹⁶¹ *Epistel Postille*, p. 93; *Gnadenjahr*, p. 553.

¹⁶² *Epistel Postille*, pp. 17—19.

¹⁶³ *Gnadenjahr*, pp. 70—74.

¹⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 93—103; *Licht des Lebens*, pp. 138—41.

¹⁶⁵ *Licht des Lebens*, p. 208; *Festklänge*, p. 285.

¹⁶⁶ *Licht des Lebens*, p. 448.

¹⁶⁷ *Licht des Lebens*, p. 226.

¹⁶⁸ *Gesetz und Evangelium*, pp. 1—4.

¹⁶⁹ W. H. T. Dau translated the German edition of 1897 in English into *The Proper Distinction Between Law and Gospel: Thirty-Nine Evening Lectures by Dr. C. F. W. Walther* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1929).

¹⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, Thesis I.

¹⁷¹ *Ibid.*, Thesis II.

Law and the Gospel; the Spirit of God Himself must give the theologian the ability to do so.¹⁷² Without the cognition for such differentiation the theologian possesses no understanding of the Scriptures or the Word of God.¹⁷³ Those who teach that the Gospel is anything less than the full and the free grace of God in Christ, that it calls for even a bit of man's doing toward his salvation, are most grossly confounding Law and Gospel.¹⁷⁴ Those who deprive the Gospel of the least measure of its sweetness or diminish the full fury of the Law are not rightly dividing the Word of God.¹⁷⁵ Nor are they rightly dividing the Word of God who confuse sanctification and justification, faith and repentance, grace and good works.¹⁷⁶ As the Law and

Gospel differ in their content, in their promises and threats, in their functions and effects, so they differ also in respect to the persons to whom they must be applied.¹⁷⁷ Prayer is not the answer to consciences terrified by the Law; the Gospel is.¹⁷⁸ For the proper division of the Word of God faith must be defined properly,¹⁷⁹ comfort must have its proper basis,¹⁸⁰ contrition must be evaluated for what it is,¹⁸¹ and belief must be properly based on the Gospel promises.¹⁸² Faith, according to the Word of God, is not a condition of justification or salvation as a required work.¹⁸³

St. Louis, Mo.

¹⁷² Ibid., Thesis III.

¹⁷³ Ibid., Thesis IV.

¹⁷⁴ Ibid., Thesis V.

¹⁷⁵ Ibid., Thesis VI.

¹⁷⁶ Ibid., Thesis VII.

¹⁷⁷ Ibid., Thesis VIII.

¹⁷⁸ Ibid., Thesis IX.

¹⁷⁹ Ibid., Thesis X.

¹⁸⁰ Ibid., Thesis XI.

¹⁸¹ Ibid., Thesis XII.

¹⁸² Ibid., Thesis XIII.

¹⁸³ Ibid., Thesis XIV.