

Genesis of the LCMS -Week 3: February 7, 2010

Walther Finds the Gospel - The Influence of Martin Stephan

While very much confused by the various trends and influences already discussed, Walther was advised to write to the Rev. Martin Stephan, Evangelical Lutheran pastor in Dresden. Walther had born his soul Stephan in his letter and was fearful of being disappointed by the answer he'd receive, but Stephan had truly experienced faith in the Gospel and helped. He advised him that Walther had only come to repentance through the law, which could never yield faith. He was like the man beaten and left for dead on the road. It was the Gospel of Christ's pure grace and care for him through his death that he had been refusing by his attention to the law. With that the burden was removed and Walther joyfully brought to the assurance of faith.



Martin Stephan 1777-1846

[cited in Suelflow, p. 44] "The crowd was so dense that we could scarcely press into the church, and but for the distinguished rank of our noble companion we should probably have been compelled to remain outside. Mr. Stephan was then about 50 years old, remarkably plain in his appearance, and his countenance and the contour of his head reminded us very forcibly of Dr. Dwight, the late President of Yale College. His sermon was plain, vigorous and evangelical, and well calculated to enlighten the mind and affect the heart. There was nothing like an attempt to show off to advantage; no playing of the orator; no effort for applause (nothing of the kind). Fancy a very plain matter-of-fact man, rather tall, somewhat inclined to austerity, with a light tinge of melancholy in his features, addressing a crowded and deeply interested congregation in a most solemn manner, on the awful interests of the eternal destiny of man, holding up Jesus Christ as the only hope of a perishing world, and demanding faith in him and obedience to his precepts, as one who in the name of his Master has authority to insist on a compliance with the requisitions, and you'll have a tolerably correct conception of one of the most devoted and consistent and successful ministers then residing in the kingdom of Saxony.

While in Leipzig, Walther also found encouragement in the household of **Friedrich Barthel** and his wife (and 5 children). The family would immigrate in the Saxon migration in 1838. He would be the first treasurer and son, Martin would be the first manager of CPH.

After his absence from the University in 1832, he finished his studies at the University of Leipzig in Spring of 1833. He took his first certification examination, and gained his preaching license, which was not yet his certification to be ordained.

From 1834-36 he tutored in the household of Friedemann Loeber in Kahla (also teaching the children of August Loeber). He had frequent disputes with the local principal who was a rationalist.

In 1836 Walther was subjected to his second examination that would approve him for ordination. Not many non-rationalists were being certified. But Count Von Einsiedel, head of ecclesiastical affairs under the prince was a friend of confessional faith in high places. In the (3 hour) exam Walther was asked about Luther's insertion of the word "alone" in Romans 3.28. Walther affirmed Luther's insertion and defended it ably, in the midst of ridicule by students and faculty present. At the end, his rationalist inquisitor told all the gallery that "this young mystic understands St. Paul better than any of you."

His first call was to the Evangelical Lutheran parish in Braeunsdorf. The superintendent of the region was a Pr. Heinrich Otto Siebenhaar, who would supervise his installation. The announcements of his call (selection by the consistory) were to be made on the 1st two Sundays in Advent, 1836, with Walther preaching a 'trial sermon and catechetical sermon' on Advent 3. He would assume the office as 41st pastor on January 15, 1837. Though he feared monkey business at both the Ordination and Holy Communion, the service was performed with no offense. In his autobiography that was traditionally read, he professed gratitude to God for service, but expressed his fears that something was missing in him to carry out his office.

He was deeply critical of the state of his congregation and the state of the religious instruction in the school, but was very impressed with the children, their discipline, respect and diligence. He performed 50 some baptisms in his two years of service, 7 of illegitimate children. He constantly battles Siebenhaar over their differences in theology, as Siebenhaar was a rationalist who consistently undermined the authority of Scriptures and needled Walther for his belief in the literal truth of the Bible. Walther submitted his resignation of his call on September 30, 1838 amidst much sobbing during his final sermon.

“The Stephanites”

While a ‘confessional revival’ was underway, it seemed to many a lost cause. But tribulation has a way of bonding soldiers who wear the same uniform. Martin Stephan’s popularity as a preacher of the Gospel among the citizens of this region made him a rallying point for confessional pastors and laity. All of those who would depart in the 700 some people that came from Saxony to Missouri had become ‘Stephanites.’ None of these followers should be much faulted for their being attracted to him, for he was indeed a godly voice in a region where God’s voice was being silenced by rationalism and its pietistic backlash. He preached as one convicted of the truth and convicting others of the same.

Stephan, though, came into conflict with the authorities and this conflict, for good reason, was seen as ‘persecution.’ Stephan had been arrested and spent time in jail for ‘breaking curfew.’ This had been the final straw for Stephan and he consolidated a plan he had been considering for some time to ‘escape from Germany,’ for the freedom of religion in America. The case was made so strongly for this position, that under the political climate in Germany, the feeling was rising that the Christian church could not exist in Germany, that, perhaps the Christian church only existed among them, and the government was putting them out of business. With that, America was seen as the last refuge left in the world where God would preserve his church in peace. They had come to feel they had no choice. If they were godly they had to leave. They would come to regret and repent of those sentiments that can all be wrapped up in the name “Stephanism.”

After coming to America what Stephan was truly looking to escape would also become dubious, since he had also left his wife and children in Germany!

The Lure of America

The Land of Opportunity:

Life in Europe was economically and demographically locked and stayed, having little opportunities to advance and develop new fields of exploration and use of stores of natural resources. The America’s were certainly the land of opportunity and there were many pamphlets circulating about the availability and relative cheap abundance of land and opportunity for those who could make the trip. Many ‘immigration’ handbooks were written include Gottfried Duden’s book touting the new world, and especially Missouri for Germans.

Walther’s National Day of Repentance Sermon, 1849 (Treasury of C.F.W. Walther, Vol. V; p. 39f)

A Refuge for Christian Faith

Walther’s 1874 Synodical Address (Treasury of C.F.W. Walther, Vol. VII; p. 149f)