

# Walther And The Synodical Conference

[Presented as the first lecture at Bethany Lutheran Theological Seminary and Bethany Lutheran College in Mankato, Minnesota at the Reformation Lectures in honor of Dr. C.F.W. Walther at the centenary of his death on October 28-29, 1987]

*By Arnold Koelpin*

When the first official meeting of the Evangelical Lutheran Synodical Conference of North America convened at “Bading’s church” in Milwaukee in midsummer 1872, the delegates recognized from the outset the place of Carl F.W. Walther in the assembly. Walther was accorded the honor of preaching the inaugural sermon; he was also elected president.

The invitation to form the conference, however, had not originated with Walther nor in the Missouri Synod. The incentive initially (in 1870) came from the Ohio Synod’s Eastern District, which had simply requested that the Ohio and Missouri Synods recognize one another as “orthodox evangelical Lutheran” church bodies. [1] The Ohio Synod in convention broadened the request to include the Wisconsin, Illinois, and Norwegian Synods. Two meetings in 1871—one in Chicago and one in Ft. Wayne—laid the bases for founding the Conference by drafting a proposed constitution. By this time the Minnesota Synod had joined in the efforts of the other five synods. [2]

## I. A NEW SPRINGTIME

Although the immediate initiative to found the Synodical Conference came from elsewhere, the groundwork for the organization of the Conference had been prepared to a large extent by Walther. The idea for the Synodical Conference can be traced to an editorial printed by Walther in 1856, sixteen years before the first official meeting. In the second volume of “*Lehre und Wehre*,” Walther proposed “a general Lutheran conference of all those Lutherans in the country who acknowledge and confess without reservation the Unaltered Augsburg Confession of 1530 as the pure and faithful expression of the teaching of Scripture and of their own faith.” [3]

Walther admittedly had taken the model for such a conference from the action of the Lutheran “free churches” in Germany. “Our brothers in Germany, working apart in various free churches, have utilized free conferences ... as a means toward the promotion of their unity in faith and confession,” he observed. But here was a device with a difference. “Since we are living under different circumstances,” he concluded, “may we not hope that similar general conferences would be more productive here, in proportion to the extent that the church is free from the bonds of the state, and mere theories alone militate against church life in this land.” A free conference in the free atmosphere guaranteed by the U.S. Constitution gave reason for optimism in achieving the goal of “the final establishment of one single Evangelical Lutheran Church of America.” [4]

The optimism of Walther for the success of free conferences in America did not blind him to contrary forces within the American Lutheran church nor to the tangled history of Lutheran controversy in this land. In fact, the 1856 proposal to hold “free conferences” was Walther’s answer to the confessional crisis of 1855. In that year, President Schmucker of the General Synod dropped his bombshell on American Lutheranism by advocating a recension of the Augsburg Confession, the chief standard of the Lutheran church. The Schmucker resolution served as a lightning rod; it took the hit of criticism and cleared the confessional air for many. [5] Walther

seized this opportunity to invite all concerned parties to address the question at issue: What does it mean to be a Lutheran?

How muddled the answer to Lutheran identity had become by the 1850s was obvious to an outsider, the renowned historian and editor Philip Schaff. In an address to a Berlin mission society in 1854, the Reformed professor attempted to classify American Lutheranism in three groups. Using designations familiar to the European mind, he fabled them simply: Neo-Lutheran, Old Lutheran, and Moderate Lutheran (or Melancthonian). [6] He split the differences in this way:

The Neo-Lutheran party, originating out of an amalgamation of Lutheranism with American Puritanism and Methodistic elements, was so integrated into the American way of life that it was the most practical and progressive and best acquainted with the English spirit. What Neo-Lutherans lacked in theological training they offset with “mostly superficial American routine sophistication, gift of eloquence, knowledge of parliamentary order, and businessmanship.”

By contrast, Old Lutherans like Walther, as recent immigrants, had not yet blended in the least with the English and the American spirit. Although they were well indoctrinated in the Lutheran faith, they still lacked the blending influence of the American melting-pot in their practice of fellowship. They “would not at any price partake of the Lord’s Holy Supper” with the Reformed.

Between these extremes, Moderate Lutherans, descendants of the old American Lutheran tradition of Pietism, had adapted to the American denominational scene by following the middle of the road. They clung to their Lutheran identity, but refrained from the exclusive spirit of the Old Lutherans. The Moderate leaders had become too Americanized to outrightly condemn the English Reformed Church. A practical sense led many of the pastors to be “more concerned about building programs and politics than theology and church affairs.” [7]

In attempting to clarify the question of Lutheran identity, Walther was by no means insensitive to the cultural and linguistic gap between Old Lutherans and other peoples on American soil. As president of the Synodical Conference, he gave the question “What is our duty with regard to the English [-speaking] population of our country” top priority on the agenda of the first meeting. [8] One month later, in August of 1872, he attended a Lutheran conference at Gravelton, Missouri, to encourage work in the English language. [9]

But to Walther the question “What does it mean to be a Lutheran” transcended Schaff’s sociological analyses, as important as such external considerations were for carrying out the church’s purposes.

The question of Lutheran identity was a far more modest one. It was a theological question; it was God’s own question, addressed to faith and confession and applied to the church in general. [10] If the question involved the Lutheran church and its confession, it was not because the confession was Lutheran, but because the Lutheran confession was drawn from God’s Word and therefore belonged to the church catholic.

In the initial call for a free conference, Walther expressed these sentiments. He outlined the purposes of such a conference as twofold: 1. to foster unity by discussing Christian doctrine, and 2. to oppose the sectarian spirit inspired by Satan. “These are very simple matters,” he stated,

“but matters commanded by God. In this way, of course, one does not build upwards to great heights so that the world can see and admire the building, but one builds downward in depth, ... leaving it up to God whether He wants to erect anything on the deep divine foundation that has been laid.” [11]

The question of Lutheran identity in the conference, therefore, was not meant to be self-serving or a measure taken from human wisdom. “God will not tolerate it when men try to preserve and govern the church by their wisdom,” Walther wrote, “for He wants to do that Himself by His Word and His Spirit. These are not new experiments employed through such a meeting because people had lost confidence in the old means for building a church.... In matters of the kingdom of God all action must be done in faith, or God will not acknowledge them and will not seal them with His blessing.” [12]

“Participants in the conference,” he insisted, were not aiming to form “an externally grand Lutheran union in spite of inner disunity. Such an endeavor, even though successful, would have no other outcome than that [of the tower of Babel] in the land of Shinar, for God abominates such building projects that have become quite fashionable but are hollow and designed by men to erect monuments to themselves.” [13]

If Walther’s outlook represented Old Lutheran ways, then his excitement over the potential for a renewal of the Lutheran church on American soil led to the charge of repristination against him. Repristination, in a churchly context, meant turning the clock back. In a Lutheran context, it meant a return to Luther’s day and living in the forms and expressions of theology as they existed in the 16<sup>th</sup> century. Repristination meant a renewal, rebirth, or renaissance rather than a reformation of the church.

In a recently published book, *C.F.W. Walther, The American Luther*, Arthur Drevlow documents the charges against Walther:

“The charge was frequently heard that Walther’s theology was nothing but a ‘theology of repristination.’ By implication, Walther was criticized for leaning too heavily upon the fathers, giving them a place of authority beside Scripture. Voices were raised deploring Walther’s ‘canned theology’ which brought forth nothing new, and that he stifled ‘theological thought development.’ Lutheran writers deplored ‘immigrant theology’ which they felt would soon ‘find the precious heritage of sound, pure doctrine becoming mouldy in its hands.’ Walther, critics insisted, did not interpret the eternal verities of God in terms of the age.” [14]

Undoubtedly the Professor’s habit of using frequent quotations from Lutheran fathers to support his theses opened the door to such criticism—even though the method was an old one. Then, too, Walther’s rhetoric added fuel to the charge of repristination. He spoke of “rejuvenating our church in America on the old tried foundation.” [15] He envisioned “a new springtime” of American Lutheranism in the manner of the old Reformation. “But just as three hundred years ago the gracious visitation which the church experienced through the Reformation was nothing else than a renewal of the apostolic church,” he stated in 1858, “so we now hope for no other visitation than that the church of the Reformation may experience a new springtime.” [16]

## II. THE MATRIX

One must understand Walther's rhetoric in the light of his experiences as a youth in Europe. His early life and training came in the aftermath of Napoleon's devastation of the German Empire and its institutions. When the French Emperor smashed and laid to rest the thousand year Empire, the German people sought to renew their fatherland by searching out their roots. A cultural nationalism swept the countryside and paved the way for political unity a generation later. During these years, the brothers Grimm researched German linguistic roots by gathering fairy tales and the newly founded University of Berlin emerged as a national institution.

Renewal of the German fatherland was accompanied by a resurgence of Lutheran confessional consciousness. The "*Erweckungsbewegung*," as the Lutheran Awakening was called, also searched for roots and found them in the Scriptures and in the historic confessions of the Lutheran church as contained in the Book of Concord. Political developments in Prussia, as we shall see, fostered the quest.

The case of Adolph von Harless can serve to illustrate the impact of the Lutheran renewal. Together with other Lutherans who were taught that the church had long ago outgrown all dogma, von Harless suddenly, from a study of the Holy Scriptures, regained an understanding of what the confessions of the Lutheran church taught about the depths of sin, the greatness of God's grace, and the power of God's Word. The experience caused the vouch man to exclaim, "After I had learned from Scriptures what saving truth is, I turned to the Symbolical Books of my church. I cannot describe how surprised and how moved I was to discover that their content conformed with the convictions I had gained from Scripture." [17]

What is particularly interesting in von Harless' reaction is not his surprised joy in finding the lost heritage of the fathers, but his discovery that their confessions measured up to God's Word. Young Walther was poured into the same historical mold during the Awakening.

The reawakening of Lutheran confessional consciousness was the matrix out of which the Synodical Conference under Walther's guidance was ultimately born. It had nothing to do, therefore, with the awakenings of Reformed revival theology nor with the reprimination theology of the anabaptist sects of the 16<sup>th</sup> century. Such a reading of church history falsifies the Lutheran concerns. The Lutheran Awakening was of another stripe.

The Awakening originated historically as a response to unionism. Specifically it was a reaction to pressures by the Prussian government to force Lutheran and Reformed churches into one Prussian Evangelical Church despite their confessional differences. To achieve religious unity, the Prussian king had selected the 300<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Luther's Ninety-five Theses in 1817 to replace the old service books of both churches with a new union Agenda. Thirty years later in 1830, on the 300<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Augsburg Confession, the king announced his intention to employ state power to force the union.

Such tactics aroused Lutheran consciences. To "awakened" Lutherans, unionism appeared as a logical counterpart to the careless rationalism that had run rampant in the land over the last century. From university to elementary school, in church and in family life, rationalist attitudes undermined both the Scriptures and the Confessions.

Walther tells how, up to age 18, he had never owned a Bible or catechism, but was taught from a miserable manual filled with nothing but heathen morality. In the "Gymnasium," all his teachers with one exception were rationalists who knew little of the Gospel and relied solely on human reason in the pursuit of truth. Only his upbringing in a Lutheran parsonage carried him through the years of trial. There at home, he said, "my dear God-fearing father had taught me from earliest childhood that the Bible is God's Word." [18]

But Walther's personal awakening to Lutheran confessional consciousness came from another direction, from the preaching of Martin Stephan. The Dresden pastor, in his battle against rationalism, had become an avid reader of Luther's writings and found in them the path to the Scriptures. "I am firmly convinced only the Bible can be a foundation of pure Christian doctrine," Steffan confessed, and then added with equal conviction, "Out of this our pious forefathers have drawn and preserved the pure doctrine in the Confessional Writings of our Evangelical Lutheran Church for us." [19]

Pastor Stephan led Carl F.W. Walther to the same conviction. Young Walther now found occasion to read the Reformer's writings in his father's library and was won by them to appreciate God's message in the Scriptures. One Walther biographer puts it this way: "It was the reading of the great reformer's writings that convinced him fully of the scripturalness of Lutheran doctrine and the necessity of a firm confessional position. He never lost that conviction." [20] For young Walther, as for the young Harless, the Lutheran awakening did not amount to a mere formal adherence to the historic Lutheran church and its confessions, but was a conviction of the heart. He was willing to stand in the Judgment on the foundation of that faith.

On the day after his ordination into the ministry, Walther said as much. "Praise be to God in eternity," the inductee said out loud, "that ... I am not compelled to look upon this oath as a shackle of conscience, but rather that through it the conviction ... has come to life, that I now have liberty to teach ... the pure Word of God, to which my poor heart clings as ... my hope for the present and for the world to come." [21]

When at later date in America Walther had to face the charge of reprobation, the convictions won in the Awakening bore fruit. He defended his adherence to the historic church and its confessions by insisting that there could be no children without fathers, that the church must remain the church of the apostles and prophets. (No wonder the motto of Walther's Missouri Synod became "*Verbum dei manes in aeternum!*") As with the Lutheran Awakening and the Reformation itself, the rallying point for Walther must remain: Back to the roots of the Christian faith in the Scriptures! Walther said as much in 1866:

"Let other churches have the fame of not being the children but the fathers of the church of the past; let their's (sic!) be the glory of not having inherited the truth but of having done independent research and having acquired the truth for themselves; let them have the zeal to transform the church of the Reformation in accordance with the demands of a new and more enlightened age, to enrich it with newly discovered truths, to guide it toward a nobler consummation, to reconcile it with the spirit of the times, and thus to speed ahead of us and leave us far behind: We will stay on our good old path! On this day (Oct.31) 349 years ago Luther made his motto not 'Forward!' but 'Backward!' namely by returning to the apostolic church. Even so, let us this day ... pledge to each other: We want to return to Luther and with him to the church of the apostles and prophets, to their doctrine and practice." [22]

But Walther did not take his Lutheran identity won during the Lutheran Awakening uncritically. He recognized that the name "Lutheran" had recently become more respected in his homeland. But his joy was tempered by the knowledge that many, even among the Old Lutherans, had bought Lutheranism too cheaply, without a thorough study the church's doctrine. What such nominal Lutherans failed to realize is that true doctrine is "not something you find on the street

like a stone you put into your pocket and then carry around with you, but Scripture says: ‘Men of violence take it by force.’ (Matthew 11:12).” [23] There were indeed those, like Professor von Hofmann at Erlangen University and Pastor Loehe in Bavaria, who were firmly committed to the Lutheran church in a formal way. But they did not consistently follow the Lutheran confession and adhered to it with reservation. [24]

America offered a different scene. In Walther’s eyes, a new springtime for Lutheranism was possible in America because the new world provided a fresh opportunity for the church to flourish unburdened by state interference. In a letter to his wife from Europe, Walther bared his soul on the matter: “I do not have to reassure you how much I yearn for America.... As much as God has done here for improvement, yet I have to say after observing many things in Germany that induce me to praise God: The greatest thing God has done for us is in America.” [25]

In America, the great and praiseworthy benefits to which Walther refers were the guarantees of religious freedom and freedom of conscience. But these freedoms also put Christians under a solemn obligation faithfully to use this freedom, for “God will someday demand a serious account of the use of the inexpressible benefit.” [26] Thus, in his own way, Walther had come to appreciate that the maxim “eternal vigilance is the price of liberty” applied to the church as well as to politics.

### **III. THE MIDDLE WAY**

Upon returning to the free atmosphere of America, Walther set himself the task of spelling out the answer to the question: What does it mean to be a Lutheran. He was convinced that, under God’s blessing, the free conferences were the best means to lead Lutherans to unity and eventual union. In the initial invitation he set an agenda that aimed to clear the way for the “formation of an Evangelical Lutheran Church of North America” by rescuing it from the twin dangers that would destroy true unity: unionism and separatism. [27]

“Our church in America stood among others in a twofold danger, either of being splintered into hostile armies, or of falling prey to the lust for conquest that might be entertained by any synodical coalition with its specific slant, swelling in number and influence and swallowing up everything,” Walther wrote in the martial tones of the church militant. He was pleased at the direction taken at the first meeting, for “the conference marked the blessed beginning of stemming this twofold danger with a mighty dike.” [28]

Steering the middle course to unity between unionism and separatism was no easy task, and Walther recognized the need for a firm stand and an evangelical heart. Unionism, as the experience in Europe demonstrated, played fast and loose with Christian doctrine and strained the bonds of fraternal love to the breaking point. For that reason, “mutual confidence prevents us from disregarding those differences in doctrine which become evident, ... to cover them up and to [bury] them,” Walther indicated, as a matter of principle. [29] Instead of declaring points of doctrine “open questions” and entering into mutual compromise in order to remain outwardly united, Walther brought them “out into the open” as mutual differences.

But openness with regard to doctrinal differences was not an end in itself for Walther. Instead, it opened the door to unity by exposing the matter in question to the scrutiny of God’s Word and the heritage of the church. “We do not desist from seeking and searching in the Word of God and in the testimonies of the church and the teachings of the church, by colloquies and

disputations, privately and publicly,” Walther explained, “until unity has been attained also in those points in which it might have suffered loss.” [30]

By this patient and charitable dealing, Walther intended to avoid the danger of a sectarian spirit. He explains at length how charity and firmness in the pursuit of unity go hand in hand: (Permit a reading of the entire passage)

“We subscribe wholeheartedly to the well-known maxim *‘In necessariis unites, in dubiis libertas, in omnibus caritas’* (in essentials, unity; in doubtful things, liberty; in all things, charity). We do so, however, not in a unionistic sense, which places even the doctrine of the means of grace into the category of doubtful things. We do so in the sense: that we gladly permit anyone to harbor his private opinions in matters which are not contrary to the Word of God, as long as he does not attempt to subject anyone else’s conscience to his.

So little is unity in the form and method of doctrine the goal of our endeavors that we rather heartily rejoice in the multiplicity of spiritual gifts, which in this respect are given free play for their development.

Our union stipulates agreement in ceremonies only insofar as this unity is required by the confessional rites of our church. Unity in practice is of great value to us, to be sure, but only insofar as the unhindered edification of the church depends upon a common foundation and as faithfulness to the Confessions requires it.

Our unity is not, however, a sectarian one. On the contrary, an inner longing for unity with all other denominations enlivens and inspires us. The less this unity among us is cold and abstract, but rather a unity of the spirit in the bond of peace, a unity of sentiments and cordial love, so much the more it urges us to pursue unity with all Christians, especially with those who carry before them the same confessional banner.” [31]

The sin of separatism weighed especially heavy on Walther’s mind because the free atmosphere in America permitted such individualistic and sectarian attitudes to mushroom.

“Just consider the relationship which existed before in this land between the synods which called themselves Lutheran,” Walther wrote in review of the first free conference. “Each one followed, according to the measure of its knowledge and according to its opinions and local environments, its own peculiar direction. Instead of emphasizing their common relationship and serving one another with the special gifts which each possessed, they separated, step by step, farther and farther from each other, and thus fell into a divided state of jealousy. It appeared as though in the end as many divisions, yes and in part, sects, would arise in the Church as there were synods.” [32]

Would it not, however, be equally dangerous and divisive for members of those synods who embraced all the Lutheran Confessions to participate in a conference whose basis was the Augsburg Confession alone, as the invitation to the conference suggested? Could not Satan use the device to rob them of the great treasure that united them? Walther admitted the danger was real. And his answer to the dilemma was forthright. “When an action does not injure the faith but is called for by love for the brethren as individuals and for the church as a whole, it would be an act of both unbelief and lovelessness to omit such an action because of the possible danger.” [33]

Even more serious, as far as Walther was concerned, not to act meant flight from responsibility. After all, those who held to the truth in their confession had nothing to hide when

others, with them, were willing to listen to God's Word. "If those who by God's grace have come to recognize the glory of all our churchly confessions timidly withdraw from all those who have the same faith but not the same knowledge, an equally dreadful danger would threaten, namely that one part would become guilty of a pharisaic, carnal, spiritually proud, loveless insistence on its strict confessionalism, while the other part, instead of being filled with confidence and love for the continued building and further fortification of our confessional castle, would more and more be scared off as from a prison tower of the spirit and of faith." [34]

Thus a Lutheran must remain a fighter for the truth, not a sectarian who leaves in the midst of the struggle for the truth. He must contend for the truth as long as God and conscience allow.

To a European friend who asked about staying in the German State Church, Walther advised: "A Lutheran is, so to say, conservative by nature and can be moved to break with the conditions in which God has placed him only if one force him to act against his conscience. There is a great difference between an originally false churchly fellowship and an originally orthodox but degenerate [fellowship].... One must leave a heretical or schismatic fellowship, without consulting flesh and blood, or even a syncretistically constituted sect. This is not the case with a church that originally was orthodox but in which untruth and heresy cause struggles. One abandons a sinking ship, not a leaky [one]." [35]

Until the time when error so persists that it is no longer correctable, therefore, love dictates a firm and gentle course. To a troubled parishioner in the Breslau Synod in Germany who requested the services of a minister, Walther counseled: "From our point of view you must necessarily have exhausted every means to lead your present communion to the truth—and thereby yourselves back to it also—and gotten no result before we could send you a pastor, or we would be making ourselves guilty of the sin of schism." [36]

What then, according to Walther, does it mean to be a Lutheran? He answered both positively and negatively. Positively, it meant the promotion of the church's catholicity; negatively, it meant avoiding the twin dangers of unionism and separatism. Early in his American labors, Walther expressed himself in this way: "The more fatal and destructive [our stubborn isolation] got for us, the more we now yearn for the most painstaking preservation of the church's catholicity and for the avoidance of separatism in every form." [37]

For the first president of the Synodical Conference the middle course between unionism and separatism lay not in church union, but in the promotion of true unity. He clearly stated this view in the year following the first free conference: "An externally grand Lutheran union in spite of inner unity" would be an abomination in God's eyes. [38]

But at the same time the question needed to be raised: "How we dare to be preserved in the fellowship of one faith, one mind, and one voice if we despise external union with those who now share our same confession before the world when such union is possible?" [39]

The answer to that question led to the formation of the Synodical Conference. Walther's middle road to church union in the Conference was not to be confused with the middle course which Schaff attributed to the Moderate Lutherans—which put the Neo and Old Lutherans at the extremes. In Schaff's eyes, the middle course of the Moderates was willing to tolerate doctrinal differences on the way to union, in the spirit of English and American toleration. For Walther the middle way to union lay in a unity grounded in Scripture and faithful to the Lutheran Confessions.

#### **IV. A TRUE LUTHERAN**

Walther unmistakably held Scripture and the Lutheran confessional writings in highest regard. They were in his eyes normative for faith and life. They remained standards in the church militant to which Christians pledged themselves to keep the peace in the battle against the devil, world, and one's own flesh. In Scripture and the Confessions can be found Walther's answer to the question: What does it mean to be a Lutheran.

The great value Walther placed on the Lutheran Confessions is spelled out in a letter to the Tennessee Synod. "Now there is, of course, no question that all the Symbolical Books of our orthodox church are acknowledged as her public confession of faith, although in certain Lutheran particular [territorial] churches for various reasons only the Unaltered Augsburg Confession is specifically named when its teachers make their confessional oath or pledge. No Lutheran will deny that the Book of Concord contains the Symbols of the Lutheran Church; a church symbol and the confession of a church are of course identical." [40]

If a pastor or congregation happened to hold only to the Augsburg Confession, Walther was willing to grant that the church was truly Lutheran. But the principle still remained: "A genuinely Lutheran church will obviously not contradict any of the Symbols contained in the Book of Concord." [41]

For this reason, Walther regarded any attempt at confessional reductionism as deceptive and a weakening of the bond of faith. "We think that anyone who is so dishonest and unscrupulous as to allow himself to be pledged to the Augsburg Confession and to swear adherence to it, even though he rejects in part the Biblical faith expressed there—such a person has a conscience so broad and dulled and branded that, if it is to his advantage, he will subscribe to the whole Book of Concord, containing all the Lutheran Symbols, even though he does not believe their teaching and has no intention of conducting his office in accord with them." [42]

The Confessions were reflective of Biblical teaching in all their parts precisely because of the center out of which the testimony grew. That center, Walther never failed to point out, was grace. As simple as it may sound, what it means to be a Lutheran is to proclaim the grace of God in Christ as the core of God's message.

"The Lutheran Church tells the sinner, as the Word of God tells him," Walther said, "*Es ist schon alles getan* [Everything has already been done]; you are already redeemed, you are already justified before God; you need not therefore do anything to redeem yourself, to reconcile God to you, to earn your salvation. All that has already been accomplished. Only believe! Believe that Christ, the Son of God, has already gained all this for you; through this faith you obtain all this and are saved." [43]

If grace shaped the Lutheran Confession, then Scripture was its basis. Walther warned against departing from this foundation: "Who will want to align himself with a new theology which claims to be a legitimate development of the old Lutheran theology, but departs from it in the doctrine of Scripture, of the '*ratio formalis Scripturae*,' of that which constitutes the essence of Scripture [namely, its inspiration]." [44]

"We have adhered," he said in summary, "first, to the supreme principle of all Christianity, that the canonical books of the Old and New Testaments are, from the first to the last letter, the inspired Word of the great God, the only rule and norm of faith and life, of all doctrine and all teachers, and the supreme judge of all religious controversies. Next we have adhered to the second supreme principle of our truly evangelical Church, that the article of the justification of the poor sinner before God by grace alone, for the sake of Christ alone, and therefore through faith

alone, is the chief fundamental article of the whole Christian religion, with which the Church stands and falls.” [45]

Under Walther’s guidance, the Synodical Conference echoed the same stand in its constitution. Article II stated simply and concisely: “The Synodical Conference acknowledges the canonical writings of the Old and New Testaments as God’s Word, and the confession of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of 1580, called the ‘Concordia,’ as her own.” [46]

After the Conference had formed, Walther had no grandiose expectations for the Synodical Conference. The battle, after all, was the Lord’s and He would either prosper or prevent the cause. Walther understood that being a Lutheran was to live with the wisdom of the cross, so foolish to human wisdom, such a folly to sign-seekers.

“True Lutheranism,” he remarked with a perception born of experience, “does not come overnight but is born through travail and the waves of difficult anxieties of conscience and difficult struggles. And above all, only he can seek to be a Lutheran in the true sense of the word who no longer seeks honor before men (John 5:44), for whom it is enough to have God’s approval, then leaves it up to God whether He wants to push us forward or whether He wants to leave us small, unnoticed, and forgotten.... But it cannot be otherwise, God’s matters always begin disdainfully in human eyes, also a self-renewing church.” [47]

This insight was especially important because the communion of saints was never to be confused with the community of the orthodox, as important as true teaching was for the building of the church.

“O my dear friend,” Walther wrote passionately, “how then can you not see that the concept of the church as the communion of the regenerate and renewed who are gathered in the Spirit conforms to the essence of living Christianity while the mechanical conception of the church as a community of the orthodox (be they converted or unconverted) leads necessarily to a dead Christianity, that is, to no Christianity at all, and to carnal boasting: ‘Here is the Lord’s temple. Here is the Lord’s temple.’ This concept makes people into Pharisees.” [48]

Contending for the truth leaves a true Lutheran instead in the humble position of a beggar. Just when the Synodical Conference was getting off the ground, Walther summoned the church to recognize such beggary: “Whoever ascribes all glory to God and seeks to have people do likewise; and whoever recognizes that man is less than nothing; whoever brings man to the point where he prostrates himself before the Almighty, and as a poor sinful beggar pleads for and awaits all things from God’s hand—he builds the church! For the church is the place where God’s glory dwells.” [49]

Walther’s principles, set down in the Synodical Conference, reflected this attitude of faith. He was firmly convinced that the church’s confession was not there to mold God’s Word, but to be molded by it; nor was the confession to be taken lightly, because God cared.

“If someone is seeking worldly honor because of his religion,” Walther announced to a convention in 1876, “he should by no means be a Lutheran! Because the Lutheran religion will not bring worldly honor; it gives all honor to God alone and gives man nothing except shame.” [50] The disciple is not above the Master. And Walther did not expect life for himself or for the Conference to be any different.

## NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. W.H.T. Dau (ed) *EBENEZER* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1922) p 326.
2. Richard C. Wolf *DOCUMENTS OF LUTHERAN UNITY IN AMERICA* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1966) p 186f.
3. C.F.W. Walther/Herbert J.A. Bouman (trans.) *EDITORIALS FROM 'LEHRE UND WEHRE'* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1981) p 39. Hereafter referred to as Walther *EDITORIALS*.
4. Both quotations in this paragraph from E.C. Luecker "Walther and the Free Lutheran Conferences of 1856-1859," in *CONCORDIA THEOLOGICAL MONTHLY* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1944) Vol 15, p 534.
5. Walther *EDITORIALS*, p 39.
6. E. Clifford Nelson (ed) *THE LUTHERANS IN NORTH AMERICA* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1975) p 211.
7. The address of Schaff can be found translated in August R. Suelilow "Nietzsche and Schaff on American Lutheranism," in the *CONCORDIA HISTORICAL INSTITUTE QUARTERLY*, Vol 23 (January, 1951). The citation in the essay is a digest of part of Schaff's address.
8. From "Erste officielle Versammlung der 'Evang-Lutherischen Synodal-Conferenz von Nord-America,'" in *DER LUTHERANER* (St. Louis, 1872) Jahrgang 28, No. 21, p 161.
9. Quoted in Lewis W. Spitz Sr. *THE LIFE OF DR C.F.W. WALTHER* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1961) p 89.
10. Walther *EDITORIALS*, p 42.
11. Ibid.
12. Ibid, p 41f.
13. Ibid, p 42.
14. Arthur H. Drevlow (ed) *C.F.W. WALTHER: THE AMERICAN LUTHER* (Freeman, S. Dakota: Pine Hill Press, 1987) p 45.
15. Walther *EDITORIALS*, p 41.
16. Ibid, p 47
17. Cited in Hermann Sasse *HERE WE STAND* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1946) p 171f.
18. Spitz, p 9.
19. Ibid, p 20.
20. Ibid, p 23f.
21. Ibid, p 35.
22. Walther *EDITORIALS*, p 121.
23. Ibid, p 44.
24. Ibid, Up 44-47.
25. C.F.W. Walther/ Roy A. Suelflow (trans) *SELECTED LETTERS* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1981) p 24.
26. Drevlow, p 20.
27. Walther *EDITORIALS*, p 39.
28. Ibid.
29. C.F.W. Walther/ Carl S. Meyer (ed) *WALTHER SPEAKS TO THE CHURCH*, (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1973) p 18. Hereafter cited as *WALTHER SPEAKS*.
30. Ibid.

31. Ibid, p 18f.
32. Luecker, p 552.
33. Walther *EDITORIALS*, p 41.
34. Ibid.
35. *WALTHER SPEAKS* p. 24
36. Ibid, p 20
37. Ibid, p 16
38. Walther
39. *WALTHER SPEAKS*, p 15.
40. Ibid, p 39.
41. Ibid, p 40.
42. Walther *EDITORIALS*, p 40.
43. Quoted in Wm Dallmann/ W.H.T. Dau/ Th. Engelder (eds) *WALTHER AND THE CHURCH*  
(St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1938) p 27.
44. Ibid, p 11.
45. Ibid, p 10.
46. Wolf, p 196.
47. *WALTHER SPEAKS*, p 41.
48. Ibid, p 37.
49. C.F.W. Walther/ Aug. R. Suelflow (trans) *CONVENTION ESSAYS* (St. Louis: Concordia  
Publishing House, 1981) p 17.
50. Ibid, p 132.