

FOREWORD TO VOLUME 108:
WHERE THERE IS NO LOVE,
DOCTRINE CANNOT REMAIN PURE
The Walther Year

John F. Brug

There has been a lot of debate within the church about the right relationship between doctrine and love. Some claim that the church should elevate love over doctrine. Doctrine is blamed for dividing the church. Love, some say, should overlook doctrinal differences for the sake of peace. This claim, however, cannot be harmonized with the scriptural teaching that truth and love must be inseparable partners. Real love can never be present wherever God's truth is ignored or set aside. Real love is not possible without the truth. No departure from God's Word can ever be labeled love, because every departure from the Word harms souls. Real love, on the other hand, never harms but always heals. "Love cannot exist where truth is absent." This is an important scriptural truth.

But in this article we are interested in examining the opposite truth: "Truth cannot survive where love is absent." Luther was vehement in his assertion that he could tolerate no "love" which compromised the truth (*AE* 27:38, 41), but in a sermon on John 15:9 he stated also the corresponding truth, "Where there is no love, doctrine cannot remain pure" (*AE* 24:244).

Holding truth and love together is a struggle. We must make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace because Satan is always working hard to tear that unity to pieces. Love is a bond which keeps a communion from being torn apart (Col 3:14). Love covers a multitude of sins (1 Pe 4:8). When the unity of a communion is torn either by error or by arrogance, love is the bond that mends the tear before it rends the whole garment.

We can't prevent offense from being given and taken in the church. Luther said we can avoid offending each other as little as we can keep one toe from touching another. Sinners constantly rub each other the wrong way. Someone offends you. You do the same to him. Even the mission team of Paul and Barnabas was split by personal offenses and disagreement. Church history is littered with such sad stories.

Sometimes these offenses are caused by insignificant personal trivia. I am offended because someone has not given me enough

praise. He is offended because he did not recognize how constructive my criticism of him really was. I have gotten some honor or position that he wanted, or vice versa. Our group accepted his proposal not mine. Such personal slights lead us to focus a more critical eye on the brother who offended us. One thing leads to another, and personal faults and theological misstatements are magnified. One brother takes a stand on an issue, and the other immediately knows, without much thought or reflection, that his stand should be the opposite. Sparks become fires, molehills become mountains, and through the magnifying glass of jealousy specks of sawdust look like beams.

We can't avoid giving and taking such offense, but we can reconcile and be reconciled. Love, which is biblically defined as doing what is good for the brother and for the church, heals little nicks before they become large wounds on the body. Love covers over such sins not by ignoring them but by healing them.

But what if the offense is real not imagined, and the offense is against God's Word? Certainly love does not cover over such sins, does it? "Love must confront error with the truth!" That is true. The medicine of correction must be applied to every ill, but a spoonful of love helps the medicine go down. Love remembers that our first goal is to win the brother, not just to win the argument. Love understands that *how* correction is applied sometimes has more impact on the outcome than whether the rebuke is true or false. "Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. ⁵It is not rude, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. ⁶Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. ⁷It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres" (1 Cor 13). This passage provides a good checklist for us to use when we are evaluating how we have responded to an offense against us.

What are some of the ways in which a lack of love endangers the preservation of the truth? They fall into the general categories of too harsh and too hasty.

Damage is done to the body of Christ when the method of correction is more destructive than the offense itself. A person who uses a cannon on every fly that goes through his house has no flies. But he soon has no house either. Not every misstep or misstatement leads to formal discipline. Be calm and talk to the brother. Don't press too hard.

Don't press too fast. Work through the problem with the brother, giving him time to study and reflect. Don't involve others prematurely. It is for good reason that Jesus instructs us that the first step should be to talk to the brother alone. Love does not hastily and prematurely involve others. Is an offense serious enough to sound the alarm at once or can it be handled quietly and privately? When people are asked to

take sides and are polarized prematurely, a whole synod can be divided into armed camps. A little flame in a pile of leaves becomes a forest fire.

Pastors, don't nitpick on your people (or on your brother pastors). People, don't nitpick on your pastor.

Avoid word battles. Gerhard warned, "It is wicked to interpret a poor choice of words as error when you know that the right meaning was intended" (*Good works*, 38).

Instruct gently, with kindness and patience. The goal is to win the person (2 Tim 2:23-26).

Lack of love can break unity by being too harsh in the way we begin discipline, but we can also cause and maintain division by the way we finish discipline. Public doctrinal error which has endangered or offended others must in some way be set right with those who may have been affected by the error, but pressing for apologies or confessions of error, doubting the brother's sincerity or repentance unnecessarily, may prolong the division in the heart long after the statements have been clarified or corrected.

We are warned to watch our life and our doctrine carefully (1 Ti 4:16). In the context of this article "watching our life" applies to the way in which we deal with offense. It is important that we not only have the right doctrine but also the right motive, manner, and attitude in the way we correct offenses. We need to practice Christian love and forgiveness as we bear with the sins and endure the faults and shortcomings of others. In this way unity is preserved in the church, so that the family of Christ is not torn apart and disrupted. Divisions must sometimes come in order to preserve the truth, but we should take care that they are necessary, unavoidable divisions for the sake of the truth, not schisms caused by personal offense or loveless correction.

"As important as it is to be concerned about purity of doctrine, we dare not become irrational about it." This statement, which served as the springboard for this article, was made by C. F. W. Walther in his "Duties of an Evangelical Lutheran Synod" (Harrison edition, p 321). Certainly, no one could accuse Walther of being lax in his concern for doctrinal purity, but because he was as evangelical as he was, he also gave close attention to the opposite concern: Where there is no love, the doctrine cannot remain pure.

The reason for this particular foreword is that a theme running through Volume 108 of the *Quarterly* will be the commemoration of the 200th anniversary of the birth of C. F. W. Walther. This commemoration will include a series on Walther's dogmatic axioms, an article on fellowship principles and practices in early Missouri, an article on the four presidents of the Missouri Synod who were colleagues or students

of Walther, and other articles and news items that relate to the topic. We begin with a brief biographical and bibliographical summary compiled from popular sources.

John F. Brug

C. F. W. Walther (1811-1887)

Perhaps the only men who had a greater impact for good on the Lutheran church than Carl Ferdinand Wilhelm Walther were the two Martins, Luther and Chemnitz.

Walther was born on October 20, 1811 in Langenchursdorf, Saxony. He was the eighth child of Pastor Gottlieb Heinrich Walther and Johanna Wilhelmina Walther. Walther's parents were faithful Christians and desired the same for their children. Carl Ferdinand was sent away from home at a very early age to be educated at Schneeberg. Walther's early education, however, did so little to ground him in the basic teachings of God's Word that by the time he was eighteen, he did not know the Ten Commandments by heart and could not recite the names of the books of the Bible.

Nevertheless, prompted by his father, Walther entered the University of Leipzig as a student of theology in the fall of 1829. He did not even own a Bible. Walther's professors, almost to a man, had forsaken many of the teachings of God's Word and taught their students to do the same. God, in his great mercy, preserved a very small remnant of students at Leipzig who had come to faith in the grace of God in Christ and who accepted the divine authorship and authority of the Holy Scriptures. Walther's older brother introduced him to these pious Christians. The group gathered together several times a week to pray and to read God's Word. Walther quickly became a member of the group in belief and spirit. Later he recalled, "It was there that God began to work on my soul by means of his Word. In a short time I had really become a child of God, a believer, who trusted in His grace" (*Law and Gospel*, p 141).

Not long after the light of the gospel had broken through the darkness of Walther's life, Satan tried to cloud and cover it up again. The piety of the group sometimes veered toward pietism. A new student of theology entered the group and, although he meant well, threw them into spiritual confusion. He threw out a challenge, "You imagine that you are converted Christians, don't you? But you are not. You have not passed through any real penitential agony" (*Law and Gospel*, p 142). Because of this man's assertions, Walther thought that he had to pray and struggle against sin until he came to a subjective feeling of assurance that his sins had been forgiven. He became frustrated and was thrown into despair.

Martin Stephan, a pastor from Dresden, assured Walther of his salvation by pointing him to Jesus and his saving work. Stephan showed him that the kind of repentance which he had been seeking was on the basis of the law. He should instead be looking toward what he had already experienced in the gospel (Suefflow, p 25).

Throughout the early and mid-1830's Walther read God's Word, the confessions of the Lutheran Church, and Luther's writings. He became convinced that salvation is a gift of God based on fact not feelings. Man deserves no credit for his salvation. All glory is given to God, because he has accomplished our salvation for us.

Walther had to take six months off from the university due to a nearly fatal lung disease. During this time off he acquainted himself more deeply with the works of Luther, and became convinced that Luther's theology taught the doctrines of Holy Scripture clearly and correctly. Through intense study he became convinced that the symbolic writings of the Lutheran Church are a correct exposition and explanation of what the Bible says.

After graduation, Walther worked for three years as a private tutor in the town of Kahla and served briefly as a pastor in Braeunsdorf. Walther and many others who opposed the Saxon government's religious policies of forcing a union of Reformed and Lutheran churches were drawn together under the leadership of Martin Stephan. In November, 1838, eight hundred Saxon immigrants left for America, hoping to find freedom to practice their Lutheran convictions. The settlers arrived in New Orleans on January 5, 1839. (One of the pilgrim ships was lost at sea. How different would American Lutheranism be, if Walther had been on that ship.) From New Orleans the majority of the immigrants traveled up the Mississippi and settled in the area of St. Louis, Missouri. They immediately began to form confessional Lutheran congregations. Stephan initially held sway over the settlers, who had pledged loyalty to him as their bishop, but he was soon expelled from the community because of charges of financial and sexual misconduct. The resulting crisis provided the occasion for Walther to emerge as the theological leader of the group and ultimately of American Lutheranism.

During the efforts to resolve this crisis of leadership, considerable debate arose in the settlement over the proper role of their church in the New World. Was it a new church, or did it remain within and under the German Lutheran hierarchy? Walther's position, derived from his reading of Luther during his long convalescence, prevailed. This church was free and should be organized on the basis of the principles set forth in Scripture, not on the basis of the ecclesiastical structure of the Old World.

Walther served as the pastor at Dresden, Missouri (later absorbed into the nearby town of Altenburg), in Perry County, Missouri until 1841, when he was called to be pastor of his late brother's congregation in St. Louis, Missouri, a position he held until his death. Later that year, on September 21, he married Emilie Buenger. Six children issued from this union.

The congregation supported the publication of a Lutheran newspaper, edited by Walther, called *Der Lutheraner*. The newspaper helped to unite Walther and the Saxon congregations with other Lutheran immigrants. In May, 1846, some pastors from Ohio, Indiana, and Michigan who had read Walther's theology in *Der Lutheraner*; traveled to Missouri for a meeting with Walther's Saxons. On April 26, 1847, the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod was founded. Walther served as its first president, a position he held from 1847 to 1850 and again from 1864 to 1878. During his forty years of ministry, Walther also served as professor and president at Concordia Seminary, St. Louis (founded at Perry County, Missouri in 1839).

God blessed the new church body with both doctrinal purity and numerical growth. In 1872, the Missouri Synod joined with the Ohio, Norwegian, Illinois, Minnesota, and Wisconsin Synods to form the Synodical Conference of North America, which also served as a confessional beacon to Lutherans around the world.

Walther was overjoyed with how richly God had blessed him and the church body that he helped found. His life, however, was also filled with grief and trial. The burdens he bore took a significant toll on his health. His greatest hardship as the chief theologian of the Missouri Synod and the Synodical Conference came in the Election Controversy. The majority of the Synodical Conference, led by C. F. W. Walther and aided by the Wisconsin Synod's Adolph Hoenecke, taught that the inner motive of election is God's grace and his free pleasure. The external motive is Jesus and his merit. No further reason for election is spoken of anywhere in Scripture. The beautiful German word used for this teaching is *Gnadenwahl*, election of grace.

Some in the Synodical Conference, led by Professor F. A. Schmidt of the Norwegian Synod's seminary, opposed this teaching. They insisted that there was another motive for God's election, namely, our faith as foreseen by God. They falsely imagined that God predestined the elect for salvation because in eternity God looked at them and saw that they would have faith, as if faith were the "rule" by which he measured us. The Ohio Synod, because it defended this error, left the Synodical Conference in 1881. This was an especially painful blow for Walther because, in 1878, the Ohio Synod's Capitol University had conferred on him the degree of Doctor of Divinity, only to charge him with heresy just two years later.

With this and many other troubles, God fashioned C. F. W. Walther into a theologian of the cross. “We must go through many hardships to enter the kingdom of God” (Acts 14:22). Walther learned that lesson again and again. He once wrote, “We also know that when God lays a cross on us, this is not his anger, but rather a sign of His love” (Suelflow, p 252).

Walther’s greatest contributions to Lutheranism were his strong leadership and the clear voice that was heard throughout the world in *Der Lutheraner* and *Lehre und Wehre*. His teaching at Concordia Seminary laid a strong foundation for confessional Lutheranism in America and indeed throughout the world. His most influential theological writing is his evening lectures published as *The Proper Distinction Between Law and Gospel*. Walther authored numerous important articles and several books, the most important of which is *The Voice of Our Church in the Question of Church and Ministry* (1852).

C. F. W. Walther found rest from his labors on May 17, 1887. The Missouri Synod had grown from fewer than a thousand immigrants to a church body of over 600,000.

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