

# Who's Walther?

## *The fingerprints of the first LCMS president are found in LCC*

Every once in a while, God sends to His church a theologian who can speak the Word of God with particular clarity to the people of his generation. Such a man was C. F. W. Walther, the first president of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod

Carl Ferdinand Wilhelm Walther was born on October 25, 1811 in Langenchursdorf, Saxony. He was ordained a Lutheran pastor on January 15, 1837. His conscience soon forced him to break with the state church into which he was ordained. He became a follower of the maverick pastor and theologian, Martin Stephan, who was preparing to emigrate to the United States. Walther's decision to join Stephan took him to America. It ensured, as God worked things out, that Walther would become the spiritual father of the Evangelical Lutheran Synod of Missouri, Ohio, and other States, later to be known simply as The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod. As the first president and the theological leader of Missouri during her golden years, Walther became one of the most influential Lutherans of the 19th century.

Walther's life testifies to how God uses evil for good. Walther was subjected to the influences of rationalism and pietism in his youth, but his struggle against these "isms" led the budding theologian into a serious study of the Scriptures and the Lutheran Confessions.

The Rationalists placed human reason above the Holy Scriptures as both judge and jury over what to believe. Every holy mystery of the faith was subjected to the standard of sinful human "reasonableness." Shallow moralism replaced Gospel preaching. The sacraments were despised as having no practical value. Rationalism rejected the divine authority of the Holy Scriptures and replaced this authority with whatever secular standards were

fashionable at the time. It put man's head over the Holy Scriptures. C. F. W. Walther, as a sheep who listened to the voice of his Shepherd, could not tolerate rationalism.

But he flirted briefly with pietism. If rationalism puts man's head over the teaching of God's Word, pietism puts man's heart over the Scriptures.

Through a thorough study of Luther's writings, Walther learned to put his confidence in the objective truth of God's Word. He learned to distrust human feelings, just as he distrusted human reason. He became a scholar of the Lutheran Confessions and the writings of the orthodox Lutheran fathers. He was drawn to the Stephanite emigration out of fierce loyalty to the truth that the state church in Saxony despised.

The followers of Martin Stephan left Dresden in November 1838 and arrived in New Orleans in January 1839. While on board ship, Pastor Stephan was elected bishop. Before the newly-arrived Saxons could settle in, Bishop Stephan was accused of sexual and financial misconduct and deposed

Pastor Walther was not yet thirty years old, but found himself the theological leader of this group of demoralized immigrant Lutherans. Now they had no bishop. What were they? Were they still the church? Or should they swallow their pride and return from whence they had come? How could they do that?

Walther helped them and now we understand that they were the church, not because they had the

correct kind of government, but because they had the Divine means of grace. They had the pure Gospel and the rightly administered sacraments. They had pastors who preached that Gospel and administered those sacraments. They were church, not a sect.

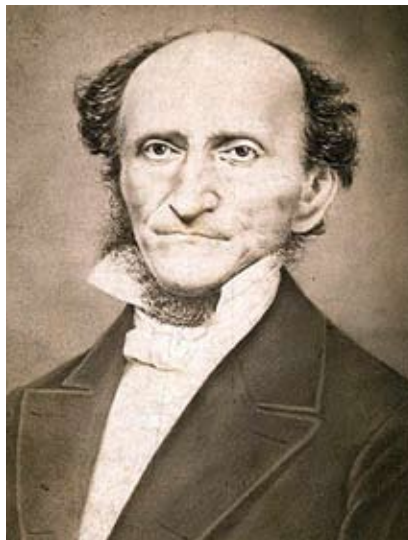
As Lutherans all over the world

seek to discover what they really are and stand for, the teaching of C. F. W. Walther is a good place to start. A sincere love for the truth will not lead to the claim that Lutherans and Roman Catholics now agree on the doctrine of God's justification of the sinner. Neither will it bog us down in endless wrangling over

the "correct" way to do things in areas where God hasn't spoken. A deep love for God's grace will see every other issue in its proper setting. The authority of the pastor is the authority of Jesus to forgive sins here on earth (Matthew 9:6), not the authority to impose his will on others. By following in Walther's footsteps a pastor serves with authority, God's authority, who says what God says and claims that God is saying it!

Through sermons, convention essays, and articles, C.F.W. Walther's voice still speaks to the Church. In a series of columns we will ask the question "Where's Walther?" and discover that his fingerprints are found in much of what we teach and practise in Lutheran Church—Canada.

This article is excerpted and adapted from an essay *Missourians in Canada?* by Rev. Rolf Preus, published in *Word&Deed*, Fall 1999.



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