

Foreword 1987

✓ THE WELS' WALTHER HERITAGE

Carl Ferdinand Wilhelm Walther lives on in the theology of the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod. Because of the synod's tremendous debt to that eminent St. Louis theologian, this journal with heartfelt thanks to God is now at the turn of the year taking note of the double Walther anniversaries, the 175th anniversary of his birth on October 25, 1811, and the 100th anniversary of his death on May 7, 1887. As a tribute to Walther, the *Quarterly*, beginning with this issue, is publishing in translation a testimonial by one of his students, Professor August Pieper. Pieper's appraisal of Walther was written in connection with the 75th anniversary of the Missouri Synod and the 50th anniversary of the Synodical Conference in 1922.

The Wisconsin Synod's first generation theological leader, Adolf Hoenecke, was educated in Germany under Tholuck at Halle. Its second generation theologians were American-trained at Northwestern College in Watertown and Concordia Seminary in St. Louis. For six years after Hoenecke's death in 1908, three of Walther's students constituted the entire faculty of Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary, then located in Wauwatosa. They were J. P. Koehler, who taught at the seminary from 1900 to 1929, August Pieper, who served on the faculty from 1902 to 1941, and John Schaller, who succeeded Hoenecke in the chair of dogmatics and occupied it until his death in 1920. All three of these men, who had been schoolmates in St. Louis, became presidents of the seminary and during their tenure perpetuated Walther's theology in the Wisconsin Synod. When Schaller died, the highest compliment Pieper could pay his colleague and friend was that he was "a faithful student of Walther." At the same time Pieper, who was no mean theologian himself, indicated the high esteem in which Walther was held when he said, "We are all dwarfs and cripples in comparison with Paul, Luther, Walther."¹ Now that's high praise!

But the Walther influence on WELS theology goes back even farther. For eight years, from 1870 to 1878, Wisconsin sent its theological students to St. Louis, where they sat at Walther's feet. Then, when the synod reopened its seminary and moved it from Watertown

¹*Theologische Quartalschrift*, XX, 2 (April 1920), p 99, 101.

to Milwaukee, two of Walther's students, Eugen Notz and August L. Graebner, were called as Hoenecke's associates on the three-man faculty. Both of these men had previously taught at Northwestern College. Other Walther students who served at Northwestern were J. P. Koehler before he was called to the seminary, Theodore Brohm, F. W. Stelhorn, Andreas Schroedel and Otto Hoyer. Dr. Martin Luther College in New Ulm, Minnesota, and Michigan Lutheran Seminary in Saginaw also had Walther-trained men as presidents and faculty members.

In addition to Walther's influence on the WELS through his students, the impact of his writings was immeasurable. Although Wisconsin's shift from its confessionally weak beginnings to a more solid Lutheranism was initiated internally by men like Bading and Hoenecke, the confessional trumpet that Walther was sounding on the pages of *Der Lutheraner* and *Lehre und Wehre* did not fall on deaf ears. It was mutually recognized as a triumph of God's Word and grace when, in spite of numerous frictions in other areas, agreement in doctrine and practice was reached between representatives of Wisconsin and the Missouri "Old Lutherans" at a colloquy in Milwaukee in 1868. Four years later when the Synodical Conference was organized with Walther as its first president, Wisconsin became a charter member.

Walther's scripturally sound books and essays met with a warm reception in Wisconsin circles and exerted a profound influence. To this day his lectures on *The Proper Distinction between Law and Gospel* are recommended reading for students at Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary. Even Walther's 1877 essay on the doctrine of election, which precipitated a bitter controversy, that split the Synodical Conference, won the hearty endorsement of Hoenecke. Wisconsin's premier theologian, who was Walther's junior by 24 years and a thoroughly independent student of the Scriptures, recognized that the teaching that God's election is *sola gratia* and not *intuitu fidei* is solidly biblical and soundly Lutheran. This is still Wisconsin Synod doctrine today. Also in the doctrine of church and ministry Walther's theology lives on in the WELS, although this has not always been understood or recognized.

Because of Walther's practice of copiously citing Luther and the orthodox dogmaticians of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, his opponents ridiculed him as a mere *Zitatentheolog* and scornfully labeled his writings as "restitution theology." In the school of *Anfechtung* or temptation, anxiety and doubt that followed the exposure of Stephan, whom the Saxons had gullibly accepted as their spiritual leader, Walther learned, however, that the theology of Luther and the Lutheran dogmaticians was God's truth, a sure guide

and solid comfort in every human need. That experience and conviction compelled him to oppose every error and resist every attempt to compromise the truth.

In 1920 the chair of dogmatics at Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary passed from Schaller, who was, as has been mentioned, a student of Walther, to J. P. Meyer, a student of Hoenecke. In the 44 years of Professor Meyer's service to the seminary the Hoenecke heritage and the Walther heritage, both of which were rooted in the Scriptures, merged, so to speak, like two streams that come together after rising high in the mountains from a common source.

By God's grace WELS theology today, too, has its source in the Scriptures. *Sola Scriptura* is the priceless heritage that it has received from the fathers. May God graciously preserve this heritage in the synod and at the seminary as the future becomes the present and then the past!

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