

WALTHER AT ALTENBURG:
THE HISTORICAL INFLUENCES WHICH LAY BEHIND THE THESES

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It would be rather difficult to overestimate the importance of Carl Ferdinand Wilhelm Walther to the development of confessional Lutheranism in this country. Even the casual observer of American Lutheran history must be struck by the pre-eminence Walther displayed during the nineteenth century. Here was a man whose mastery of systematic theology resulted in colossal works like The Proper Distinction between Law and Gospel and Church and Ministry. Here was a man whose editorial excellence resulted in the periodicals Der Lutheraner and Lehre und Wehre, bastions of confessionalism within an American Lutheran wilderness that had witnessed the steady growth of unionism. Here was a man whose synodical leadership coincided with the growth of the Missouri Synod from the few hundred of the Saxon emigration to over a million at the time of his death less than fifty years later. Here was a man whose stress on education and worker training assured his synod of a future of confessional clergy and laity. Here was a man who, through all of this, was the pastor's pastor, distinguishing himself in the areas of counseling and preaching. Surely here was a man on whom the Lord showered tremendous amounts of grace and power.

If Walther's importance cannot be overemphasized, neither can that of the Altenburg Debate of 1841. The effect Altenburg had on both Walther and the Saxon emigrants is attested to by contemporaries of the situation and historians alike. The exuberant candidate of theology G. Schieferdecker, a witness to the debate, called the events of Altenburg "the Easter Day of our sorely tried congregations. Like the disciples on their way to Emmaus, we beheld the light and power of God's grace and were filled with new hope."¹ Commenting on W.G. Polack's The Story of C.F.W. Walther, a Theologische Quartalschrift review editor writes: "In Altenburg life and death, faith and despair, hung in the

balance. One shudders to think what course Lutheran church history in America might have taken if Walther had not carried the day in Altenburg."² Speaking of Altenburg's effect on the stature of Walther himself, Carl S. Mundinger writes that the debate "was definitely the making of C.F.W. Walther."³ There can be no doubt. When Walther set forth ^hte scriptural and Lutheran doctrine of the church, clothed as it was by eight theses at Altenburg, an incredibly important cornerstone of confessional American Lutheranism was laid.

Yet, to call Altenburg important is not enough. Nor should the debate be studied in a vaccuum. The two years from the time the Saxons landed to the actual Altenburg Debate ~~was~~ ^{were} filled with significant influences upon Walther and the course he would take concerning the question of the church. All of these influences may be traced back to specific events or series of events in the life of Walther and the Saxon colony. With this writing we shall attempt to relate and analyze the various historical influences which led to the theses Walther proposed at Altenburg on April 15 and 21, 1841. These influences will serve as the main parts. As a summary part we shall examine the subsequent force the Altenburg theses had on the Missouri Synod, asking ourselves the question: "Is Altenburg the birthplace of Missouri's 'decentralized' church government?"

I. Stephan and Stephanism

As one might expect, the fall of Martin Stephen is a fairly well-chronicled bit of history. But it is only when we study the reasons why Stephan at one time enjoyed tremendous popularity that we can begin to appreciate the influence this man had on the development of the Altenburg theses. While Stephan's sexual improprieties may have shocked the Saxon settlement, they were not the primary cause of the emigrants' subsequent consternation. What hurt those Lutherans the most was the

fact that the very embodiment of true religion, Martin Stephan, had proved to be a sham. Stephan had an almost uncanny grip on these people. So great was his pull that women parted with their husbands, and mothers forsook their infant children in order that "they might follow Christ to America."⁴ Stephan's appeal was overpowering. When asked by his sister whether she too must follow Stephan to America, candidate for the ministry J.F. Buenger replied: "If you wish to go to hell, stay here; if you wish to be saved, go with us to America."⁵ The natural by-product of this almost unnatural appeal was a faulty doctrine of ecclesiology. But before we examine Stephan's specific thoughts on the church, let us take a closer look at the emotional make-up of this man. In so doing we may begin to appreciate what Walther was up against at Altenburg in 1841.

The gifts Martin Stephan possessed for ministry were not overly substantial by any means. His upbringing did not allow for much education. Both his mother and father were Lutherans who had once been Roman Catholics. They died early on in Stephan's life, leaving him, as Stephan put it, "to fight through many a battle as a poor and neglected orphan waif."⁶ Stephan's orphan status was made more difficult by the fact that he was despised as the son of turncoats by his Roman Catholic neighbors. It has been suggested that all the hardships this man had to face early in life manifested themselves in a certain persecution complex he developed later in life. The historian Mundingger feels that Stephan was plagued with feelings of inferiority, and that "instead of meeting the problems of life head on, he took the roundabout way of compensation through persecutory delusions and the achievement of complete control over his fellows."⁷

Stephan's presentation of suffering and persecutions in his sermons

allows us an interesting glimpse of how he transferred his persecutory delusions to his followers. A perusal through Der christliche Glaube, a book of Stephan's sermons, will show that the subject of suffering appears more than any other topic. A majority of sermons are dedicated to suffering and hardship, while a casual reference to the subject is made in just about every sermon. Stephan's emphasis in this regard seems to stem from a rather un-Lutheran doctrine of suffering. Almost claiming hardships as a means of grace, Stephan writes: "Various hardships are means to keep us more firmly with Christ. They are to prepare our hearts for the enjoyment of God's grace."⁸ It is no surprise that Stephan demanded hardship of his followers also. Nor is it a surprise to find millennialistic tendencies throughout Stephan's sermons, for in the millennium one may teach an escape from the sufferings and hardships of this world.

At this point we may well ask: How could an uneducated Bohemian preacher who harbored feelings of persecutory delusions have such control of a group of Saxons, so much control that they were willing to follow him to the farthest corners of the planet? Parts of the answer may be found in many things. We could mention the oasis Stephan represented in the desert of rationalism that gripped Germany at the time. We could mention the political pressure these Saxons were feeling from their government. But perhaps the most complete answer lies in the ability Martin Stephan had in the area of estimating people. He was a tremendous judge of character, and he adapted his message to the character he happened to be dealing with. About Stephan and this ability, Carl E. Vehse, one of the first to champion Stephan and one of the first to call for his exile, wrote: "He was the very embodiment of tact, so that people came under his control without knowing it."⁹ Whether Stephan led from the front or from the back, one thing is certain:

the Saxon emigration was his.

While a study of Stephan may lead to an understanding of the "cult of personality" that developed around him, a study of Stephanism will allow us a more precise understanding of what Walther was trying to correct with his Altenburg theses. The term Stephanism most aptly describes Stephan's teaching of the church, both what it is and where its power lies. Before the Saxons had even reached American soil, all the emigrants had signed an "Emigration Charter." The primary purpose of this charter was to establish a form of church polity for the Saxons once they had settled in Missouri. The principle tenets of what Stephan believed their church should be were laid down in a manuscript bearing the title "Principles of an Ecclesiastical Constitution as It is Prescribed in the Word of God and the Symbolical Writings of the Evangelical Lutheran Church and as It Actually Existed in the Apostolic Church in the First Centuries." This constitution was recorded in J.F. Koesterling's Auswanderung der saechsischen Lutheraner im Jahre 1838. In this document Stephan set down fifteen points concerning the church and the office of the ministry. Basically, the fifteen points ascribe every piece of decision-making, whether secular or ecclesiastical, to the Bishop, Martin Stephan. Perhaps most notable is point number four: "Only through the office (of the ministry) the grace of God is offered."¹⁰ Also included in this document was a rather thorough stifling of any lay involvement in the church. It appears that Stephan's thirst for control had quite completely affected his ideas of the church.

Yet these were the ideas of the church that the Saxons were left with after Stephan's removal from the colony. What is more, these were the ideas that had firmly established themselves in the minds of the remaining clergy. The days following May 30, 1839, were trying ones indeed as clergy and laity alike did some deep soul searching in order

to identify exactly what kind of group they were. This background of uncertainty, effected by Stephan and his Stephanism, was to be a profound influence on the mission of comfort C.F.W. Walther set out to accomplish at Altenburg.

II. Spiritual and Physical Hardship within the Colony

When one considers the deeply religious nature of the Saxon emigrants, it becomes very easy to understand the spiritual chaos into which they were thrown following Stephan's fall from grace. We must remember that these emigrants were convinced they had to come to America if they were to remain members of the Christian Church. Their faithful admiration of those who proclaimed the gospel and administered the sacraments had been cruelly manipulated by their leader. Stephan had erroneously taught that he was their connection to God's grace, and that without him there was no hope. The colony had fixed all its trust in Stephan's doctrine of the church and ministry. Overnight, as Munding writes, that same doctrine of church and ministry "fell into disrepute, yea, it stank to the highest heavens." Everything the Saxons held dear was tied to Martin Stephan in some way. But on May 31, 1839, the colonists watched as that same Stephan was put on a boat and sent across the Mississippi to Illinois to fend for himself.

Stephan's spiritual legacy was now being felt by two distinct groups within the Saxon settlement: the clergy and the laity. Each group had its own peculiar problems as a result of the defrocking of their bishop. Most disconcerting about the clergy was the fact that Stephanism had taken hold in their thinking of the church. These were young men who had had Stephan's Romanish ideas of church polity drilled into them in the most formative years of their ministry. They were not about to let go of their "power" so easily; in fact, they had every intention of continuing Stephan's hierarchical ideas even after

his deposing. Reflecting back on the situation, Pastor E.G.W. Keyl writes: "Unfortunately the removal of Stephan did not mean the removal of Stephanism from our midst. In continued blindness I clung tenaciously to most of the Stephinistic ideas."¹¹ These young "Amtsbrueder" simply could not turn the reins of ministry over to laymen with a clear conscience, especially laymen who had begun to contest their office rather vehemently. The three hundred years between the Reformation and the Saxon emigration had clouded the teaching of the universal priesthood Luther had worked so hard to reestablish. Indeed, it was not until a full six months had passed since Stephan's exile that the clergy was even ready to discuss abandoning Stephanism. The pastors were understandably defensive about their ministries, and it was this same unhealthy attitude that Walther had to battle as he carried out the eight theses to be presented at Altenburg.

Yet the clerical disciples Stephan left behind must not be perceived as paranoid rhetoricians, concerned only about saving their own skins. The forced dismissal of their leader shook their own faith in what they had been called to do. In fact, whether they even had calls was subject to debate as far as they were concerned. They did not need an angry laity breathing down their necks to make them uncertain about their ministry. The soul searching they were doing had already accomplished that feat. Perhaps an extended passage from a letter written by C.F.W. Walther to his brother O.H. Walther in St. Louis will serve to give us a feeling of exactly what fears and apprehensions were going through the minds of these young pastors:

"The main questions being treated among us just now are these: Are our congregations truly Lutheran (Christlutherische) congregations? Or are they mobs? Sects? Do they have the authority to call and to excommunicate? Are we pastors or not? Are our calls valid? Could we possibly have been divinely called here, since we abandoned our divine calls in Germany and ran away from them, following our wrong

consciences? Should not the congregations depose as now, since now for the first time they realize with us how great an offense we have given?"¹²

If Walther's words are to be any indication of the clerical state of mind, it would appear their own guilty consciences were just as formidable a foe as the protestations of the laity.

The general reaction of the laity to the defrocking of Bishop Stephan reflects one of the laws of controversy: when correcting an error one must always be careful that he does not overcorrect into another error. The lay party's solution to the colony's spiritual hardships was a classic example of overcorrection. While a large share of the study and work put into this question by lay leaders like Vehse served admirably, there were pieces of work which only served to inflame the wound. For instance, Vehse's "Protestationsschrift" insisted that clergy follow the laity in public processions since St. Paul directed his epistles to the congregations, and not to bishops.¹³ The lay party was very clear in their resolve to stress congregationalism, with a heavy emphasis on the individual. Even further, it became the official position of the lay party that the emigration was "not the work of God but rather the work of the devil, a work of falsehood and deception."¹⁴ Factionalization was a reality within the colony, yet another problem, and influence, with which Walther dealt at Altenburg.

Before we close this section we must make brief mention of the physical hardships besetting the Saxons at this time. Candidate for ministry Schieferdecker recorded a vivid picture of the terrible ills that existed within the colonists of Perry County.¹⁵ He writes of emigrants who were terribly unprepared for the climate in Missouri. Many people had practically no shelter to protect them from the elements. The resulting number of sick people was too much for the colony to handle, since most of those competent to care for the sick were in poor health

themselves. Fever spread through the colony during the oppressive summer of 1839; any large buildings were converted into crude hospitals. Most tragic, however, was the loss of human life due to improper medical attention. These points are only mentioned in order to show the almost pathetic state which afflicted the Saxon colonists. They were terribly shaken in both body and soul.

III. The Solutions of Vehse and Marbach

While physical suffering was certainly very real within the settlement, the suffering that was causing the most severe discomfort was the occasion for the colonists to doubt their status as a church of God. It is certainly true that Walther went a long way toward alleviating those spiritual hardships with his Altenburg theses in 1841. However, Walther's solution to the problem was hardly the first one. The groundwork of two theologically talented laymen, Dr. Carl E. Vehse and Dr. Adolph Marbach, preceded Walther's theses and the writings of these two laymen must never be forgotten as the important influences on Walther that they were. We shall see later how Walther himself, in the notes he prepared for the Altenburg Debate, acknowledged his indebtedness to Vehse.

A character study of Carl E. Vehse is an interesting one. Here was a man who had that rare combination of a passion for secular learning and solemn devotion toward God. At the age of 31 Vehse had been appointed as curator of the Saxon State Archives. So extensive was Vehse's knowledge of Saxon history that he would later author a seven volume work on the ruling houses of Saxony.¹⁶ As a Lutheran Vehse was closely tied to Stephan, always quick to rise to the Bishop's defense when he was arrested by the authorities in Saxony. Munding describes Vehse as "perhaps the most learned of the entire group"¹⁷ while Forster calls him a "central figure"¹⁸ in the theological debates surrounding

the fledgling Saxon colony.

Vehse's first attempt at spiritual balm for the colony was dated August 5, 1839, and came under the form of six theses entitled "Zeugnisse uber das Predigtamt." This short document stressed the Lutheran doctrine of the universal priesthood of all believers and it was submitted to O.H. Walther. Of particular interest is Vehse's final thesis, stating that the office of ministry is only a public service afforded to an individual by the congregation. While O.H. Walther replied that he and the rest of the clergy were in agreement with the theses, a reply letter dated September 9, 1839, contains language which would appear that the clergy was not in agreement with Vehse after all. The letter warned against those "who would unfairly abuse this declaration in order to discredit our office, maliciously sow the seeds of mistrust against us, and bring about dissension and offense in the congregation."¹⁹ It was almost as if the clergy were willing to admit the error of following Stephan, but at the same time they were unwilling to give up Stephanistic thinking. While they agreed with Vehse's theses, they were afraid of what that line of thinking might mean for them.

Although Vehse had been indirectly blasted by this letter from the clergy, he remained undaunted in his effort to rid the clergy of Stephanism. With the help of fellow layman Fischer and Jaeckel, Vehse drew up a more complete statement than the initial document submitted to O.H. Walther. This document was a formal protest and it was embellished with frequent and lengthy quotations from, among others, Luther and Spener. This protest was divided into three "chapters," each one making a specific point drawn from the writings of the various Lutheran fathers. The three points are as follows:

- I. Evidence concerning the rights of the congregation in relation to the clergy in religious and ecclesiastical matters.
- II. Evidence against the wrong Stephanite system, in which the rights of the congregation are not respected, but suppressed.
- III. Evidence from Luther and (a statement of) our private opinion on the justifiability of the emigration.²⁰

Included in this official protest was an earnest plea to laity and clergy alike that the contents be examined in the light of the Scriptures and the Confessional writings.

The three separate conclusions drawn by Vehse in regard to his three points are predictable. The first point simply advanced the doctrine of the universal priesthood, with frequent reference to Matthew 18:20. While this conclusion was completely scriptural, it was also mildly critical of the way the clergy had handled the situation among the colonists. With the second conclusion came much sharper criticism of the clergy. Everything about Stephan's ecclesiology was soundly condemned, and Vehse made sure that the remaining clergy would suffer guilt by association. Furthermore, Vehse attacked the episcopal way in which the clergy acted even after the deposition of Stephen. Basically, Vehse and the lay faction allowed for three functions of the clergy: instruction, administration of sacraments, and the exercising of the Keys. As Forster puts it: "The essential demand of Vehse and his companions was that the pastors confine themselves to these functions and relinquish control of secular affairs."²¹ The conclusion drawn from the third point was the flat assertion that the emigration was wrong, an assertion which is understandable from a man who would leave for Germany about a month later.

The pastors issued their formal reply to this protest on November 9, 1839. This reply included an admission of shame and guilt on the part of the clergy, but they remained adamant in their "Stephan duped us"

defense. They also claimed that they had done everything under their power to rid themselves of Stephanism since Stephan's exile. Such a claim was hardly true, for evidences of the Stephanistic hierarchical thinking among the clergy abounded. They may have rid themselves of Stephan, but they had hardly extricated the Stephanism from their thinking. It was this less than candid confession by the clergy which, among other things, led Vehse to consider the situation hopeless. On December 16, 1839, he was on a ship headed for Germany. Yet his contribution to what would become the Altenburg theses was not lost on C.F.W. Walther.

Dr. Adolph Marbach, the brother-in-law of Vehse, assumed leadership of the lay party once Vehse had left for Germany. Another one of Stephan's strongest supporters in the beginning, Marbach was a distinguished lawyer who had once been mayor of Zwickau and a member of the Saxon civil service. Marbach also distinguished himself within the emigration. It was Marbach, more than any other layman, who had advanced the notion that the Stephanite emigration was the only right church, in fact, that it alone was the Church.²² It was Marbach who made arrangements with the Episcopal congregation in St. Louis so that the Saxons could worship in their new facility. Marbach's ties to Stephan had been as close as, if not closer, than those of Vehse. The height of Marbach's early allegiance to Stephan was only matched by the depth of the bitterness he felt once Stephan had been exposed.

Because Marbach was crushed by a feeling of personal guilt over following Stephan to America, his conclusion regarding the legitimacy of the Saxon emigration was less than positive. For Marbach and his faction there could be no middle ground as far as the emigration was concerned. Either it had been justifiable or it had been completely

wrong. Judging from how the colonists had fared in Missouri, Marbach thought, it was clear that the emigration had been entirely wrong. The Saxon lawyer felt it was now his duty to find a solution to the problems that had resulted from the evil emigration. Opposition to Marbach's conclusions from the pastors never really came since the pastors themselves were unsure of their position within God's church. Taking his opposition a bit further, Marbach and his following held their own devotional meetings rather than attend the worship services led by the pastors. Things looked quite bleak for the clergy, but they would get still worse.

On March 3, 1841, Marbach issued a manifesto which directly led to the necessity of the Altenburg Debate. With Pastor Buerger and two candidates for the ministry already in his camp, Marbach charged that their whole church polity had been built on a sinful foundation. Furthermore, Marbach argued, unless this sinful foundation was completely destroyed, the Saxons could not expect the blessing of God on any of their ecclesiastical endeavors. Needless to say, Marbach's manifesto created quite a stir--especially when we consider what he meant by the destruction of the sinful foundation. He asserted that this destruction was to be twofold: a public confession of sin by the whole company and a return to Germany.²³ It is important to note exactly what Marbach was saying about the emigration that had taken place over two years earlier. He was saying that the emigration was sinful per se, and not just because Stephan had used it for sinful purposes. Sprouting from this assertion was a more damaging one: the Saxons were not just a church which had erred, they were no church at all. And so Marbach had gone full circle from calling the emigration the only church to calling it no church at all. The Saxons, clergy and laity

alike, had reached rock bottom. The stage was ~~now~~^{now} set for young C.F.W. Walther to react to the solutions already proposed with some solutions of his own. These solutions were the Altenburg Theses, a veritable phoenix rising from the Saxons' ashes of despair.

IV. Walther's Study of Luther and Others

Before we arrive at the Altenburg theses themselves, we must take a brief glimpse at sources upon which Walther based his ecclesiology. In what can only be described as an act of divine providence, Walther was stricken with an illness during the year 1840. This illness limited Walther's activity greatly, but it did not confine him to a bed. Walther wisely used the year to study Luther and the classic Lutheran dogmaticians concerning the questions that had been raised about the church. Pastor E.G.W. Keyl's fine library served as Walther's source materials, since it was in Keyl's home that Walther convalesced. Here the great churchman came to a firm understanding of what Scripture says about the church. He learned to distinguish between the visible and invisible church, and he realized that this distinction would serve as the basis of the comfort his comrades so desperately needed.

In the manuscript Walther prepared for the debate he cites only two quotations from Luther. Both the quotations are from Luther's Briefe von der Wiedertaufe and both of them are brief.²⁴ In fact, we simply do not know how many quotes from Luther and Gerhard and others Walther used during the course of the debate. Yet it is possible to trace Walther's dependence on church fathers through his monumental Kirche und Amt, written some ten years later. Though this latter work was directed at the ecclesiological problems J.A.A. Grabau was causing, the theses on the church are essentially the same as those presented at Altenburg in 1841. To support his theses on the church in Kirche

und Amt Walther quotes ancient church fathers and Lutheran theologians one hundred eighty-five times. Included in these quotations are forty-six from Luther and thirty-two from Gerhard, many of them several pages in length.²⁵ Therefore it is safe to assume that these two fathers affected Walther's thinking about the doctrine of the church deeply.

One name, however, must be re-emphasized as one of ^{the} chief influences on Walther at Altenburg. That name is Vehse. Although Vehse had left for Germany rather discouraged over a year earlier, it was his style and thought which served to move Walther. It was Vehse who first went back to the sixteenth century church fathers. It was Vehse who reverted back to the scriptural doctrine of the universal priesthood as a starting ground for solving the problems of Stephanism. In fact the first three of Walther's eight Altenburg theses are merely a restatement of what Vehse had said before. During the debate itself Walther acknowledges that, if not for Vehse's documents, the Saxons "would still be grasping in the dark or wandering about in labryinths of error."²⁶ With Vehse as an impetus and the fathers as an authority, Walther proceeded to expound Scripture in such a way that the emigrants could find true comfort in the true doctrine of the church.

V. Subsequent Force of the Altenburg Theses

To say that Walther and his theses "won the day" at Altenburg is a gross oversimplification. It is true that the vast majority of the colony accepted Walther's teaching as scriptural. It is true that his eight theses set his church body on the track of a long and prosperous existence. Yet we must examine in what exact way Walther and his theses were victorious at Altenburg. The strength of this victory, and thus the strength of these theses, lies in the fact that Walther was able to comfort some terribly troubled souls with the pure doctrine of the church derived from Scripture. The comfort and confidence that existed in Missouri after April 21, 1841, were not founded on the clever

words of a clever man. They were founded on the scriptural words of a faithful divider of the truth. They resulted from a sanctified effort to apply God's Holy Word to a given situation, a situation which had developed out of several different historical influences. Walther applied God's word to man's situation. He applied the changeless to ^hte ever changing. Such is the mastery and power of the Altenburg Theses.

We shall content ourselves to list only the last five of Walther's theses since they are the ones especially directed at the situation the Saxons found themselves in. Note how these theses make it abundantly clear that the Saxons, no matter how horribly they had been misled by Stephan and Stephanism, were still members of the una sancta ecclesia:

- IV. It is not improper to apply the name "Church" to heterodox societies, on the contrary, that is in accord with the manner of speech of the Word of God itself. And it is not immaterial that this high name is granted to such societies; for from this follows: (1) that members also of such societies may be saved; for without the Church there is no salvation.
- V. (2) That the outward separation of heterodox society from the orthodox Church is not necessarily a separation from the universal Christian Church or a relapse into heathenism and does not deprive that society of the name "Church."
- VI. (3) Even heterodox societies have church power; even among them the treasures of the Church may be validly dispensed, the ministry established, the sacraments validly administered, and the keys of the kingdom of heaven exercised.
- VII. Even heterodox societies are not to be dissolved but reformed.
- VIII. The orthodox Church is to be judged principally by the common, orthodox, and public confession to which the members acknowledge themselves to have been pledged and which they profess.

The comfort these theses provided and the acceptance they enjoyed become evident when we study the reactions various prominent colonists had to them. Most notable is the reaction of Walther's opponent in the debate, Dr. Marbach. A teacher by the name of Winter, whose letters are important references concerning the Perry County settlement, recorded that Marbach abandoned his pre-debate position and acknowledged that the true Christian church existed within their midst. After reporting what

must have been monumental news, Winter cannot help himself from writing this doxology: "God be praised that these controversial issues have come up for public discussion, for through this debate many a soul has been put back on the right path."²⁸

One of the pastors who had earlier offered his resignation, G.H. Loeber, writes of how the theses changed some and strengthened others: "Many doubts have vanished and those who were formerly convinced have now been strengthened in their conviction."²⁹ Recognizing their rights as the true church, the individual congregations did not hesitate to call pastors. The salve Walther had applied was working.

But the force of Altenburg could not be limited to the fledgling Saxon colony. Nor were the problems addressed at Altenburg never to rear their collective head again in the early history of the Missouri Synod. When J.A.A. Grabau of the Buffalo Synod espoused the same hierarchical views of the church Stephan had, the Saxons found themselves at a sort of second Altenburg. It was quite natural for them to go back to the Altenburg Theses, based as they were upon Scripture, for their direction in the matter. In response to Grabau and springing from Altenburg came Walther's masterwork Die Stimme unserer Kirche in der Frage von Kirche und Amt (1852). While this treatise includes theses on the ministry, it is quite apparent that it is a wonderful expansion of the truths first stated at Altenburg. In subsequent years two more giant works of Lutheranism, written by Walther, grew out of the Altenburg Theses: The Correct Form of a Local Congregation Independent of the State (1863) and The True Visible Church (1867). All three of the aforementioned books continue the practical application of God's Word used so masterfully years before in a log cabin in Altenburg, Missouri. It is no wonder that many church historians regard Altenburg as the most far-reaching event in Walther's life.

However, as those who now bask in the legacy of Walther's work at Altenburg, we must be careful not to enlist his theses as support for policies Walther really did not intend to implement. If the Altenburg Theses are not studied in their historical setting, if no regard is given the specific influences on Walther as he prepared the theses, it becomes quite easy to point to the Altenburg Debate as the birthplace for Missouri's "decentralized" idea of church government. An examination of the historical background of Altenburg will prove such a notion to be on shaky ground. Walther addressed his theses to congregations who doubted whether they were the church. When Walther expanded his theses into Kirche und Amt, he was defending his congregations from a man who would have them return to their post-Stephan doubts. These are the specific settings for Walther's teaching on the church.

While it may be said that Walther proposed that individual congregations are also the church, he never proposed that individual congregations are only the church. It appears that the unnatural shift from the former to the latter is the basis for Missouri's present teaching of the church. Justification for the shift, however, cannot be found in Walther nor in the Altenburg Theses. In fact, when we read the title of Walther's very first presidential address given at the Missouri Synod convention of 1848, we are struck by the way Walther refers to the newly formed synod as wielding the same power the local congregations wield, namely, the power of the Word. The title of the essay is as follows: "Why Should and Can We Carry on Our Work Joyfully Although We Have No Power But the Power of the Word."³⁰ In this address Walther asserts that a synod can claim no power over a congregation in "advis^{ory}~~ing~~" or adiaphoric matters. Yet, since synods have the power of the Word, Walther claims, in matters of the Word synods hold the same

power individual congregations do. After all, is not a synod a gathering of believers even as an individual congregation is? It should be remembered that these sentiments come from a man who, seven years earlier at Altenburg, brought the scriptural doctrine of the church back to light.

This writing is being completed on the 148th anniversary of the Altenburg Debate. May we, as confessional Lutherans and students of Walther, continue to stress the comforting doctrine of the true church that bore such abundant fruit in the days and years following the debate. May we, as students of history, always keep Walther's theses in historical perspective so that their value to our time in history may not be lost. May we, as proclaimers of the whole counsel of God, follow Walther's example by fleeing to the Word when we or our flock are assailed by doubts and fears. For the greatest legacy of Altenburg is the same legacy Walter utilized--the legacy of God, recorded by the prophets, evangelists and apostles.

ENDNOTES

¹Carl S. Munding, Government in the Missouri Synod. (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1947), p. 113, note 8, quoting G. Schieferdecker in the 1856 Western district Proceedings, p. 7.

²P. E. Kretzmann, "The Altenburg Debate" in Concordia Theological Monthly, March, 1941, p. 161.

³Munding, p. 114.

⁴Munding, p. 41, quoting Pleissner, Die kirchlichen Fanatiker im Muldethale, pp. 8-9.

⁵Munding, p. 42, note 6.

⁶Martin Stephan, Der Christliche Glaube, p. XII.

⁷Munding, p. 42.

⁸Stephan, p. 14, 17.

⁹Carl E. Vehse, Die Stephansche Auswanderung nach Amerika, p. 2.

¹⁰J. F. Koestering, Auswanderung der saechsischen Lutheraner im Jahre 1838. (St. Louis: Wiebusch and Son, 1867), p. 37.

¹¹E. G. W. Keyl, "Bekenntnisse" in Zeitschrift, III, No. 1, 1842, p. 112.

¹²C. F. W. Walther, Letter to the Rev. O. H. Walther, May 4, 1840, translated by Carl S. Meyer in Letters of C. F. W. Walther. (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1969), pp. 37-38.

¹³Munding, p. 101.

¹⁴Kretzmann, p. 164.

¹⁵Ibid., p. 162.

¹⁶Walter O. Forster, Zion on the Mississippi. (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1953), p. 58.

¹⁷Munding, p. 95.

¹⁸Forster, p. 436.

¹⁹Ibid., p. 463.

²⁰Forster, p. 464, quoting Vehse, "Protestationsschrift", pp. 49-53.

²¹Forster, p. 468.

²²Ibid., p. 64.

²³Mundinger, p. 110.

²⁴William J. Schmelder, "Walther at Altenburg" in Concordia Historical Institute Quarterly, October, 1961, p. 79.

²⁵C. F. W. Walther, Church and Ministry, J. T. Mueller, trans. (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1987).

²⁶Mundinger, p. 122.

²⁷Kretzmann, p. 171.

²⁸Mundinger, p. 124.

²⁹Ibid., p. 125.

³⁰Carl Lawrenz, "An Evaluation of Walther's Theses on the Church and Its Ministry" in Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly, Spring, 1982, p. 118.

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