

# Missouri's Twin Traumas

## I. The Stephan Crisis (1839–)

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### Abstract

*In view of two recent anniversaries, the 175th of its founding in 1847 and the fiftieth of the “Walk Out” of faculty and students in 1974 at its St. Louis seminary, the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod (LCMS) through its Concordia Historical Institute has published several volumes that highlight two traumatic moments in its history. One of them is a new translation of The Emigration of the Saxon Lutherans in the Year 1838 and Their Settlement in Perry County, Missouri, written in German by an LCMS pastor, Johannes Friedrich Koesterling, twenty-five years after its immigrant forebears arrived in America. The book provides an account of the exposure and exile of Martin Stephan, a bishop to whom these Saxons had given total authority in ecclesiastical and civil matters. The traumatic effects of this crisis were not only immediately felt but help explain the subsequent behavior of “Missouri” as a church body. Chief among them are its unequivocal allegiance to its own brand of Lutheran orthodoxy, its insistence upon complete agreement in matters of doctrine and church practice for ecclesiastical fellowship of any kind, and its tendency to isolate itself protectively from key features of America’s culture. As a subsequent article will demonstrate, the second traumatic moment created by the “Walk Out,” named more often as “Seminex” and featured in other recent LCMS anniversary publications, only reinforced these same effects of the Stephan crisis. These incidents shed light on where “Missouri” has positioned itself in the world of the twenty-first century.*

Upon the 175th anniversary in 2022 of the founding of the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod (LCMS) in 1847, Concordia Historical Institute sponsored the publication of two volumes that highlight two critical features of its history. The first was *Seminex in Print: A Comprehensive Bibliography*, which provides extensive documentation of the various types of literature on the “Walkout” in 1974 of most of the students and faculty of Concordia Seminary, St. Louis, that led to the creation of their own seminary in exile

(Seminex). The second was a new translation, *The Emigration of the Saxon Lutherans in the Year 1838 and Their Settlement in Perry County, Missouri*, written in German by an LCMS pastor, Johannes Friedrich Koesterling, twenty-five years after the crisis of 1839 among these immigrant forebears of the Synod over the leadership of Martin Stephan.<sup>1</sup>

While recognizing that this is not the only lens available for examining the history of the LCMS, I will argue that these crises were in fact related traumas that have had lasting and telling effects upon this American church body. My intention is not to venture into the neurological and psychological literature on the causes and effects of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder,<sup>2</sup> and I remain aware that “trauma” has become an overused and abused explanation for almost everything. However, when it is used in a metaphoric manner, I argue that several features of a trauma’s lasting effects apply here. These include tendencies to relive the traumatic event as if were happening again (flashbacks), to be vigilant and on guard lest the unpleasant past repeat itself in the present, and to perceive as threats anything that might cause the abandonment of those places of safety and certainty where one has found refuge. In this first of two articles, I will seek to demonstrate that the traumatic effects of the Stephan crisis that occurred at the outset of the history of the LCMS in America can still be seen in much of this church body’s present behavior, and in a subsequent article, I will show how the Seminex crisis served to reinforce those effects. Finally, while the LCMS has declared that the first of its chief purposes is to “conserve and promote the unity of the true faith” and “to work through its official structure toward fellowship with other Christian church bodies,”<sup>3</sup> the effects of these same traumas that were already apparent in the aftermath of the Stephan crisis have tended to spawn division within its own fold and to keep it apart from other Lutheran church bodies in America.

### *The Rise and Fall of Martin Stephan*

More recent as well as previous historians of the LCMS clearly state that Martin Stephan was the indisputable leader of the Saxon band of 665, the Missouri Synod’s forebears, who in November of

1838 boarded five ships that set sail for America from Bremen, Germany.<sup>4</sup> Unnerved by the inroads of rationalism that the Enlightenment had made on the clergy of the established church in their native Saxony and the threat of the Prussian Union of 1817 to their strictly Lutheran identity, they had found comfort in the ministry of Stephan, based as it was on a brand of Lutheran orthodoxy set forth in prior centuries, at St. John's Bohemian church in Dresden. Their bond with him had become so strong that despite suspicions about his moral conduct during informal night gatherings with female parishioners and run-ins with established authorities, their trust in him remained unwavering. Those who entertained doubts or ventured to voice disagreements with Stephan quickly experienced a full measure of his anger as well as the displeasure of his loyal supporters. Hence, they often found themselves apologetically crawling back to him in order to regain his favor.<sup>5</sup>

Among these same historians, there also appears to be general agreement with Walter Forster's conclusion that the "basic reason for the departure of the 'Stephanites' from Germany was not just a principle," such as faithfulness to the Lutheran Confessions; "it was a person—Stephan."<sup>6</sup> The confessional revival in Germany that Claus Harms had initiated upon the 300th anniversary of the Lutheran Reformation was in fact gaining ground, and it came to include influential German clergy like Wilhelm Loehe, who also would play another key role in Missouri's early history, even though he remained ensconced in Franconia's Neuendettelsau. With regard to the Prussian Union model of Lutheran and Reformed churches, pressure was mounting to allow the formation of independent congregations.<sup>7</sup> Hence, it was Stephan who not only ignored these favorable trends, but even convinced those Saxon followers who had been swayed by his domineering personality that since they were the true church of Christ, their soul's salvation was in jeopardy if they did not choose to join him aboard one of the ships in the Bremen harbor.<sup>8</sup> Furthermore, Stephan did not hesitate to use the charges still facing him from Dresden's civil authorities for his illegal and immoral conduct, his house arrest, and the Ministry of Worship's suspension of him from his pastoral office, to portray himself as a martyr and to stress the urgency of the emigration for his followers.<sup>9</sup>

Stephan's lordship over his Saxon followers was strengthened during the voyage to the port at New Orleans, where all but one of their ships arrived by January of 1839, and continued from there up the Mississippi River to St. Louis. As his ship entered the Gulf of Mexico, he persuaded those on board that since an episcopal form of polity was most suited for their settlement on American soil, they should elect him as their "bishop."<sup>10</sup> During the subsequent leg of their journey up the Mississippi River, a "Declaration of Submission to the Bishop" was drawn up that gave him complete authority in both civil and ecclesiastical matters. Once they arrived, the entire Saxon band ratified this document as well as Stephan's investiture as bishop.<sup>11</sup>

At this point, historians of the LCMS call attention to the ways Stephan proceeded to abuse his absolute and now unquestionable authority. He raided the Credit Fund, to which his flock had contributed for the sake of their resettlement in Missouri, in order to finance his lavish lifestyle and the ecclesiastical accoutrements befitting a bishop. He also became more irascible, and he made crucial mistakes, including the purchase of a remote and hard-scrabble tract of land well to the south of St. Louis in Perry County and by ordering those who obediently migrated there to build roads, bridges, and churches before they erected suitable structures to house their families. Once he left St. Louis to join them, moreover, Stephan remained aloof and largely unavailable to his suffering, but still loyal subjects.<sup>12</sup>

The steps toward Stephan's exposure began in the spring of 1839, as several women stepped forward to provide written documentation, based on their own experience, of his sexual misconduct. Added to these charges was evidence of his financial indiscretions. Less often mentioned on this list of indictments is the charge of false teaching regarding the relationship between church and ministry. In addition, Johannes Koesterling, one of the first chroniclers of the Stephan crisis, called attention to a brand of chiliasm (millennialism) apparent in the American "Zion" that the messianic Stephan was intent upon creating here on earth.<sup>13</sup> In this context, C.F.W. Walther, one of the younger members of the clergy in St. Louis, was chosen to travel to Perry County to confront Stephan and to inform the other members of the colony still in the throes of its construction. It

was as if the moment had come for which at least some of them had been waiting. As their eyes were opened to the truth about Stephan, no trial was deemed necessary, and their bishop was hastily rowed across the Mississippi to his exile in southern Illinois.

### *Immediate Effects of the Crisis*

In my view, the Stephan crisis was a trauma with lasting effects, and one that remains essential for understanding the LCMS. The immediate fallout lasted for two years, with three features worthy of emphasis. First, a “heavy pall of black hopeless despair,” as one early twentieth century LCMS chronicler put it, “descended upon the whole colony.”<sup>14</sup> Many felt a deep sense of guilt over permitting themselves to be duped by Stephan into leaving their civic, church, and family responsibilities in Saxony and blindly following him to America. Some even believed that the only way to make amends for their sins was to return to Germany. In a letter to his brother Otto in St. Louis, Walther perhaps best expressed the anguish felt by others at the time in Perry County: “I allowed myself to be bound by Satan with the bonds of fearing men, trusting in men, and pleasing men. I did not leave the hellish dungeon of sin before God himself *evicted* me by force through the discovery of the Stephanite abomination.”<sup>15</sup>

Secondly, there now were fundamental ecclesiastical questions that remained unanswered. Since they were led to believe that Stephan was their only “means of grace,” how could any of them claim to still be part of Christ’s church on earth? Up for grabs as well were the calls that had validated the ministries of their clergy. It became a reason that one of them, Maximillian Oertel, decided to “jump ship” in 1840 for a stint in Roman Catholicism.<sup>16</sup> “Would it, under the present disquiet of conscience,” so Walther wrote to his colleague Ottomar Fuerbringer, “perhaps not be more advisable to persuade the congregation to either dismiss me, or, at least suspend me until there is complete light in this matter?”<sup>17</sup> For others, going back home and seeking to resume their former positions once again seemed to be the better option.

Third and finally, there was a deep rift that developed between the laity and their pastors. Lay members of this Saxon party of

immigrants were not only plagued by guilt and feelings of despair. They were also angry at the clergy who had made the decision to depose Stephan without them and who then were looking among their own ranks for a way to replace him as their “God-given bishop.” Mistrust and suspicion of clergy, therefore, soon took hold, and pastors for a time were barred from carrying out their duties and from taking part in the meetings of their congregations. Several members of these same Saxon laity were educated professionals who stepped forward to make a strong case for their complaints. Chief among them was Carl Vehse, who with the backing of several others drafted a series of “Protest” documents over the course of the late summer and fall of 1839, stating that the laity had a direct role to play in the governing the church. As the clergy remained reluctant to surrender the episcopal form of polity that Stephan had advocated, the lay party, for whom Vehse was now the spokesperson, became more adamant in demanding that on the basis of the “priesthood of all believers,” they had the right to supervise the clergy, to judge doctrine, and to participate in the final decision of all disputes within the life of any congregation.<sup>18</sup>

Having failed to gain a sufficient response from the clergy, Vehse returned to Germany. What followed was another year of spiritual deterioration and mutual mistrust between clergy and laity in Perry County. In early 1841, however, Walther was driven to devote his months of recovery from depression and illness at the home of his brother-in-law, Ernst Keyl, to an immersion in the writings of Luther and some of the Lutheran fathers of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries on the subject of church and ministry.<sup>19</sup> At the same time, the cause of the laity was picked up by a lawyer in the colony, Franz Marbach. He issued a Manifesto in which he called for demolition of the sinful foundation laid by Stephan for governing the church. It also insisted that until this was done, there could be no return of the blessings of God for which everyone was longing.<sup>20</sup> Hence, the stage was set for the debate between him and Walther at Altenburg in April of 1841.

The Altenburg debate tends to be celebrated in the LCMS as one of Walther’s finest hours. There Marbach advocated a return of the Saxons to Germany in order to truly repent for having left the

established church and turned themselves into a sect. Walther countered with eight theses in which he drew a distinction between the invisible and the visible church of Christ. The unseen church, or so he argued, consisted of the totality of all believers, and the visible church appeared wherever “the Word of God is purely taught and the holy sacraments are administered according to the institution of Christ.”<sup>21</sup> While Walther’s argument convinced most of his fellow immigrants (Marbach did not alter his own plan to go back to Germany) that they were still part of the church, what he actually succeeded in brokering was only a truce that stabilized the colony and served to keep the majority of its members on American soil.

### *Lasting Effects of the Crisis*

The memory of Stephan’s abusive leadership kept the laity in a state of unease about the role of clergy in church governance, a subject that Walther did not address in his Altenburg Theses. When he crafted the constitution of Trinity congregation in St. Louis, where he began serving as the pastor in 1841, the laity carefully scrutinized each of its articles, one by one, in their meetings for two years prior to adopting it in 1843.<sup>22</sup> Then in 1847, out of fear that the newly-forming Synod might become a federation of pastors, they also pressured him into adding an article to the constitution that made it clear that its relationship to the member congregations was “only advisory.”<sup>23</sup> In addition, the specter of “another Stephan” that appeared in the person of Johannes Grabau, the dictatorial leader of another group that emigrated from Prussia in 1839 out of opposition to the union of Lutheran and Reformed churches, prompted Walther to draft yet another series of theses on “Church [*Kirche*] and Ministry [*Amt*].” Here he focused more attention on the doctrine of the ministry and attempted to state more clearly that the “ministry of the Word [*Pre-digtamt*] is the power conferred [or transferred] by God through the congregation as the possessor of all ecclesiastical power” by means of its call to a pastor whom the congregation elected to assume the pastoral office [*Pfarramt*] on their behalf. He also emphasized that while the pastor commanded their “unconditional obedience” when he “uses God’s Word,” he “must not tyrannize the church,” as

both Stephan and Grabau were prone to do, by introducing “new laws” or arbitrarily establishing “adiaphora or ceremonies.”<sup>24</sup>

Throughout its subsequent history, the LCMS has sought to maintain a balance of power between clergy and laity. The laity are given voice and vote in the decision-making process of congregations and the right to supervise the doctrine and life of the pastors whom they have called, while the Synod’s clergy have retained their authority in the administration of God’s Word and sacraments as well as permanent tenure in the office to which their congregations have called them, unless they are found guilty of false doctrine or an ungodly life. Representation at District and Synod conventions, moreover, remains equally divided between voting clergy and voting lay delegates. Nevertheless, the LCMS has remained a clergy-driven church body where less-informed laity in the decision-making process often defer to their pastors. There also continues to be substantial evidence of Stephan’s unpleasant legacy of clericalism. One sees this particularly in the unresolved features of the Synod’s doctrine of the ministry. The relationship between other called church workers, such as parochial school teachers, and the pastoral officeholder, for example, continues to be a subject of discussion and debate. Such workers also remain disenfranchised “advisory” participants at District and Synod conventions. Rearing its head among some of the Synod’s most conservative clergy, moreover, is a more recent claim (that only the pastor may read the appointed scripture lessons in worship as well as lead adult Bible study and confirmation classes) for which Stephan was condemned, namely, exclusive authority in dispensing of God’s grace and salvation.<sup>25</sup>

Furthermore, the kind of all-encompassing monarchical leadership that Stephan demanded and sought to exercise has remained in evidence at various points in the subsequent history of the LCMS. In this respect, one need look no further than Walther, who seems to have followed a course similar to the one Stephan might have wanted to keep on taking with the Saxons in Missouri. While remaining the pastor of Trinity congregation in St. Louis until his death in 1887, Walther also served as the chief theological professor at Concordia Seminary, the President of the Synod (with only a brief interlude) as well as of the Synodical Conference, and as the editor of his church body’s publications. His hand was in fact felt



in almost every aspect of the early life of the LCMS. His advice was sought and followed by almost everybody, and to many outside as well as within it, Walther was the Missouri Synod.<sup>26</sup> While not all of his successors chose to emulate him in their leadership, Franz Pieper assumed a similar role in the Synod from 1887 until his death in 1931, and the current President of the LCMS, Matthew Harrison, seems to be leaving a similarly large footprint on its history. In 2013, for example, he was granted the right of “prior approval” of all personnel nominated for president and theological faculty members at the Synod’s colleges and seminaries, and in 2016, he was accorded the prerogative of reviewing as well as overriding the decisions of district presidents in the supervision of their congregations and rostered church workers.<sup>27</sup>

The more consequential of the lasting effects of the Stephan crisis for the LCMS, in my view, is the spiritually secure refuge that these Saxon forebears sought and found in a well-defined orthodox understanding of Lutheran confessional theology. Young Walther was still a recovering Lutheran Pietist when he joined the emigration of the Saxons to America, but the chaos that followed on the heels of Stephan’s exile drove him during his convalescence in 1841 to take that deeper dive into the writings of Luther and the orthodox Lutheran fathers. The doctrinal position to which he gravitated closely resembled the one Stephan had vigorously defended against his opponents in Saxony’s established church, one that was based on the Word of God confessed by Luther and then explicated in the entire Book of Concord, but also with added grounding for it that Walther now provided from the more nuanced writings of the post-Reformation Lutheran dogmaticians, such as Martin Chemnitz, Johann Gerhard, Abraham Calov, and Johannes Andreas Quenstedt. What emerged to take the place of the unreserved way in which the Saxon immigrants had regrettably pledged themselves to Stephan and blindly followed his leadership, however, was an equally total and uncompromising allegiance to a brand of Lutheran orthodoxy that Walther now took the lead in passionately defining and unabashedly defending on their behalf.<sup>28</sup>

As one examines the early history of the LCMS, the evidence of the shift in indisputable loyalty from Stephan to a particular brand of Lutheran orthodoxy becomes increasingly apparent. Hints of it

appear already in the “Theses” that Walther employed at Altenburg. While he conceded, in contrast to Stephan, that the visible church included members of churches “united in the confession of a falsified faith,” and that “the outward separation of a heterodox society from the orthodox church is not necessarily a separation from the universal Christian Church or a relapse into heathenism,” he stated that Saxons could rest assured that they were in fact the “true visible church of Christ on earth.”<sup>29</sup> Walther made this same assertion even more plain in his 1866 essay at the Missouri Synod convention, where he stated that “the Evangelical Lutheran Church has all the essential earmarks of the true visible church of God on earth,” that these “are not found in any other known denomination of another name,” and that for this reason “it is not in need of a reformation in doctrine.”<sup>30</sup>

At the same time, the second of the original “Reasons for Forming a Synodical Organization” listed in the Constitution at the founding of the LCMS in 1847 was the “furthering” as well as the “preservation” of “the unity of pure confession (Eph. 4:3–6; I Cor. 1:10).”<sup>31</sup> Already in 1844, with the launching of his twice-a-month religious paper, *Der Lutheraner*, with its motto, “God’s Word and Luther’s doctrine ever shall remain and perish never,” Walther had set out to achieve this same objective by seeking fellowship with other Lutheran immigrants in America “without ever sacrificing the slightest truth for the sake of love and peace.”<sup>32</sup> For the LCMS historian Johannes Koesterling, this implied giving no quarter to those of an irenic frame of mind. Included in his book, published a quarter century following the Saxon emigration, is a thoroughgoing four-point refutation of “people of peace,” who might dare to argue that “the truth is not so clear and absolute that those who teach and believe differently in one point or another might not also be right,” that such differences are tolerable “as long as one is filled with the spirit and charity and peace,” that “godliness is undermined” by persistent “quarreling and conflict” among Christians,” and that “it is irresponsible on the basis of doctrinal differences to distance oneself from those who still hope to attain the same salvation with us.”<sup>33</sup>

This ambitious effort on the part of Walther was one that produced a mixed outcome. On the one hand, there was a group of

other like-minded Lutherans, some of whom were sent by Wilhelm Loehe as missionaries to other parts of the Midwestern frontier. Friedrich Wyneken (Indiana), Wilhelm Sihler and Adam Ernst (Ohio), and August Craemer (Michigan) responded positively to Walther's brand of Lutheran orthodoxy and were numbered among those who were incorporated into the new Synod in 1847. On the other hand, Missouri and Wilhelm Loehe, the Synod's most generous benefactor in Germany, parted company in 1852 over Loehe's assertion that orthodox Lutheran doctrine was still subject to ongoing reformation, that there were "open questions" that remained to be addressed, and that it is God who calls and ordains pastors through the Church, including its ministerium, rather than just the local congregation.<sup>34</sup>

Nevertheless, Walther continued to promote the brand of Lutheran orthodoxy to which his Synod had now pledged itself as the best means of achieving union with older and with newly-forming immigrant Lutheran church bodies in America. To this end, the radical "Definite Synodical Platform" of Samuel Simon Schmucker that was largely rejected by 1855 within the orbit of the General Synod provided him with another incentive.<sup>35</sup> This time, his medium of communication also included the monthly theological journal, *Lehre und Wehre* [Doctrine and Defense]. As a confessional movement among American Lutherans of all stripes began getting more traction, Walther's method for promoting unity became the "free conference," where representatives from various Lutheran church bodies sought to find agreement through their discussion of every article of the Augsburg Confession. Walther in fact dreamed that this would produce fellowship among all Lutherans in America.<sup>36</sup>

Once again, however, Walther's efforts yielded a mixed result. His call for free conferences in 1856 attracted representatives of the Joint Synod of Ohio and the Ministeriums of New York and Pennsylvania, who joined him at a productive meeting in Columbus, Ohio. Other such conferences followed in Pittsburgh (1857), Cleveland (1858), and Ft. Wayne (1859).<sup>37</sup> However, this same process for achieving Lutheran unity, which was interrupted by Walther's sabbatical to Europe for the sake of his health in 1860 and the outbreak of the Civil War a year later, soon encountered some strong headwinds

when it resumed after the war ended. The first of these involved the unsuccessful conclusion in 1866 of Missouri's contentious colloquies with Johannes Grabau, who had previously excommunicated all of the congregations of the Synod, and some representatives of his own Buffalo Synod. The following year, conversations with the Iowa Synod, to which Loehe had shifted his support, came to an impasse, chiefly over whether chiliasm, despite its condemnation in Article XVII of the Augsburg Confession, should still be regarded as an "open question."<sup>38</sup>

These same unresolved controversies with the Buffalo and Iowa Synods, however, in no way seem to have diminished the Missouri Synod's insistence upon complete unity in doctrine as a prerequisite for any form of church union. When the Pennsylvania Ministerium left the General Synod in 1866 and Charles Porterfield Krauth was seeking to organize the confessional movement that was gaining ground among Lutherans throughout North America, the Missouri Synod did not join forces with him. Instead the Synod remained insistent upon Walther's "free conference" method as the only means of achieving the doctrinal uniformity it deemed necessary for Lutheran unity.<sup>39</sup> On the other hand, the LCMS succeeded in using it to achieve an accord with the Ohio Synod in 1868 and a year later in establishing fraternal relations with the Wisconsin and Illinois synods.<sup>40</sup> At the same time, this process was one that resulted in division within a promising movement toward Lutheran unity in America based on allegiance to the Lutheran Confessions. While Krauth, despite the "four points" of doctrine and church practice (chiliasm, membership in secret societies, altar and pulpit fellowship) that remained unresolved among some of its members, succeeded in creating the General Council in 1867, Walther helped broker the Synodical Conference of North America, a federation of Midwestern members that included Missouri, Ohio, Norwegian, Minnesota, and Illinois Synods as its charter members, where he was chosen in 1872 as its first president.<sup>41</sup>

However, this union based on the principle of unity in doctrine, to which (in contrast to the General Council) uniformity in church practices was now added, soon became a source of division. Controversy within the ranks of the Synodical Conference came to a head

in 1880 over the doctrine of predestination, in which Walther and Friedrich A. Schmidt stood out as the chief opponents. This time, Schmidt, who had served as the Norwegian Synod professor at the St. Louis seminary, and some of his theological allies in the Ohio Synod, chose to do battle on Walther's own orthodox turf, contending that the term *intuitu fidei* (that the elect were those whose faith God in his omniscience foresaw) was in fact used by some of the Lutheran dogmaticians of the seventeenth century. Walther, on the other hand, focused on Luther's principle of God's grace alone (*sola gratia*) as the only source of one's salvation, which ruled out anything, including the faith that led one to believe this, and that the elect might contribute to their conversion. Unlike Stephan, Walther tended to be humble, cordial, and extremely polite in his personal relationships with others. But when it came to theological disagreements, he could be just as unbending and intolerant as his one-time bishop. Incensed when Schmidt began publishing his *Altes et Neues* [Old and New] magazine in which he accused Walther of being a "Crypto-Calvinist" and his Missouri Synod of heresy, he openly declared, "Be it so! You want war; you shall have war!"<sup>42</sup>

The controversy became one that was never settled. The immediate result was the departure of Ohio and the Norwegian Synods from the Synodical Conference as well as the formation in 1887 of a dissenting group of Norwegians led by Schmidt, which named itself the Anti-Missourian Brotherhood. While the Norwegian Lutherans in the Madison Agreement of 1912 reached enough consensus among their member churches to accept both sides of the longstanding argument over predestination, Missouri's leading theologian, Franz Pieper, chose to double down on Walther's position in the longest passage of his *Brief Statement*, which the Synod adopted in 1932 in order to set forth its requirements for any form of Lutheran unity.<sup>43</sup> Therefore the Ohio Synod and the Norwegian Lutherans, along with the Iowa and Buffalo Synods, moved in the direction of union with each other, one that was finally forged in 1960 with the creation of The American Lutheran Church (TALC).

I have come to the conclusion, therefore, that the spiritual security that the forebears of the LCMS sought in place of the deposed Martin Stephan and that they found in an uncompromising allegiance to

a brand of orthodoxy based on the Lutheran Confessions and the writings of the sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Lutheran fathers, proved to be more a source of division than of unity among Lutherans in North America, one that in time has served to isolate the LCMS from most of the other members of this family of denominations and from the larger array of Protestant church bodies.

### *Reinforcement of Cultural Attitudes*

As I have examined this same period in the history of the LCMS, I have observed that another important lasting effect of the Stephan crisis is the attitude of these Lutherans toward their culture in both the Old and the New World. The French Revolution of the 1790s had only accelerated the intellectual revolution that the Enlightenment was stirring up in Germany and throughout much of the rest of Europe. Reason was quickly replacing all traditional sources of authority, including the time-honored doctrines of orthodox Christianity.<sup>44</sup> The change was one to which Martin Stephan openly objected from his Dresden pulpit, and while he succeeded in attracting a significant number of followers, he became an unwelcome dissenter within the established church of Saxony.

As the son and grandson of traditional Lutheran pastors, C.F.W. Walther found himself in a similar position as a ministerial student at the University of Leipzig. The respite he sought in a fraternity of highly pietistic Lutheran students and candidates for ministry, however, failed to quell the doubts created by rationalism's theological revisions of confessional Lutheranism to which he was being exposed in the course of his studies. The spiritual crisis proved to be one that brought him into Stephan's orbit. The peace in his relationship with God that Walther was seeking was finally achieved when Stephan informed him by letter that what the legalistic rituals prescribed by his pious companions had not supplied for him was faith in the promise of salvation that God out of his grace had revealed through his Son, Jesus Christ. For Walther, it was an eye-opening, transcendent moment that also served to create in him a sense of indebtedness to Stephan. Just as unsettling for young Walther, moreover, was

his subsequent brief tenure as the pastor of the Braeunsdorf parish in Saxony. Here the more traditional Lutheran theology that now guided his preaching and teaching put him at odds with his Enlightened ecclesiastical supervisor in the established church of Saxony as well as a skeptical parish schoolmaster who was more than ready to stir up opposition to Walther's pastoral leadership.<sup>45</sup>

The Napoleonic wars that followed on the heels of the French Revolution produced another reason that these forebears of the LCMS would come to see their cultural environment as an unfriendly, if not hostile, one. At the Congress of Vienna in 1815, Austria's Count Metternich succeeded in brokering a restoration of Europe's monarchies. To this end, their state churches were likewise invested in supporting the status quo. The democratic revolutions that subsequently broke out in various European countries, therefore, were doomed to fail in 1830 and then again in 1848. Ironically, this conservative political environment only added to the suspicion with which the governing authorities of Saxony tended to view an increasingly popular group of ecclesiastical dissenters led by the outspoken Stephan, who was in fact interested in restoring the German Lutheran church's commitment to its orthodox heritage. Hence, it was the threat posed by the democratic Revolution of 1830 to the prevailing political order that intensified the forms of harassment which Stephan's Saxon followers perceived. Especially onerous in this regard were efforts to enforce the use of the *Agenda*, the worship book that contained "union" liturgies and rites, namely, between the Lutheran and the Reformed.<sup>46</sup> In any case, these factors helped confirm their decision in 1838 to depart for the New World.

While America granted these forebears of the LCMS the religious freedom they were seeking, they continued to view their surrounding culture as a threat to the brand of Lutheran orthodoxy that had their unwavering loyalty following the exiling of Stephan as their supreme leader. As a segment of the growing number of immigrants arriving in America, they were welcomed by some but soon faced their share of antipathy from others.<sup>47</sup> Once they landed in Missouri, they were in fact put on the defensive by the leading German newspaper, *Anzeiger des Westens*, whose immigrant founders

in 1835 had brought with them an anticlerical bias and a tendency to favor forms of religious as well as political liberalism.<sup>48</sup> As soon as Stephan was removed from their midst, therefore, his Saxon followers quickly retreated from his vision of creating an independent state over which he could exercise complete political and as well as spiritual control. Instead, their guiding principle became “separation of church and state,” which succeeding generations in the LCMS would continue to invoke in order to justify their quietism in the political realm and to assert that the role of the church in people’s lives was primarily spiritual.<sup>49</sup>

Walther’s puzzling stance with respect to the Civil War and to the issue of chattel slavery in America seems paradigmatic of the Synod’s attitude toward their culture. His reaction was quite the opposite of other recent German immigrants like Carl Schurz, a refugee from the unsuccessful European democratic uprisings of 1848, who actively supported the election of Abraham Lincoln, and then served as his Minister to Spain and as a general in the Union army. For Walther, fear of an expanded role for the federal government that Lincoln might seek in order to preserve the Union may well have brought back discomfiting memories of how this type of regime had adversely affected him during his parish ministry in the established church of Saxony, and it probably helped align him with the states-rights Democratic Party. More importantly, it was the Synod’s indisputable brand of Lutheran orthodoxy that seems to have contributed to Walther’s refusal to condemn chattel slavery. Employing the same isolated biblical texts that Southerners used to justify slavery, he chose to counsel masters to treat the enslaved humanely and to direct the enslaved to give the masters their unquestioned obedience. In defense of this same theologically-grounded position, therefore, he could leave no room for an alternative viewpoint and went so far as to call out every abolitionist as “a *child* of unbelief and its unfolding, rationalism, deistic philanthropism, pantheism, materialism, atheism, and a brother of modern socialism, Jacobinism, and communism.” At the same time, Walther stopped short of supporting the secession of states from the Union prior to Lincoln’s inauguration in 1861 on the basis of St. Paul’s injunction in Romans 13 not to resist the governing authorities.<sup>50</sup>



*Applying the Christ Against Culture Paradigm*

In my view, one must recognize that in looking upon America's culture as a potential threat to its religious heritage, the LCMS was following a course similar to that of other ethnic immigrant groups of the nineteenth century. Like many of them, its members tended to isolate themselves from the linguistic, economic, and social patterns of their new neighbors.<sup>51</sup> More revealing, in my estimation, is the assessment of this same set of cultural attitudes on the part of the LCMS in light of the five-fold paradigm set forth by H. Richard Niebuhr in *Christ and Culture*. Between the extremes of worldly (Christ *of* culture) and separatist (Christ *against* culture) types, Niebuhr placed three mediating types of churches, one of which he labeled as "Lutheran" (Christ and culture *in paradox*) because it vested this group of Christians with specific responsibilities in the temporal and as well as the spiritual realms. However, it is the "Christ *against* culture" set of attitudes that this LCMS group of immigrant Lutherans tended to demonstrate. One of the attitudes that Niebuhr identified in his critique of this type of church is resorting to excessive forms of legalism in order to regulate the conduct of members in the corrupt and errant world outside their self-isolating fold.<sup>52</sup> Here, the compilers of the chapter on "The Process of Americanization" in *Moving Frontiers*, Carl S. Meyer's collection of readings in the history of the LCMS, provide a substantial list of concrete examples, including opposition to putting up lightning rods and taking out life or fire insurance (interfering with the will of God), to charging interest on loans (usury), to dancing and going to the theater (immorality), to mixed marriages and membership in secret societies (syncretism), as well as warnings about the dangers of investing in the stock market (gambling) and participating in labor unions (socialist ideology).<sup>53</sup>

To be sure, the positive side of this same Christ-culture type is not to be overlooked. Niebuhr recognized that there were times when the church needed to set itself apart, albeit only temporarily, from its surrounding culture in order to affirm its primary allegiance to Jesus Christ as well as the way of life he outlined for it, and thus to avoid turning into a "worldly" church.<sup>54</sup> Becoming a purely

Christ-*of*-culture type of church body is a danger the LCMS, to its credit, has scrupulously tried to avoid throughout its history. At the same time, another weakness of a Christ-*against*-culture type of church identified by Niebuhr that becomes evident to me from the inception of the LCMS is the inescapability of “culture” as a church attempts to set itself apart from the corrupt and danger-filled world around it. “Christ claims no [one] purely as a natural being,” or so Niebuhr argued, “but always as one who has become human in a culture; who is not only in culture, but into whom culture has penetrated.”<sup>55</sup>

In this regard, one has only to give attention to the LCMS struggle to define the role of women in the church and society. Missouri’s immigrant forebears tended to divide life into three spheres (home and family, church, civil society), and to restrict the role of women to the first of these. This cultural notion that “a woman’s place is in the home” was one they believed was supported by biblical texts that called for a woman to see herself in general as having been created as a “helper” for man (Genesis 2:18,20; KJV “help meet”), and in the church to “keep silence” (I Corinthians 14:34) and not to have “authority over men” (I Timothy 2:12). Despite the undue advantage that Stephan’s position of authority had allowed him to take with female companions as well as his frequent use of hierarchical principles to support his autocratic style of leadership, both of which had contributed to his removal in 1839, the Synod consistently chose to invoke the biblical “orders of creation” to reinforce its patriarchal stance toward women.<sup>56</sup>

While they were not excluded from the church’s worship, LCMS women congregants, well into the twentieth century, sat together with the family’s children apart from the men and were expected to follow them in the order of communicants receiving the sacrament. When it came to church meetings, they were advised to stay at home. As the women’s suffrage movement started to gain the momentum that eventually culminated in the adoption of the Nineteenth Amendment to the U.S. Constitution in 1920, the Synod leaders opposed it at every step along the way, and the right of women to vote as citizens was only reluctantly conceded in order to help put to rest the anti-American suspicions of a (still) German

speaking church body during World War I. Not until 1969 did the Synod in convention recognize the right of congregations to grant the franchise to women at their meetings, with the proviso that there could still be those congregations that had the right to restrict it to the male adult membership.<sup>57</sup>

Yet another feature of America's culture that posed a threat to the orthodox theological fortress the LCMS had erected was use of the English language in church settings. Some of its leaders continued to link purity of doctrine with the German language. There were those like Synod President Heinrich Schwan who associated the English language with the "American spirit" that in his view had "no knowledge of the real essence of Christianity and therefore deems the maintenance of pure doctrine ridiculous, holds the fight for the one faith to be sheer blasphemy, but seeks the salvation in sweet sensations, and much busied workery of all kinds." Others felt that allowing the use of the American tongue would keep the succeeding generations within the fold of LCMS congregations and enhance the outreach efforts of the Synod to bring the Gospel to English-speaking populations. Still others, however, countered this idea by contending that such outreach efforts "meant we should compromise the Lutheran doctrine because Americans would not bear the strictness of sound apostolic principles."<sup>58</sup>

The struggle over this feature of Missouri's Americanization played out most prominently over the issue of permitting English-speaking Lutherans who were theologically in step with the Synod to be added to its membership roster. "The time is not yet ripe," or so these English-speaking aspirants were long told. They were advised to organize themselves, first in 1872 as a separate "English Evangelical Lutheran Conference," and then in 1887 as an "English Evangelical Lutheran Synod." While this group was finally permitted to join the LCMS in 1911 as its "English District," the issue of the pure language for conveying the Synod's brand of Lutheran orthodoxy was not put to rest until the close of the two world wars with Germany in the twentieth century. However, concerns over the more American cultural persona of the non-geographical English District continued to linger in communities where there were neighboring congregations with a distinctively German immigrant background.<sup>59</sup>

### Concluding Comments

In conclusion, it is my conviction that the first of two traumatic moments in the history of the LCMS with lasting effects upon its life as a Lutheran church body occurred already in 1839, the year its Saxon immigrant forebears arrived in Missouri, with the exposure and removal of Martin Stephan, the immoral and domineering “bishop” to whom they had pledged their complete allegiance. There are solid reasons to commend the LCMS for its efforts to preserve key features of its Reformation heritage. At same time, the indisputable and uncompromising brand of Lutheran doctrine and practice in which these immigrant ancestors found refuge under the leadership of C.F.W. Walther has continued to shape its internal and external relationships in the ecclesiastical as well as the cultural context of America. These tendencies, as we shall subsequently see, are the same ones that the equally-traumatic Seminex crisis of the 1970s has served to reinforce.

### NOTES

1. David O. Berger, ed., *Seminex in Print: A Comprehensive Bibliography* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2021); J. F. Koesterling, *The Emigration of the Saxon Lutherans in the Year 1838 in Perry County, Missouri* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2022).

2. See [www.mayoclinic.org](http://www.mayoclinic.org).

3. Article III, LCMS Constitution, in *Handbook 2023: Constitution, Bylaws, Articles of Incorporation as amended by the 2023 LCMS Convention 29 July–3 August 2023* (St. Louis: The Lutheran Church Missouri Synod, 2023), 11.

4. See Koesterling, *The Emigration*, 17–28; D.H. Steffens, *Doctor Carl Ferdinand Wilhelm Walther* (Philadelphia: The Lutheran Publication Society, 1917), 91–103; Theodore Buenger, “The Saxon Immigrants of 1839,” in W.H.T. Dau, ed., *Ebenezer: Reviews of the Work of the Missouri Synod during Three Quarters of a Century* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1922), 6–26; Walter O. Forster, *Zion on the Mississippi: The Settlement of the Saxon Lutherans in Missouri 1839–1841* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1953), 60–82; August R. Suelflow and E. Clifford Nelson, “Following the Frontier,” in E. Clifford Nelson, ed., *The Lutherans in North America* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1975), 155–157; Mary Todd, *Authority Vested: A Story of Identity and Change in the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2000), 22–42.

5. Forster in *Zion on the Mississippi* cites the case of Ernst Keyl, 39–40; and Gotthold Loeber, 53–55.

6. Forster, *Zion on the Mississippi*, 112.

7. Walter A. Baepler, *A Century of Grace: A History of the Missouri Synod 1847* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1947), 12.

8. Baepler, *A Century of Grace*, 24; Forster, *Zion on the Mississippi*, 151.
9. Forster, *Zion on the Mississippi*, 100–103, 112.
10. “Stephan’s Investiture,” in Todd, *Authority Vested*, 285–286.
11. Baepler, *A Century of Grace*, 29.
12. Forster, *Zion on the Mississippi*, 385–389.
13. Koesterling, *The Emigration*, 38–39.
14. Steffens, *Doctor Carl Ferdinand Wilhelm Walther*, 133.
15. “To the Rev. Otto Herman Walther, May 4, 1840,” in Carl S. Meyer, ed., *Letters of C.F.W. Walther: A Selection* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1969), 33–34.
16. “To O.H. Walther, May 4, 1840,” in Meyer, *Letters of C.F.W. Walther*, 49.
17. Steffens, *Doctor Carl Ferdinand Wilhelm Walther*, 142.
18. See Carl S. Munding, *Government in the Missouri Synod: The Genesis of Decentralized Government in the Missouri Synod* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1947), 96–101; Forster, *Zion on the Mississippi*, 507–508; Todd, *Authority Vested*, 59.
19. Munding, *Government in the Missouri Synod*, 111–112; Forster, *Zion on the Mississippi*, 518.
20. Munding, *Government in the Missouri Synod*, 110; Forster, *Zion on the Mississippi*, 518; Todd, *Authority Vested*, 59.
21. “Altenburg Debate and Theses,” in Erwin L. Lueker, ed., *Lutheran Cyclopedia* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1954), 21.
22. Baepler, *A Century of Grace*, 50.
23. Steffens, *Doctor Carl Ferdinand Wilhelm Walther*, 260; Baepler, *A Century of Grace*, 100.
24. See C.F.W. Walther, *Church and Ministry*, translated by J.T. Mueller (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1987).
25. Koesterling, *The Emigration*, 42.
26. Meyer, *Letters of C.F.W. Walther*, 8–9.
27. For right of “prior approval,” adopted by the 2013 LCMS Convention, see bylaw 3.10.6.8.2; 3.10.6.9.2, in *Handbook 2023*, 180–183; For right to appeal the decision of a District President to the President of Synod adopted by the 2016 LCMS Convention, see *Handbook 2023*, bylaw 2.14.5, in *Handbook 2023*, 72.
28. See Koesterling, *The Emigrations*, 19–20.
29. “Altenburg Debate and Theses,” in *Lutheran Cyclopedia*, 21.
30. C.F.W. Walther, *The Evangelical Lutheran Church, The True Visible Church of God on Earth*, cited in Meyer, *Letters of C.F.W. Walther*, 12–13.
31. “Constitution of the German Evangelical Lutheran Synod of Missouri, Ohio, and Other States, April 26, 1847,” *Concordia Historical Institute Quarterly*, 95 (Spring 2023), 23.
32. Koesterling, *The Emigration*, 92–94.
33. Koesterling, *The Emigration*, 5–12.
34. Baepler, *A Century of Grace*, 142–144.
35. “To the Rev. J. A. Ottenson, August 27, 1859,” in Meyer, *Letters of C.F.W. Walther*, 91–92.
36. Carl S. Meyer, “The Missouri Synod and Other Lutherans Before 1918,” in Carl S. Meyer, ed., *Moving Frontiers: Readings in the History of the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1964), 247–252.
37. Steffens, *Doctor Carl Ferdinand Wilhelm Walther*, 305–306.
38. Meyer, “The Missouri Synod and Other Lutherans Before 1918,” 283–284.
39. Meyer, “The Missouri Synod and Other Lutherans Before 1918,” 255–258.

40. Meyer, "The Missouri Synod and Other Lutherans Before 1918," 260–266.
41. Meyer, *Letters of C.F.W. Walther*, 15.
42. Meyer, "The Missouri Synod and Other Lutherans Before 1918," 276–278; Baepler, *A Century of Grace*, 198–207; "To G.A. Barth, May 9, 1880," in Meyer, *Letters of C.F.W. Walther*, 132–137.
43. "Brief Statement," in *This We Believe: Selected Topics of Faith and Practice in the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod* (Office of the President, The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, 2009), 68–71.
44. See, for example, Thomas Paine, *The Age of Reason* (New York: Truth Seeker Company, 2009).
45. Baepler, *A Century of Grace*, 41–45.
46. See Forster, *Zion on the Mississippi*, 81–82.
47. Forster, *Zion on the Mississippi*, 271–277.
48. Forster, *Zion on the Mississippi*, 259–262; Baepler, *A Century of Grace*, 30.
49. "Brief Statement," in *This We Believe*, 68.
50. Meyer, "Early Growth of the Missouri Synod," in *Moving Frontiers*, 234–238.
51. Everette Maier and Herbert T. Mayer, "The Process of Americanization," in *Moving Frontiers*, 344.
52. H. Richard Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture* (New York: Harper and Row, 1951), 69–82.
53. Meier and Mayer, "The Process of Americanization," 344–385.
54. Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture*, 64.
55. Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture*, 69.
56. Koesterling, *The Emigration*, 22.
57. Todd, *Authority Vested*, 43–201; Benjamin P. Schaefer, "Avoiding the Hornet's Nest—Woman Suffrage and Synodical Conference Lutherans," *Concordia Historical Institute Quarterly*, 96 (Fall, 2023), 9–58.
58. Meier and Mayer, "The Process of Americanization," 356–359.
59. Meier and Mayer, "The Process of Americanization," 360–361; John H. Baumgaertner, ed., *A Tree Grows in Missouri* (Milwaukee: Agape Publishers, 1975), 3–33; David P. Stechholz, *The English District: A Niche in the History of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in North America* (Angels' Portion Books, 2021), 37–79.