
Christoph Barnbrock

Carl Ferdinand Wilhelm Walther (1811–1887)*

On January 15, 1837, twenty-five year old Carl Ferdinand Wilhelm Walther was ordained in Bräunsdorf (Saxony).¹ On this occasion he preached on Jeremiah 1:6–8. Celebrating the fiftieth anniversary of that event, which he did while sick in bed, was the last major occurrence in his life before he passed away on May 7 of that year. The ministry and work of Walther are in a way framed by these two incidents.

Walther's ordination anticipated and prefigured many of the characteristic issues of his life. Ordination itself stands for the issue of church and ministry, which would be Walther's focus for the next decades. The verses from the first chapter of the book of the prophet Jeremiah also point to the Word of God that is to be proclaimed. This also was of high importance for Walther's life and teaching. And finally it is necessary to focus on the first words of the biblical text for the sermon he preached that day, in which the prophet Jeremiah describes how insufficient he feels to follow God's call. It is not a mere coincidence that Walther chose this of all biblical texts. He would continue to sense his inability to fulfill God's expectations throughout the next fifty years.

* In honor of my dear colleague Gilberto da Silva *on the occasion of his fiftieth birthday*

1 There are basically two major biographies on C.F.W. Walther: Martin Günther, *Dr. C.F.W. Walther. Lebensbild* (St. Louis: Lutherischer Concordia-Verlag, 1890), which also provides a lot of primary sources, and August R. Suelflow, *Servant of the Word. The Life and Ministry of C.F. W. Walther* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2000). – Cf. also my own biographical sketch in Christoph Barnbrock, *Die Predigten C.F.W. Walthers im Kontext deutscher Auswanderergemeinden in den USA. Hintergründe – Analysen – Perspektiven* (Hamburg: Verlag Dr. Kovač, 2003), 67–115.

Walther's Life

C.F.W. Walther's character was shaped by the fact that he was born on October 25, 1811, as the youngest son in his family and the second youngest child of those who survived childhood at all.² It is well known that the youngest children of a family often grow up under the impression that the older siblings are way more intelligent or more competent and that it seems almost impossible to catch up to them. But, on the other hand, many of those who are among the last to be born in a family have a strong motivation to try hard to achieve great results.³ The pressures that Walther likely experienced were probably intensified by the fact that his father, also a pastor, was so rigorous in his own education that his children hardly dared to look into his eyes.⁴ Walther's fear to fail becomes most obvious in some lines from his diary (Feb 8, 1829):

This is exactly what makes my soul depressed, that I know, even though my knowledge is still very superficial in every aspect; nevertheless my father reminds me, yes, my teachers and especially also my fellow students, that I do have the knowledge, yes, even more that I am a promising student. I am very much afraid of the moment when that error will be discovered. I am miserable and without any limits or parameters to hang onto.⁵

It can be easily shown that this was not just a transient self-perception, typical for an adolescent. The degree to which he was clear and direct in his theological teaching in the later years seemed to match the degree to which he was inwardly insecure. There are many documents that show his fears about preaching appropriately, about being well prepared for presentations, and about reacting adequately to matters in the letters of others.⁶ It is impossible to understand Walther if one does not recognize the "peculiar mixture of softness and firmness" in his demeanor, as one of his contemporaries put it.⁷ Not only was he concerned to arrive at correct theological positions, but he did so in the context of various afflictions that troubled his life.⁸

After graduating from a local *Gymnasium* Walther enrolled at the University of Leipzig in order to study theology. His older brother, Otto Hermann, seems to

2 For a table of all siblings, see Suelflow, *Servant of the Word*, 12–13.

3 See Jürg Frick, *Ich mag dich – du nervst mich! Geschwister und ihre Bedeutung für das Leben*, 3rd ed. (Bern: Verlag Hans Huber, 2009), 65–73.

4 See Günther, *Dr. C.F.W. Walther*, 3.

5 Quoted in Suelflow, *Servant of the Word*, 21.

6 For examples, see Günther, *Dr. C.F.W. Walther*, 21, 25, 129–132, 134–137, especially 136, 161–164, 171, 177, 202, 217, 221–223.

7 Quoted in Günther, *Dr. C.F.W. Walther*, 195 (my own translation).

8 See Christoph Barnbrock, "C.F.W. Walther and Affliction," in *C.F.W. Walther. Churchman and Theologian* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2011), 3–23.

have been of vital importance for this decision. The younger brother followed in his older brother's footsteps. Otto was also the one who had introduced his younger brother to a rather pietistically-minded student group.⁹ This was a crucial event in Walther's life, since now his general feeling of insufficiency assumed a new, spiritual, dimension. Walther was deeply afflicted by the question of whether he had experienced repentance to a sufficient degree. The person who most helped him with this problem was Martin Stephan, pastor in Dresden, who would in later years lead the emigration group to the United States. With Stephan's help Walther was able to overcome his spiritual afflictions.

When Walther served as pastor in the congregation of Bräunsdorf, he faced quite a few challenges. First of all he felt pretty uncomfortable with the agenda,¹⁰ the hymnal¹¹ and the school books¹² which were used in the kingdom of Saxony.¹³ All of these books had been deeply influenced by the spirit of Rationalism, which focused on human virtues and on Christ as the moral teacher of humankind. Issues like sin and redemption were de-emphasized and even undermined in these publications. Second, there were also personal conflicts (partly linked to theological issues) between Walther and his parish members, which also led to conflicts with the church authorities.¹⁴ One should keep this in mind when one considers how Walther later on would underline the authority of the single congregation to manage its own affairs.

There were several different motives that led Walther (less than two years after his ordination and installation) and many others to join Martin Stephan in immigrating to the United States.¹⁵ These included accusations against Stephan, the shining light of these circles, conflicts in their own congregations that persuaded them that the Lutheran Church would not be able to exist in Saxony any longer, and the general appeal of the New World as well.¹⁶ As time wore on,

9 See Günther, *Dr. C.F.W. Walther*, 6–13.

10 Probably *Kirchenbuch fuer den evangelischen Gottesdienst der Koeniglich Saechsischen Lande auf allerhoechsten Befehl herausgegeben*. Erster Theil und Zweiter Theil (Dresden: Koenigliche Hofbuchdruckerey 1812).

11 Probably *Dresdnisches Gesangbuch auf hoechsten Befehl herausgegeben*. Mit koenigl. Saechs. allergnaedigsten Privilegio (Dresden: Hofbuchdruckerey, 1816).

12 Probably Carl Friedrich Hempel, *Der kleine Schulfreund, ein Lesebuch fuer Anfaenger im Lesen und Denken, zur Vorbereitung auf den Volksschulensfreund und aehnliche Buecher*. Vierzehnte unveraenderte Auflage (Leipzig: Friedrich Christian Duerr, 1837) and/or Carl Friedrich Hempel, *Volksschulensfreund, ein Huelfsbuch zum Lesen, Denken und Lernen*. Fuenfte verbesserte und vermehrte Auflage (Leipzig: Friedrich Christian Duerr, 1819).

13 See Günther, *Dr. C.F.W. Walther*, 28–32.

14 See Suelflow, *Servant of the Word*, 34–37.

15 For more information to the emigration process see the exhaustive study of Walter O. Forster, *Zion on the Mississippi. The Settlement of the Saxon Lutherans in Missouri 1839–1841* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1953).

16 See Barnbrock, *Die Predigten C.F.W. Walthers*, 53–55 and 71–72.

the more it became obvious that Stephan had the idea of establishing an episcopal hierarchy for the Lutheran Church overseas, which was to be built under his leadership. He himself was installed as bishop on the passage overseas. But soon after they had arrived, a whole new set of problems arose (culminating in accusations of sexual harassment against Stephan), which led the group to split off from him, but this then created a major spiritual crisis, especially among the clergy. In the wake of the Stephan crisis, many began to doubt that leaving Germany had been the right thing to do: was the immigrant group a “church” in any distinct way? Had the pastors lost their call or even their eligibility?¹⁷

It was Walther who was able to contribute significantly to settling this crisis by laying the foundation of a renewed understanding of the church (and its ministry), which he did decisively in the Altenburg Debate in April 1841.¹⁸ There he set forth arguments which had been partly taken from laypeople, who had been earlier engaged in the discussions of the problem. It is striking that this debate took place a couple of weeks after Otto Hermann, Walther’s brother, had died. It is only then that the young Walther stepped out of the shadow of his older brother and became (to the end of his life) the leader of the Saxon immigrants and The Lutheran Church–Missouri Synod, which was founded a couple of years later (at that time: The German Evangelical-Lutheran Synod of Missouri, Ohio and other States).

There were two more (intertwined) disputes that forced Walther to shape his doctrine of the church. The one was with Johannes Andreas August Grabau, who had emigrated from Prussia and established a Lutheran Synod with a strong emphasis on the authority of the clergy.¹⁹ The other was with Wilhelm Löhe from Neuendettelsau, who was very much engaged in assisting the North American Lutherans by providing them support in different ways. A group of his church workers co-founded The Lutheran Church–Missouri Synod, together with the Saxon group. He tried to mediate between the Saxon and the Prussian emigrants, but laid more emphasis on the office of the ministry vis-à-vis the congregation rather than viewing it as more a part of the congregation.²⁰

17 See Günther, *Dr. C.F.W. Walther*, 36–40.

18 For the whole process from the Altenburg Debate to the first constitution of The Lutheran Church–Missouri Synod, see Christoph Barnbrock, “Constitution in Context: Analytical Observations on the First Draft of the Missouri Synod’s Constitution (1846),” *Concordia Journal* 27 (2001): 38–56.

19 See William Schumacher, “Grabau’s Hirtenbrief and the Saxon Reply & Introduction to Grabau’s Hirtenbrief and the Saxon Reply,” in *Soli Deo Gloria. Essays on C.F.W. Walther. In Memory of August R. Suelflow*, ed. Thomas Manteufel and Robert Kolb (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2000), 133–140 (an English translation of the *Hirtenbrief* and the reply is printed on pages 141–176).

20 For both intertwined conflicts, see Johannes Hund, “‘Gewisse Einseitigkeiten’ und die ‘rechte,

Given everything Walther and his fellows had experienced with the church government in Saxony and with a strong leader as Stephan had been, it is no surprise that they rejected especially Grabau's viewpoints. His approach to church and ministry would have fundamentally questioned the solution that the Saxon immigrants had just found for their spiritual and ecclesiological crisis. While it was not that distressing for the Saxon group to walk on a different path from Grabau, with whom they had not been in close contact, the conflict and later split between Löhe and the young Lutheran Church–Missouri Synod was much more painful.²¹ Hermann Sasse once called this one of the “most shocking events in the history of the Lutheran Church of the 19th century.”²²

How valuable this cooperation with Löhe has been for the Missouri Synod can be seen by the fact that the Synod sent its two leading theologians, Walther and the then president of the Missouri Synod, Friedrich Conrad Dietrich Wyneken, to Germany in 1851 to talk with Löhe.²³ Speaking face to face they were able to find agreement. But soon after the two American theologians got back home it became obvious that this agreement was not durable enough to overcome the conflicts which arose on the American continent between the different Lutheran groups.

Walther served as president of the Synod in 1847–1850 and 1864–1878. Starting in 1850 he taught at Concordia Seminary, St. Louis, a position he held almost until his death in 1887. But he also continued being a pastor of the St. Louis *Gesammtgemeinde*. Due to the many articles, books, essays and letters he wrote²⁴ he became one of the most influential theologians of nineteenth-century Lutheranism in the United States. He has had an impact on the theological profile of his church to the present day.

Even though Walther is well known for his firm confessional stance, one ought not ignore the fact that it has been Walther who was very much engaged in binding together the different Lutheran church bodies in the United States. Es-

allseitige, ökumenische Faßung': Die Zusammenarbeit und der Bruch zwischen Wilhelm Löhe und Carl Ferdinand Wilhelm Walther," *Lutherische Theologische und Kirche* 35 (2011): 211–245.

21 For the different approaches inside the Missouri Synod, see Christoph Barnbrock, “Ungleiche Partner. F.C.D. Wyneken (1810–1876) und C.F.W. Walther (1811–1887) in ihrer Eigenart,” *Lutherische Theologie und Kirche* 35 (2011): 246–274.

22 Hermann Sasse, “Zur Frage nach dem Verhältnis von Amt und Gemeinde (Briefe an lutherische Pastoren, Nr. 8, Juli 1949),” in *In Statu Confessionis 1. Gesammelte Aufsätze von Hermann Sasse*, ed. Friedrich Wilhelm Hopf (Berlin und Schleswig-Holstein: Verlag Die Spur GmbH & Co. Christliche Buchhandels KG, 1975), 121–130, 121 (my own translation).

23 See “The Trip Report of the Visit of Walther and Wyneken to Germany in 1851,” trans. Deaconess Rachel Mumme, in *At Home in the House of my Fathers*, ed. Matthew C. Harrison (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2009), 19–106.

24 An overview is presented by Thomas Egger and Concordia Historical Institute, “Waltheriana Research Guide,” in *C.F.W. Walther: Churchman and Theologian*, 113–195.

pecially worth mentioning are the Free Conferences (1856–59), different colloquies in which he participated, and the Evangelical Lutheran Synodical Conference (which began in 1872).²⁵ It is obviously not true that Walther “wanted to see neighbors only in the brothers and sisters of his own Synod.”²⁶ In point of fact, Walther actually had to defend himself for inviting individuals to the Free Conferences who only accepted the Unaltered Augsburg Confession and not the whole Book of Concord.²⁷ Striving for the truth and communicating with those with whom a consensus not (yet) had been reached was no contradiction in Walther’s thought.

When Walther passed away in the spring of 1887, his Synod and the Seminary he had served for so long had experienced an incredible growth. And yet throughout his lifetime he had been burdened by his perceived inabilities, a perception that remained a faithful companion to him: suffering from his “very small, extremely limited knowledge”²⁸ and feeling “as if I were not a worker but a stumbling stone in His vineyard, which He must finally cast aside.”²⁹ This is one of the reasons why Walther stuck so often to the writings of the Lutheran fathers, especially to Luther himself. In his last essay he stated:

A man ought to make it a rule of himself to read something in Luther’s writings every day. He should especially flee to them when he needs to be refreshed for his work, is tired, forsaken, discouraged, in need of counsel, and feels miserable. He should especially read the letters, for they cheer, strengthen, and revive. One should make himself so familiar with his edition of Luther that he can find every document without time-consuming reference works.³⁰

25 See Suelflow, *Servant of the Word*, 195–210.

26 Angelika Dörfler-Dierken, *Luthertum und Demokratie. Deutsche und amerikanische Theologen des 19. Jahrhunderts zu Staat, Gesellschaft und Kirche* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2001), 357 (my own translation).

27 See C.F.W. Walther, “Subscribing to the Whole Book of Concord. Foreword to the 1857 Volume. Lehre und Wehre 3, No. 1, Jan 1857, pp. 1–4,” in *C.F.W. Walther, Church Fellowship (Walther’s Works)* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2015), 1–4.

28 C.F.W. Walther, “Brief an die Ehrwürdige Pastoralconferenz zu Chicago, Herrn Pastor H. Wunder daselbst zu handen (9. März 1878),” in Günther, *Dr. C.F.W. Walther*, 134–137, 136 (my own translation).

29 C.F.W. Walther, “Walther’s Breakdown. To the German Evangelical Lutheran Gesamtgemeinde of the Unaltered Augsburg Confession in St. Louis 1860,” in *At Home in the House of my Fathers*, 142–145, 143.

30 C.F.W. Walther, “A Fruitful Reading of the Writings of Luther. A Paper by Dr. C.F.W. Walther. Taken from the Proceedings of the Missouri District Conference. Offered for Publication at the Conclusion of the Same 1887,” in *At Home in the House of my Fathers*, 333–343, 343.

The Word of God and the Lutheran Tradition

If one takes a closer look at Walther's larger works, for example his book, *The Voice of Our Church on the Question of Church and Office*,³¹ one may be surprised by the number of quotations from Holy Scripture, the Lutheran Confessions, and the writings of Lutheran theologians that he provided and by the small number of his own words. This is one reason why Walther has been accused of being a (mere) reprinting theologian.³² But why did Walther work like this? Were his own abilities indeed that limited that he was unable to develop a more complex thinking on his own? Was he searching too intensely for certainty by getting back to the fathers in faith, as his older brother Otto Hermann had observed when, after Stephan's dismissal and during the resulting crisis, he wrote to his younger brother:

Your excerpts on vocation don't help you at all, if you are not assuring yourself regarding your vocation to His eternal kingdom of mercy. In it everything is right and at once everything crooked is straight.³³

But even if one would take these aspects as illustrative, they do not explain why Walther was offered an honorary doctorate degree from the University of Göttingen in connection with his book, *The Voice of Our Church on the Question of Church and Office*.³⁴ It is hard for us to understand, in a time of nearly unlimited research options, that for Walther and his contemporaries the (orthodox) Lutheran literature was not that readily accessible. This was true for the German context in which Pietism and Rationalism had outpaced that older way of doing theology. And even more so was it true for the American context, in which this literature was hardly available at all. Walther's compilation of quotations thus should not be understood as mere repetition of what everybody was already aware of; rather, he provided theologians of that day with a real rediscovery of hidden treasures and did so through remarkable editorial work. Moreover, each selection of the quotations in a different historical setting has to be understood as

31 C.F.W. Walther, *The Church & The Office of The Ministry*, 3rd ed (1875), trans. J.T. Mueller, ed. Matthew C. Harrison (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2012).

32 See his diary entry, quoted in Günther, *Dr. C.F.W. Walther*, 106–107: "Let us bear the humiliation with joy, that we only reprint the theology of the 16th century, not reproduce; let us look to those, who seek fame having not received the pure Lutheran teaching as students, but having independently reproduced." (My own translation).

33 Otto Hermann Walther, "Brief an C.F.W. Walther (9. November 1840)," in Günther, *Dr. C.F.W. Walther*, 42–43, 43 (my own translation).

34 See Gottfried Hoffmann, "C.F.W. Walthers Göttinger Ehrendoktorat," in *Einträchtig lehren* (Festschrift Jobst Schöne), ed. Jürgen Diestelmann/Wolfgang Schillhahn (Groß Oesingen: Verlag der Lutherischen Buchhandlung Heinrich Harms, 1997), 167–198.

an act of interpretation. An old word, spoken in a new context, will necessarily create a new (though not necessarily different) message.

And it is no surprise that Walther turned back to the confessional writings and to the private teachings of Lutheran theologians. Different from Pietistic, Rationalistic and hierarchical theological approaches, his way of doing theology led him to know the books of those Lutheran theologians who focused less on human abilities. The perspective of the *extra nos*, that salvation is completely God's work, was a beneficial contrast to the teaching in the theologies of his time, which forced the single person to believe more deeply, to become a better person, or to do what a religious leader was asking one to do. Lutheran theology thus has been shown in Walther's life to be useful for overcoming personal and ecclesiological crisis situations.

Although Walther adhered to the teaching of verbal inspiration³⁵ and emphasized the authority of the Holy Scripture and that of the Lutheran Confessions³⁶ he gives the de facto impression that for him the confessional writings served as normative frame for interpreting the Scriptures.³⁷ In a letter Wilhelm Löhe defined the disagreement with Walther this way:

Furthermore, the question is not what Luther, the theologians, and the Symbols say, rather *what do the Scriptures say?* Is it from the Scriptures that my doubts arise, and not only mine, regarding the individual-Lutheran doctrine? While Walther and Wyneken were here, an article appeared in *Der Lutheraner* that censured not merely us poor pastors but also the Erlangen theologians, because we do not first listen to Lutheran doctrine and then the Scriptures.³⁸

But even if in Walther's theology the Holy Scripture and its interpretation in the Lutheran Confessions tend to merge, there are some basic thoughts which also have to be considered. First of all: Walther explicitly accepts the possibility that the Symbols of the Lutheran Church could contain errors:³⁹

But is it not possible that the Symbols of the orthodox Church contain errors in less important points? Yes, but the possibility does not establish reality. [...] But if error should really be found in our Symbols, we would be the first to pass the death sentence on them.⁴⁰

35 C.F.W. Walther, "Vier Thesen über das Schriftprinzip," *Lehre und Wehre* 13 (1867): 97–111, 100–103.

36 C.F.W. Walther, "The Only Source of Doctrine. Foreword to the 1882 Volume. *Lehre und Wehre* 27, No. 1, Jan 1882, pp. 1–6, *Lehre und Wehre* 28, No. 2 Feb. 1882, pp. 49–57, *Lehre und Wehre* 28, No. 3, March 1882, pp. 97–108," in Walther, *Church Fellowship*, 337–349.

37 See Barnbrock, *Die Predigten C.F.W.W. Walthers*, 106–108, 127–130, 295–297, 363–364.

38 "Löhe's Response to Walther's Doctrine of the Office of the Ministry and the Walther/Wyneken Visit. Letter to Grossmann, 1853," in Walther, *The Church & The Office of The Ministry*, 439–446, 442.

39 Against my earlier observations in Barnbrock, *Die Predigten C.F.W. Walthers*, 106 and 297.

40 C.F.W. Walther, "Answer to the Question." "Why Should Our Pastors, Teachers, and Pro-

The second aspect that has to be taken into consideration is the distinction between “inside the confessional church body” and “outside this church body.” Since most of Walther’s discussion partners were from within the Lutheran Church, this “inside the church”-perspective dominated his thinking. It is the free decision of every single person to subscribe to the Symbolical books of the Lutheran Church or not, but if he does so, his decision should be taken seriously, that he “understands and believes that they [i. e. the Symbolical Books of the Lutheran Church, ed.] do agree with Scripture.”⁴¹ For the debate with discussion partners from other denominations the reference only to the Holy Scripture would be (of course) much more important.

But what is the benefit of such a strong emphasis on the Confessions and the unconditional subscription to them? I would like to name only two aspects. First of all it is an act of fairness towards the congregations that they get what they justifiably expect – or, to say it in Walther’s words: It should be “a guarantee that no teacher with an erring conscience nor an outspoken errorist will come in and teach them all sorts of errors.”⁴² A second aspect would be that in this way not all questions have to be discussed over and over again:

Finally, the purpose of binding the teachers of the Church to its public Confessions is to remove the long controversies that have been thoroughly discussed and settled, at least in the orthodox Church. A mere conditional subscription, however, opens the door for a renewal of controversies that have already been settled and paves the way for everlasting discord.⁴³

Walther was here presenting an approach to the hermeneutics of the Lutheran Confessions and the right understanding of the binding character of the Symbolical Books.⁴⁴ But he refuses to accept any approaches of a conditional subscription to the Symbols, for instance by treating some issues as “open questions.”⁴⁵ For Walther, the latter approach would create a problem in that private opinions would then replace the authority of the teaching of the church:

If the Church therefore would permit its teachers to interpret the Symbols according to the Scriptures, and not the Scriptures according to its Symbols, the subscription would be no guarantee that the respective teacher understands and interprets Scripture as the Church does. *It would only tell the Church what he himself holds for correct. Thus each*

fessors Subscribe Unconditionally to the Symbolical Writings of Our Church? Essay Delivered at the Western District Convention in 1858,” in Walther, *Church Fellowship*, 11–28, 22.

41 Walther, “Answer to the Question,” 19.

42 Walther, “Answer to the Question,” 18–19.

43 Walther, “Answer to the Question,” 19.

44 See Walther, “Answer to the Question,” 11–13.

45 See Walther, “Answer to the Question,” 15–17.

*personal conviction of its teachers of that moment would become the Symbol to which they are sworn.*⁴⁶

Actually Walther took seriously the fact that every act of reading the Scriptures is an act of interpretation, in which there is the danger that one will insert one's own personal views. Walther tried to overcome this problem by placing an emphasis on a larger consensus that is not just focused on a single person and his interpretation but includes the interpretation of various theologians of the church and which has been adopted by countless numbers of theologians and laypeople. Probably because of his own sensibility about his own limitations, Walther preferred to stick with the consensus of the church rather than opening up room for private opinions of each and every theologian at that time.

Church and the Office of the Ministry⁴⁷

As described above Walther developed his understanding of the relationship of church and the office of the ministry during the months after Stephan's dismissal. In the light of the awareness that they may have emigrated under the wrong conditions, Walther and his fellow Saxons had to deal with the questions about whether or not the immigrant group could be considered "church," whether or not their congregations had the power to call pastors, and whether or not they should just return to Germany.

In the Altenburg Debate Walther distinguished different ways of using the word, "church," especially in the distinction between the visible and invisible church. Most important in the historical situation was the fact that even heterodox groups can be called church:

VI. 3. Even heterodox groups have church authority; even among them the goods of the church may be validly administered, the preaching office [*Predigtamt*] established, the sacraments validly administered, and the keys of the kingdom of heaven exercised.

VII. 4. Even heterodox groups are not to be dissolved, but reformed.⁴⁸

This approach, which emphasized the invisibility of the church and focused on each individual Christian group, laid the foundation of what would later become The Lutheran Church–Missouri Synod.

Since the Missouri Synod was formed in 1847 by pastors and congregations with different backgrounds, it was necessary to explain how the individual

46 Walther, "Answer to the Question," 19.

47 See Barnbrock, *Die Predigten C.F.W. Walthers*, 73–77, 88–96, 101–105.

48 C.F.W. Walther, "Altenburg Theses." trans. Carl S. Meyer and Matthew C. Harrison, in Walther, *The Church & The Office of the Ministry*, 362.

congregation and its pastor are related to each other. John C. Wohlrabe, Jr. called Walther's perspective "A Distinctly Mediating Position."⁴⁹

This becomes evident by two poles in the second part of Walther's book, *The Voice of Our Church on the Question of Church and Office*. On the one hand he stated:

Thesis II

The preaching office or the pastoral office is not a human institution but an office that God Himself has established.

Thesis III

The preaching office is not an optional office but one whose establishment has been commanded to the church and to which the church is properly bound till the end of time.⁵⁰

On the other hand he affirmed:

Thesis VI

The preaching office is conferred by God through the congregation as the possessor of all ecclesiastical authority, or the keys, and through the call that is prescribed by God. The ordination of those who are called with the laying on of hands is not a divine institution but an apostolic, churchly order and only a solemn public confirmation of the call.

Thesis VII

The holy preaching office is the authority, conferred by God through the congregation as the possessor of the priesthood and of all churchly authority, to exercise the rights of the spiritual priesthood in public office on behalf of the congregation.⁵¹

Walther considered both, office and congregation, like an ellipse with two focal points. There is not just the preaching office vis-à-vis the congregation, and there is not only the congregation delegating its authority to a minister. But the one is actually related to the other and vice versa – though in different ways. The results of Walther's thoughts are:

Thesis IX

To the preaching office there is due respect as well as unconditional obedience when the preacher uses God's Word. Yet the preacher has no dominion in the church. Therefore, he has no right to introduce new laws or arbitrarily to establish adiaphora or ceremonies in the church. The preacher has no right to inflict and carry out excommunication alone, without the preceding knowledge of the whole congregation.

49 John C. Wohlrabe, Jr., "Walther's Doctrine of the Ministry: A Distinctly Mediating Position," in *Sola Deo Gloria*, 203–221.

50 Walther, *The Church & The Office of The Ministry*, 5.

51 Walther, *The Church & The Office of The Ministry*, 5.

Thesis X

To the preaching office, according to divine right, belongs also the office to judge doctrine, but laymen also possess this right. Therefore, in the ecclesiastical courts and councils they are accorded both a seat and vote together with the preachers.⁵²

On the one hand, the last thesis especially reflects the contribution of the laymen during the ecclesiological crisis in the run-up to the Altenburg Debate. Walther had said in these days:

Read everything to the above mentioned men and ask them in my name, also to put their hands to the task and to help; if the laymen don't contribute we are truly lost; I regard us pastors really as the most miserable ones [...].⁵³

On the other hand, Walther refused to endorse a practice of congregations to allow laymen to preach on a regular basis:

This is absolutely and directly contrary to the doctrine of the Scriptures regarding the office [*Amt*] (1 Corinthians 12:29; Acts 6:4; Titus 1:5). And it is contrary to the Fourteenth Article of the Augsburg Confession. It is against all the testimony of pure teachers and against the constant practice of our church. Given all this, it is inconceivable how a person otherwise well versed in God's Word and the orthodox church can for an instant be unclear on this. To base [this practice] upon the spiritual priesthood of Christians is ridiculous [*Unsinn*].⁵⁴

Taking into consideration that Walther focused in his Altenburg Theses so much on the invisible or even the invisibility of the true church it is eye-catching that Walther identifies about 25 years later the Lutheran Church with the "True Visible Church of God Upon Earth."⁵⁵ The original title of the book, *The Evangelical Lutheran Church, The True Visible Church of God Upon Earth* can easily become an occasion for misunderstanding, by identifying the Lutheran Church with the true church at all. Probably also for that reason the English translation uses a short title: *The True Visible Church*. Walther explicitly rejected the idea that the Evangelical Lutheran Church is the one, holy, catholic, and apostolic church:

52 Walther, *The Church & The Office of The Ministry*, 6.

53 Quoted in Günther, *Dr. C.F.W. Walther*, 39 (my own translation). – In Saxony laymen seemed to be astonishingly dedicated to getting involved in theological matters. It is no coincidence that for establishing the Lutheran Free Church in Saxony in the second half of the nineteenth century so called "Lutheranvereine" have been of greater importance. See Gottfried Herrmann, *Lutherische Freikirche in Sachsen. Geschichte und Gegenwart einer lutherischen Bekenntniskirche* (Berlin: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 1985), 56–74.

54 C.F.W. Walther, "On Luther and Lay Preachers. A Letter to Pastor J.A. Ottesen, 1858," trans. Matthew C. Harrison, in *At Home in the House of my Fathers*, 137–141, 140.

55 C.F.W. Walther, *The True Visible Church: An Essay of the Convention of the General Evangelical Synod of Missouri, Ohio, and Other States for its Sessions at St. Louis, Mo., October 31, 1866*, trans. John Theodore Mueller (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1961).

Thesis XI

The Evangelical Lutheran Church is not that one holy Christian church outside of which there is no salvation, although it has never separated itself from it and professes no other.⁵⁶

The emphasis in the title of this book obviously has to be laid on “visible” and not on “true.” In any case, Walther focused at that time much more on the visible churches than he had done two decades prior. In the later context he identified different types of ecclesiastic groups, “churches”, “heretical groups”, “sects (schisms) or separatistic bodies” and finally “synagogues of Satan and temples of idols.”⁵⁷ While this new accent was still compatible with his earlier writings, it can be understood as a shift in stress. In the first years Walther and his fellows had to define how they themselves could be understood as “church.” Decades later these theologians and congregations had become for a long time part of an established church and had to think about how to relate to other church bodies. It was especially important for them to take into account the attractiveness of the Roman Catholic Church and its theology. Two of Walther’s faculty colleagues had joined the Roman Catholic Church in the years after the publication of *The True Visible Church*.⁵⁸ Quite likely in the years leading up to their decision, there had been discussions within the faculty about the issue of the importance of the visibility of the church as it is underlined in Roman Catholic theology.

On the other hand, sticking to the concept of the one true *visible* church was important for Walther in order to reject a specific concept of ecumenism in which all churches are thought to be complementary in their teachings:

Does the saving doctrine in all visible churches still flow from a murky fountain even after the Reformation? Is each one only one color of the rainbow so that only by putting them all together does the heavenly rainbow of pure and complete truth become visible on earth? Does none have the complete pure teaching? [...] As we have seen above from Gerhard, our fathers of three hundred and two hundred years ago sincerely believed that, after the revelation of Antichrist, God truly gave grace for the presentation of such a visible church – and they praised God for it with cheerful voices.⁵⁹

If there would be no true visible church all visible churches would have their relative truths. But if there is a true visible church, one can affirm this church’s teachings as presenting the truth, though without overlooking that such a church never will be perfect. Walther was thereby criticizing the concept of denomi-

56 Walther, *The True Visible Church*, 45.

57 Walther, *The True Visible Church*, 15, 20, 29, 32.

58 See Suelflow, *Servant of the Word*, 105.

59 C.F.W. Walther, “On Doctrinal Development. Foreword to the 1859 Volume. Lehre und Wehre 5, No. 1, Jan 1859, pp 1–12, Vol 5, No. 2, Febr. 1859, pp. 33–45,” in Walther, *Church Fellowship*, 29–41, 33.

nationalism, which became especially important after his lifetime in the twentieth century.

The Preacher⁶⁰ and the Teacher of (future) Pastors

Although Walther is remembered today primarily as a systematic theologian, he probably had the strongest effect on his church by being a preacher and teaching future pastors in his synod. Walther preached on a regular basis until he accepted the call to serve as professor. Even then he was assigned to preach at least thirteen times a year in the St. Louis congregations.⁶¹ Of course he also preached in other places and on other occasions, when he served as president of the Missouri Synod. His sermons have been printed in various ways and have been bestsellers.⁶² For example, 22,000 copies of his *Gospel Postil* sold within eleven years. During that time it was also translated into Norwegian.⁶³ Obviously Walther found the right words for his contemporaries, even though he himself felt insufficient in this area, too:

You cannot imagine how miserably I have to beg from the loving God each period and I feel ashamed to tell you how much precious time I have to spend like a schoolboy to memorize ...; You start joyfully to write your sermons; I mostly with mortal fear, believe me.⁶⁴

One can interpret Walther's statement here as an expression of "his well-known humbleness," as Günther puts it.⁶⁵ Or one could take his words more seriously and concede that preaching was a more difficult issue for him than other parts of his professional activity. And indeed there are several aspects in his sermons—such as his focus on the emotions of the listeners or his attempt to present the Christian faith as something absolutely reasonable or his description of missing

60 See Barnbrock, *Die Predigten C.F.W. Walthers*, particularly 131–412; and Christoph Barnbrock, "Introduction," in *C.F.W. Walther, Gospel Sermons*, vol. 1, trans. Donald E. Heck (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2013), xiii–xviii.

61 See Günther, *Dr. C.F.W. Walther*, 80–81.

62 All known sermons of C.F.W. Walther (published and not yet published) are listed in Thomas Egger, *Walther Sermon Inventory: An Exhaustive Listing and Finding Aid for the Sermons and Addresses of Dr. C.F.W. Walther* (St. Louis: Concordia Historical Institute, 1998). On the occasion of Walther's 200th birthday another volume of previously unpublished sermons was released: *C.F.W. Walther, Frühregen und Spätregen. Predigten*, ed. Christoph Barnbrock (Groß Oesingen: Verlag der Lutherischen Buchhandlung Heinrich Harms, 2011).

63 See C.F.W. Walther, *Americanisch=Lutherische Epistel Postille. Predigten über die meisten epistolischen Perikopen des Kirchenjahrs u. freie Texte* (St. Louis: Lutherischer Concordia Verlag, 1882), III.

64 Günther, *Dr. C.F.W. Walther*, 163 (my own translation).

65 Günther, *Dr. C.F.W. Walther*, 163 (my own translation).

faith as a psychiatric disorder—that seem to be problematic.⁶⁶ Sometimes in his sermons Walther fell short of his own standards that he described in his later works, especially his lectures on *Law and Gospel*.⁶⁷ Nevertheless, Walther's homiletical work is impressive. Different approaches can be identified in his sermons: to describe reality in the light of God's Word and to present and to represent aspects of this God-shaped truth; to convince the listeners on a logical basis; to provide assistance on how to act in the new context; to give the listeners a correct orientation in a multi-confessional world, something that had not been necessary to do in Germany; to lead the listeners to overcome situations of spiritual danger, hardships, and despair.⁶⁸ Coming to church was like coming home for many of the parishioners, who came as immigrants to the United States. They listened to the gospel in their mother tongue—and the gospel was proclaimed in the sermon according to the Lutheran Confessions as they had been used to (more or less) in their home countries. Walther put it like this: "The gospel ... brings to you heaven on earth [and] it makes this foreign country for you to a new home country."⁶⁹

Even though Walther did not seem to be a very situational theologian, especially in his works on pastoral theology and in his sermons he was well aware of the fact that he was teaching and preaching in a specific national and social context. His pastoral theology is called *American-Lutheran Pastoral Theology*,⁷⁰ and his most important sermon volumes are likewise called *American-Lutheran Gospel Postil*⁷¹ and *American-Lutheran Epistle Postil*.⁷²

As in his other publications, so also in his *Pastoral Theology* Walther referred broadly to the writings of orthodox Lutheran theologians. Much more than elsewhere, however, he related those insights to his own American context, which was to some extent different from the circumstances he had faced earlier.⁷³ Starting with the topic of the call into the ministry and ending with the matter of resigning from one's position, Walther discussed pretty much all issues of a pastor's work in that time. That his considerations gained importance beyond the North American context may be shown by the fact that parts of his *Pastoral*

66 See Barnbrock, *Die Predigten C.F.W. Walthers*, 360–366.

67 See Barnbrock, *Die Predigten C.F.W. Walthers*, 357–360.

68 See Barnbrock, "Introduction," xvi.

69 C.F.W. Walther, "Kirchweihpredigt" [1847], in C.F.W. Walther, *Casual=Predigten und =Reden. Aus seinem schriftlichen Nachlaß gesammelt* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1892), 197–207, 205 (my own translation).

70 C.F.W. Walther, *Amerikanisch=Lutherische Pastoraltheologie*, 5th ed. (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1906 [1872]).

71 C.F.W. Walther, *Amerikanisch=Lutherische Evangelien Postille. Predigten über die evangelischen Pericopen des Kirchenjahrs* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1870/71).

72 Walther, *Amerikanisch=Lutherische Epistel Postille*.

73 For example, see Walther, *Amerikanisch=Lutherische Pastoraltheologie*, 37 and 342.

Theology have been reprinted in Germany (even as recently as 1986) in a collection of excerpts from works of pastoral theology.⁷⁴

It is quite astonishing that Walther prized highly what he called a “biblical psychological” approach.⁷⁵ He was not satisfied with sermons that are merely free of heresy, he also criticized sermons that had little or no effect on the listeners. In his view, sermons should lead the hearers to a “resolution.”⁷⁶ He did not elaborate on what he meant by the psychological aspect within his “biblical psychological” approach, but one may assume that his main emphasis concerned a spiritual understanding, since he stressed that this only can be “learned through lived *experience* in Christianity and it has to be asked for every time.”⁷⁷ Still, Walther did not take the appropriate effect of a sermon for granted, as if that effect could occur merely through a presentation of orthodox theology; rather, he continually asked how sermons can be “effective.”

In light of their historical importance, Walther’s evening lectures on *The Proper Distinction of Law and Gospel* (1884/85), which were published posthumously (1897), are some of the greatest parts of his work.⁷⁸ Even today his theses are used in educational programs worldwide.⁷⁹ In these lectures, held at the end of his lifetime, Walther definitely reached the final maturity of his theological thought. At the same time one discovers extraordinarily personal passages in this book.

In these lectures Walther rediscovered the basic distinction between law and gospel, which had been of such great importance for Martin Luther. But as with so many other issues, this one, too, had fallen into oblivion. Eberhard Hauschildt described the development in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries as the “dissolution” of law and gospel as a “homiletical category.”⁸⁰ Walther was one of the first, if not the first Lutheran theologian, who brought this topic back to light.

The base line of Walther’s explanations is that human beings cannot contribute anything to their salvation (neither beforehand nor afterwards) and that

74 Detlef Lehmann, ed., *Vom Dienst des Pfarrers. Auszüge aus den klassischen lutherischen Pastoraltheologien des 19. Jahrhunderts* (Oberurseler Hefte. Ergänzungsband 1) (Oberursel, 1986).

75 Walther, *Americanisch=Lutherische Pastoraltheologie*, 109 (my own translation).

76 Walther, *Americanisch=Lutherische Pastoraltheologie*, 109 (my own translation).

77 Walther, *Americanisch=Lutherische Pastoraltheologie*, 109 (my own translation).

78 C.F.W. Walther, *Law & Gospel. How to Read and Apply the Bible*, ed. Charles P. Schaum et al., trans. Christian C. Tiews (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2010).

79 For example, see John T. Pless, *Handling the Word of Truth: Law and Gospel in the Church Today* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2004) and its expanded German translation, John T. Pless, *Unterscheidungskunst*, ed. and trans. Christoph Barnbrock (Göttingen: Edition Ruprecht, 2014).

80 Eberhard Hauschildt, “‘Gesetz und Evangelium’ – eine homiletische Kategorie?. Überlegungen zur wechselvollen Geschichte eines lutherischen Schemas in der Predigtlehre,” *Pastoraltheologie* 80 (1991): 262–287, 264 (my own translation).

they must and can expect everything from God. The law has to proclaim the forsakenness of humankind, and the gospel God's unconditional love, forgiveness and comfort for Christ's sake. The ninth thesis has to be regarded as the "central thesis of the series".⁸¹

Thesis IX

You are not rightly distinguishing law and gospel in the Word of God if you point sinners who have been struck down and terrified by the law toward their own prayers and struggles with God and tell them that they have to work their way into a state of grace. That is, do not tell them to keep on praying and struggling until they would feel that God has received them into grace. Rather, point them toward the Word and the sacraments.⁸²

In his explanation Walther very frankly referred to his own experiences from his student days, when he underwent "a period of severest spiritual affliction."⁸³ That he still got back to that about fifty years later is an indication of how those situations in which he felt insufficient had had a great, lasting impact on his theological thoughts throughout his whole lifetime. Particularly the pietistic theology with which he had become acquainted in his youth and which he found again in a similar way in North American Methodism was something he sought to overcome in his theology and especially in his theses on law and gospel. Finally with the distinction between law and gospel Walther had found the matching answer for the various afflictions of his life:

Now, whoever receives Him and believes in Him, that is, whoever takes comfort in the fact that, for the sake of His Son, God will be merciful to them, will forgive their sins, and grant them eternal salvation, etc. – whoever is engaged in this preaching of the pure gospel and thus directs people to Christ, the only mediator between God and people, he, as a preacher, is doing the will of God. That is the genuine fruit by which no one is deceived or duped. For even if the devil himself were to preach this truth, this preaching would not be false or made up of lies – and a person believing it would have what it promises.⁸⁴

Walther's Lifetime Achievement

Walther's accomplishments are impressive, especially if one considers the extremely difficult and challenging circumstances he had faced in his lifetime. He was able to overcome his own (spiritual) crisis situations by focusing on the

81 Richard W. Kraemer, "The Structure of Walther's Lectures on Law and Gospel," in *Soli Deo Gloria*, 61–81, 67.

82 Walther, *Law & Gospel*, 143.

83 Walther, *Law & Gospel*, 157–167, 158.

84 Walther, *Law & Gospel*, 466.

Lutheran message of the clear gospel. He rediscovered the treasure of orthodox Lutheran theology and did his best to present it to his contemporaries and to relate it to his time and general conditions. His heritage bears fruits to this day. In this way he laid the foundation of a confessional type of Lutheranism and of such a Lutheran Church in the United States.

It is a Reformed theologian who has probably best described the importance of Walther for nineteenth-century American theology:

A recovery of classical Reformation theology could have been very helpful at this point for the development of American preaching. There were Americans who were beginning to realize this. [...] On the other hand, too many American preachers knew Luther, Zwingli, Calvin, and Melancthon only remotely. We can only regret that Walther and those who followed him never really penetrated the larger circles of American Christianity. How valuable Walther's witness might have been if he had been able to speak to the American church more broadly.⁸⁵

On the other hand, these words also express a pious hope: That confessional Lutherans do not pull back into their ghetto, but boldly introduce their rich heritage and their understanding of theology to the broader Christian and theological discussion. Maybe Walther was sometimes a bit too harsh in the way he led theological discussions and thus let slip the chance to be heard beyond the limits of his own denomination. F.C.D. Wyneken, the second president of the Missouri Synod, put it this way in a letter to Walther:

Then I am, as you also well know, against the form and manner in which controversy with our opponents is often carried out. For instance, *according to my opinion*, we deal too much with the personal circumstances, frictions etc., that arise between us and our opponents. And we demonstrate a level of irritation and touchiness, which according to *my view* is not fitting for us. That was the case earlier with Grabau, and now with Wisconsin, Iowa etc. It always seems to me that we could certainly drive the matter in a somewhat loftier manner, not being so petty, perhaps dealing more with the matter itself. [...] I also believe that in our fight (we may and shall give up nothing of the doctrine itself), we too often forget that we could win over sincere people, or could better help those who are on the way [toward us], by proceeding in a friendly manner (which recognizes the good that shows itself developing here and there) to move them to the right point of view.⁸⁶

Probably both, sticking to the orthodox Lutheran teachings, as Walther did, and "proceeding in a friendly manner," as Wyneken suggested, will help to transmit Walther's heritage into the twenty-first century.

85 Hughes Oliphant Old, *The Modern Age*, vol. 6 of *The Reading and Preaching of the Scriptures in the Worship of the Christian Church* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), 622.

86 F.C.D. Wyneken, "Letter from Wyneken to Walther on *Anfechtungen*, Depression, Doctrine and Polemics, December 5, 1863," trans. Matthew C. Harrison and Roland Ziegler, in *At Home in the House of my Fathers*, 423–427, 425–426.