

# The Election Controversy in the Synodical Conference

[Dakota-Montana District Pastoral Conference; April 9-11, 1991]

by: R. Dennis Rardin

## I. Luther's Doctrine of Election

We will fail to understand the Lutheran Election Controversy unless we begin with Luther. His most detailed treatment of election is in his classic work, *The Bondage of the Will*. Nor is that surprising. Lutherans have always maintained that the correct doctrine of conversion and free will leads to the correct doctrine of election, and vice versa.<sup>1</sup> On the other hand, the smallest error overthrows them all. Whenever we address any of these doctrines, we address them all. This paper could well be called, "The Election/Free Will/Conversion Controversy in the Synodical Conference."

We might picture ourselves as ship's navigators. A well-charted course will land us safely at our destination if our map is good. But even a tiny error at the beginning will leave us lost. Similarly, we can begin with the correct doctrine of free will and conversion, and arrive safely in the comfort of our election, for our map is God's infallible Word.

So let us briefly trace Luther's course through these deep theological waters. These waters will drown our human reason; only the Spirit enables us to navigate them. He does so by giving us eyes that see the wretched evil in which we are born and with which we struggle each day, and a jaw that drops in awe and wonder at the riches of God's glorious grace.

In chapters 9, 10, and 11 [of Romans, Paul] teaches concerning God's eternal predestination [*providentia, Vorsehung*—"providence" might be better], from which it originally comes that one believes or not, is rid of sin or not rid of it. Thus our becoming righteous is taken entirely out of our hands and put in the hand of God. And that is most highly necessary. We are so weak and uncertain that, if it were in our power, surely not one man would be saved, the devil would surely overpower us all; but since God is certain, and His predestination cannot fail, and no one can withstand Him, we still have hope against sin.<sup>2</sup>

With these famous words, Luther summarized the doctrine of election he held throughout his life, and expounded nine years later in his classic work, *The Bondage of the Will*. Luther's understanding of election begins with the truth that man is by nature a slave to sin. What's more, man is happy about it; his enslaved will is in perfect conformity with the will of Satan, his master.

The human will\* is placed between the two like a beast of burden. If God rides it, it wills and goes where God wills . . . If Satan rides it, it wills and goes where Satan wills; nor can it choose to run to either of the two riders or to seek him out, but the riders themselves contend for control and possession of it.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Becker, *The Foolishness of God*, p. 215.

<sup>2</sup> Luther, *Commentary on Romans*, pp. Xxiii-xxiv.

<sup>3</sup> Luther, *The Bondage of the Will*, pp. 65-66. The editor translated "*arbitrium*" as "choice" throughout this edition (cf. P. xii). "Will" is certainly the more common translation, used most notably in the Triglot's translation of the Formula of Concord. This author has therefore replaced the translation of "choice" with "will" wherever it occurs. Where the editor uses "will", indicating "*voluntas*" in the original, an asterisk will appear.

If we are unwilling to let this term go altogether—though that would be the safest and most God-fearing thing to do—let us at least teach men to use it honestly, so that free will is allowed to man only with respect to what is beneath him, not what is above him.<sup>4</sup>

Luther affirms what Paul says, “Do you not know that you are slaves to the one whom you obey, whether you are slaves to sin, which leads to death, or to obedience, which leads to righteousness?” (Rom. 6:16; v. 17 shows that “obedience” here is faith, not sanctification.) Since we are all born as Satan’s children, by nature we eagerly will and do what Satan wills. The Christian believes because God has taken control of his will, man’s will is in complete bondage, before and, in a sense, even after conversion.

Luther goes further. After all, the two riders of the human will are not equal. God is omnipotent; Satan is not. God has free will; Satan does not. Therefore everything that happens, happens because of God’s will.

God foreknows nothing contingently, but he foresees and purposes and does all things by his immutable, eternal, and infallible will . . . From this it follows irrefutably that everything we do, everything that happens, even if it seems to us to happen mutably and contingently, happens in fact necessarily and immutably, if you have regard to the will of God.<sup>5</sup>

Now by “necessarily” I do not mean “compulsorily,” but by the necessity of immutability and not of compulsion. That is to say, when a man is without the Spirit of God he does not do evil against his will, like a thief or robber carried off against his will to punishment, but he does it of his own accord and with a ready will. And this readiness to will or act he cannot by his own powers omit . . . By contrast, if God works in us, the will is changed . . . so that it cannot be turned another way by any opposition, nor be overcome or compelled even by the gates of hell, but it goes on willing and delighting in and loving the good, just as before it willed and delighted in and loved evil . . . So not even here is there any free will, or freedom to turn oneself in another direction and will something different [i.e. turn from faith to unbelief], so long as the Spirit and grace of God remain in a man.<sup>6</sup>

Conversion, Luther says, is a complete turning of our will from evil to good, performed by the Holy Spirit. After conversion, the Christian is not preserved in faith by his free will.<sup>7</sup> Rather, since the Spirit is in control, the Christian cannot will to turn from good to evil. Since the Spirit now rides our will instead of Satan, we eagerly and gladly go where the Spirit wants us to go. We are converted and preserved in faith *sola gratia*. We are certain of our salvation because the omnipotent Spirit will not allow us the “freedom” to “turn in another direction and will

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<sup>4</sup> Luther, *Bondage*, p. 70.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 37-38.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 64-65.

<sup>7</sup> The Scriptural paradox that we are freed from sin to be slaves of God, and yet we are not slaves but sons, reminds us that the freedom God’s children enjoy is freedom to love God with a willing singlemindedness that is created only by God’s powerful grace. It is not freedom to choose or reject God at will. This is why we speak of Adam’s sin as an abdication of, not an exercise of, free will.

something different” than what God wills.<sup>8</sup> (Luther, however, never denies the Law’s teaching that man can fall. This is an expression of the paradox of grace.)

Luther’s doctrine of election follows from this; it is the doctrine of Romans 8:28. Luther’s insistence that all things happen necessarily is a fine exegesis of Paul’s words, “In all things God is working,” and Eph. 1:11, “we . . . having been predestined according to the plan of him who works out [energounto~—effects, brings about] everything in conformity with the purpose of his will.”<sup>9</sup> This is a pillar that holds up Luther’s faith—God is sovereign and omnipotent; everything happens in keeping with his will. The other pillar of Luther’s faith is that God has revealed what his will is—to save him for eternal life. “[In all things God works] for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose. For those he foreknew, he also predestined,” called, justified and glorified.

Now Luther is face-to-face with the paradox of grace. God and only God is responsible for converting us and preserving us in faith. His omnipotence assures us that Satan cannot knock the Spirit from the saddle and resume riding our wills to hell. But if this is so, isn’t it also a result of God’s omnipotent will that many are hardened instead of converted, led astray instead of preserved? Luther, without blaming God, answers yes!

It may perhaps be asked how God can be said to work evils in us, such as hardening, giving up men to their lusts [Rom. 1:24], leading them astray, and so forth . . . Reason and [Erasmus’] diatribe admit that God works all in all [I Cor. 12:6]<sup>10</sup> and that without him nothing is effected or effective; for he is omnipotent . . . Since then God moves and actuates all in all, he necessarily moves and acts also in Satan and in ungodly man. But he acts in them as they are and as he finds them; that is to say, since they are averse and evil, and caught up in the movement of this divine omnipotence, they do nothing but averse and evil things . . . It is the fault, therefore, of the instruments, which God does not allow to be idle, that evil things are done, with God himself setting them in motion. It is just as if a carpenter were cutting badly with a chipped and jagged ax. Hence it comes about that the ungodly man cannot but continually err and sin, because he is caught up in the movement of divine power and not allowed to be idle, but wills, desires, and acts according to the kind of person he himself is. All this is settled and certain if we believe that God is omnipotent, and also that the ungodly is a creature of God, although as one averse from God and left to himself without the Spirit of God, he cannot will or do good.<sup>11</sup>

These are bold, sweeping statements. Indeed, Becker says, “Against Erasmus, Luther could write as vehemently about the sovereignty of God and the monergism of grace as Calvin did.”<sup>12</sup> Luther insists that we let God be God, nothing less than almighty also when evil is done. However, he preserves the paradox of grace which Calvin broke. Luther realizes that because God is omnipotent, all man’s actions, whether evil or good, flow from the will and power of the

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<sup>8</sup> cf. Eph. 1:19. Habek in his commentary translates, “[that you may know] what is the overwhelming greatness of his power upon us, the ones believing by virtue of the exercise of the might of his strength.”

<sup>9</sup> One should note that the “we” in this verse is the elect Jews (cf. v. 12--’first” there is temporal); the “you” in verse 13 is the elect Gentiles. This makes Ephesians 1:11-14 quite parallel with Romans 9-11, which Luther is about to enter in upon.

<sup>10</sup> Better passages would include Eph. 1:11 or Romans 8:28.

<sup>11</sup> Luther, *Bondage*, pp. 175-176.

<sup>12</sup> Becker, *Foolishness*, p. 135.

sovereign God. But the guilt or responsibility for evil rests with man's fallen, perverse will, even though fallen man has no choice (*arbitrium*) but to do evil unless God converts him.

At this point we are tempted to speak of an antecedent and consequent will of God. That is to say, God elects, converts, and preserves us antecedently—not as a consequence of anything we might do. God then is said to condemn the rest consequently—only after taking into account their sin, and their wicked rejection of his grace. This distinction is entirely right, says Luther, but only up to a point.

[Luther is discussing Ezekiel 33:11, “I do not desire the death of a sinner, but that the sinner turn from his wicked ways and live.”] In this regard [the revealed will of God] we say, the good God does not deplore the death of his people which he works in them, but he deplores the death which he finds in his people and desires to remove from them. For it is this that God as he is preached is concerned with, namely that sin and death should be taken away and we should be saved . . . But God hidden in his majesty neither deplores nor takes away death, but works life, death, and all in all. Thus he does not will the death of a sinner, according to his word, but he wills it according to that inscrutable will of his . . .<sup>13</sup>

It is therefore right to say, “If God does not desire our death, the fact that we perish must be imputed to our own will.” [i.e. “God condemns consequently.”] It is right, I mean, if you speak of God as preached, for he wills all men to be saved, seeing he comes with the word of salvation to all, and the fault is in the will that does not admit him as he says in Matthew 23: “How often would I have gathered your children and you would not.” But why that majesty of his does not remove or change this defect of our will in all men, since it is not in man's power to do so, or why he imputes this defect to man, when man cannot help having it, we have no right to inquire . . . It is as Paul says in Romans 9:20: “Who are you, to answer back to God?”<sup>14</sup>

[Luther discussing why Jesus wept over Jerusalem's hardness in Matthew 23] It is likewise part of this incarnate God to weep, wail, and groan over the perdition of the ungodly, when the will of the Divine Majesty purposely abandons and reprobates some to perish. And it is not for us to ask why he does so, but to stand in awe of God who both can do and will to do such things.<sup>15</sup>

It is not hard to see why many have called *Bondage of the Will* a Calvinistic book. It is not; Luther is simply saying that God is God in all things (God hidden in majesty) and at the same time maintaining the universal nature of the Gospel (God revealed in the Word). This is another way of stating the paradox of grace. In 1525 he said in a sermon on I Timothy 2:4, “Therefore you may not make a distinction in the will of God. There is just one single will, for the believers as well as the others.”<sup>16</sup> Yet he acknowledges that this one will of God baldly contradicts itself in our eyes when it saves some and hardens others, although all are equally sinful and averse to his will. Luther is honoring the paradox of grace.

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<sup>13</sup> Luther, *Bondage*, pp. 139-140.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 140.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 146.

<sup>16</sup> Quoted by Becker, *Foolishness*, p. 136.

This becomes clear in Luther's discussion of Romans 9. On the basis of the discussion summarized above, he considers it a given that: "If grace comes from the purpose or election of God, it comes by necessity and not by our own effort or endeavor, as we have shown above."<sup>17</sup> Election, which causes conversion, happens solely by the gracious will of God.

But Luther also understands that God's hardening of the lost, which in one sense happens only as a result of man's evil actions, also happens by the gracious will of the hidden God. Even when people reject the Gospel, the Gospel is still working God's gracious, incomprehensible will to save his elect. God's Word never fails to achieve his saving purpose (Rom. 9:6), even when it works hardening instead of conversion.

"For this very purpose I raised you up, that I may show my power in you and that my name may be declared throughout all the earth." [Ex. 9:16, quoted in Rom. 9:18] You see here that Pharaoh is hardened precisely in order that he may resist God and delay the redemption, so that occasion may be given for many signs and for a declaration of the power of God, so that he may be proclaimed throughout all the earth. What else does this mean but that all these things are done for the confirmation of faith and the consolation of the weak, so that they may thereafter willingly believe in God as true, faithful, mighty and merciful? . . . If there had been any flexibility or freedom of will in Pharaoh, which could have turned either way, God would not have been able so certainly to predict his hardening. Since, however, the Giver of the promise is one who can neither be mistaken nor tell a lie, it was necessarily and most certainly bound to come about that Pharaoh should be hardened; which would not be the case unless the hardening were entirely beyond the capacity of man and within the power of God alone. It is just as we said above, namely, that God was certain that he was not going to suspend the general operation of his omnipotence in Pharaoh's case or on Pharaoh's account, since he cannot indeed suspend it. Moreover he was equally certain that the will of Pharaoh, being naturally evil and averse to God, could not consent to a word and work of God that was contrary to it. Consequently . . . nothing else could be the result but umbrage and hardening of heart in Pharaoh . . . though without any violence being done to his will, since it is not unwillingly compelled but is carried along by the operation of God to will naturally.<sup>18</sup>

Luther forbids us to conclude that man's evil finds its source in God's will.

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<sup>17</sup> Luther, *Bondage*, p. 272.

<sup>18</sup> Luther, *Bondage*, pp. 182-184. The grammar of Romans 9 emphatically bears out Luther's conclusion. In the case of hardened fleshly Israel, Paul says (6) "It is not as though God's Word had failed. *For* not all who are descended from Israel are Israel." Again, (16) "It does not, therefore, depend on man's desire or effort, but on God's mercy. (17) For the Scripture says to Pharaoh . . . " In both cases, *yap* is causal. God's Word did not fail because the hidden, incomprehensible God used it to harden fleshly Israel, to harden Pharaoh, so that his Word would be proclaimed in all the earth and bring the elect to faith. The question in v. 19, "Who resists his will," is right on target—God's will, which no one can resist, is doing all this. Paul does not respond, "This is not God's will." He silences the question as God silenced Job's attack on his justice, "Who are you, O man, to talk back to God?" Reason cannot tower these heights. We always, always, must view this part of Romans after thoroughly taking to heart the first eight chapters, where we learn that the clay of v. 21 is not a neutral, but an entirely corrupt mankind, and then bask in the sweetness of universal justification.

Let no one suppose, therefore, when God is said to harden or to work evil in us (for to harden is to make evil), that he does so by creating evil in us from scratch . . . That is the way people seem to imagine that man in himself is good, or at least not evil, and that he suffers an evil work at God's hands, when they hear it said by us that God works in us good things and bad . . . God works evil in us, i.e. by means of us, not through any fault of his, but owing to our faultiness, since we are by nature evil and he is good . . . In accordance with the nature of his omnipotence . . . he cannot help but do evil with an evil instrument, though he makes good use of this evil in accordance with his wisdom for our own glory and our salvation.<sup>19</sup>

Luther wants no double predestination. He speaks, however, of a God, who in his mercy hardens some fallen men in order to save other fallen men whom he has elected to eternal life. That God does this, Luther says, is clearly revealed in God's Word. How and why God operates this way, which to us seems such a violent contradiction of his revealed will, Luther refuses to answer; this is God at his most incomprehensible. For the hidden and revealed will of God do not, in reality, contradict each other; it only seems so to us.

It remains for someone to ask why God does not cease from the very movement of omnipotence by which the will of the ungodly is moved to go on being evil and becoming worse. The answer is that this is wanting God to cease to be God . . . But why does he not at the same time change the evil wills that he moves? This belongs to the secrets of his majesty, where his judgments are incomprehensible. It is not our business to question, but to adore these mysteries.<sup>20</sup>

God hides his eternal goodness and mercy under eternal wrath, his righteousness under iniquity. This is the highest degree of faith, to believe him merciful when he saves so few and damns so many, and to believe him righteous when by his own will he makes us necessarily damnable, so that he seems, according to Erasmus, to delight in the torments of the wretched and to be worthy of hatred rather than love. If I could by any means comprehend how this God can be merciful and just who displays so much wrath and iniquity, there would be no need of faith.<sup>21</sup>

Luther realizes the magnitude of the paradox he is describing, as does Paul in Romans 9. It is faith of the highest order to believe God is sincerely and genuinely merciful to all if we ponder the fate of the lost, such as the Jews over whom Paul laments. Luther takes us right to the edge of the abyss where Calvin fell, stops, points to it and still says, "I believe that God is truly, genuinely merciful to all; his Word says so." If we take even one step back from this abyss, we fall into the one behind us—synergism. For Luther followed Paul to the edge of this incomprehensible abyss to prove that "In all things God is working for the good of those who love him, who are called according to his purpose." Since God is working, we rest, secure in the knowledge that our salvation rests entirely in his almighty hands. This is *sola gratia*.

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<sup>19</sup> Luther, *Bondage*, p. 78.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 180.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 62-63.

Before moving on, we should note that in *Bondage of the Will*, Luther is stressing the part of the paradox of grace that Erasmus denied: that election and salvation are sola gratia. Professor Becker reminds us, however,

Had Luther been involved in a debate with Calvin rather than with Erasmus, his argument would have taken a completely different path . . . as unreservedly as Luther held to the bondage of the will, so consistently he also refused to limit the grace of God in any way. He taught a universal atonement . . . Luther believed also that it is the earnest will of God to convert all men. He said, "He wants all men to be saved, in whatever condition they may be. Let each one therefore see how he may find himself in that 'all.'" God comes to all men with the word of salvation.<sup>22</sup>

Beginning with Melancthon,<sup>23</sup> Lutheran synergists have said that Luther later silently retracted (how does one do that?) his position in *Bondage of the Will* because it leads one away from confidence in the Gospel to wondering whether the hidden God has predestined him. Luther never retracted; in 1537 he said it and his Small Catechism were the best of all his books.<sup>24</sup>

In fact, at the beginning of his career, in his *Preface to Romans*, he had already arrived at the Scriptural answer to this objection:

But do you follow the order of this Epistle? *Worry first about Christ and the Gospel, that you may recognize your sin and His grace*; then fight your sin, as the first eight chapters here have taught. Then, when you are under the cross and suffering, that will teach you the right doctrine of predestination . . . and how comforting it is. For in the absence of suffering and the cross and the danger of death, one cannot deal with predestination without harm and without secret wrath against God. The old Adam must die before he can endure this subject and drink the strong wine of it.<sup>25</sup>

In a lecture delivered on Genesis 26:9 in 1542, three years before his death, nothing has changed.

People of our time say, "What God has determined beforehand must happen. Consequently, every concern about religion and the salvation of souls is uncertain and useless." . . . God, according to the blasphemy of these people, was horribly foolish when he sent his Son, promulgated Law and Gospel, and sent the apostles if the only thing he wanted was that we should be uncertain and in doubt whether we are to be saved or really to be damned. But these are delusions of the devil with which he tries to get us to doubt and disbelieve, although Christ came into this world to make us completely certain . . . This is how I have taught in my book *On the Bondage of the Will* and elsewhere, namely that a distinction must be made . . . about the hidden God or about the revealed God . . . With regard to God, insofar as he has not been revealed, there is no faith, no knowledge, and no understanding . . . Why not rather let God keep his decisions and mysteries in

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<sup>22</sup> Becker, *Foolishness*, pp. 135-136.

<sup>23</sup> Bente, *Concordia Triglotta*, "Historical Introductions to the Symbolical Books," p. 209.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 225.

<sup>25</sup> Luther, *Preface to Romans*, pp. xxiii-xxiv.

secret . . . If you listen to him [Christ], are baptized in his name, and love his word, then you are surely predestined and are certain of your salvation . . . You must kill the other thoughts and the ways of reason or of the flesh, for God detests them.<sup>26</sup>

This fence of Luther's prevents our fall into the abyss of God's incomprehensible ways. He says, "Come to the edge of the abyss and express with me the highest order of faith, 'I believe God is most merciful; his Word says so.'"

## II. The Formula of Concord

Luther was not alone in his regard for *Bondage of the Will*. The Formula of Concord virtually elevates it to confessional status when it says:

Even so Dr. Luther wrote of this matter [Free Will and Conversion] in his book *De Servo Arbitrio*, i.e., Of the Captive Will of Man, in opposition to Erasmus, and elucidated and supported this position well and thoroughly, and afterward he repeated and explained it in his glorious exposition of the book of Genesis, especially of chapter 26. There likewise his meaning and understanding of some other peculiar disputations introduced incidentally by Erasmus, as of absolute necessity, etc., have been secured by him in the best and most careful way against all misunderstanding and perversion; to which we hereby appeal and refer others.<sup>27</sup>

Article XI of the Formula, "Of God's Eternal Foreknowledge and Election," is unique. For it alone treats a doctrine which was not then disputed among Lutherans, "since the same expressions were not always employed concerning it by the [Lutheran] theologians . . . to prevent disagreement and separation on its account in the future."<sup>28</sup> Chemnitz and the others were in the midst of conflicts over Original Sin, Free Will, and Law and Gospel. It is therefore no surprise they wrote about Election, where all these doctrines flow together.

Much of the material in the Election Controversy dealt with the meaning of the Formula, so we will save much of the discussion for later. At this point we will simply look at how it deals with the questions Luther dealt with above.

Since it was written after the rise of Calvinism, the Formula makes a somewhat sharper distinction in terminology than Luther did, saying that while God's foreseeing (omniscience before the fact) extends over all people, predestination or election (the eternal will of God) extends only over those God has chosen.

However, by saying that the Formula does not contradict Luther's teaching that God from eternity willed to use the non-elect to bring his elect to heaven.

The foreknowledge of God (*praescientia*) foresees and foreknows also that which is evil; however, not in such a manner as though it were God's gracious will that it should happen; but all that the perverse, wicked will of the devil and of men wills and desires to undertake and do, God sees and knows before; and his *praescientia*, that is, foreknowledge, observes its order also in wicked acts or works, inasmuch as a limit and measure is fixed by God to the evil which God does not will, how far it should go, and

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<sup>26</sup> Luther, *Lectures on Genesis*, pp. 43-45.

<sup>27</sup> *Formula of Concord*, II, 44, Triglot p. 897.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 1063.

how long it should last, when and how he will hinder and punish it; *for all of this God the Lord so overrules [i.e. governs, rules over: regiert, gubernat] that it must redound to the glory of the divine name and to the salvation of his elect*, and the godless on that account must be put to confusion. However, the beginning and cause of evil is not God's foreknowledge, but the wicked and perverse will of the devil and of men.<sup>29</sup>

God's omnipotence works evil through man, not in man, Luther said; man was already evil to begin with. The Formula says God's omnipotence and foreknowledge combine to govern man's evil will and actions so that they serve the salvation of his elect. God's guiding and directing do not increase man's wickedness (since man is totally evil already), but check and rule over it so that it does not harm, but serves his elect. To Luther, since everything the wicked do is done necessarily, that is, in accordance with God's infallible foreknowledge and by means of his omnipotence, what the wicked do necessarily serves God's purpose. The Formula says that God allows only those wicked acts to occur which will work for the salvation of the elect. These are two sides of one coin.

*The Apology to the Book of Concord*, written by Chemnitz, Krichener, and Selnecker—the most prominent of the men who drafted the Formula, emphatically asserts the agreement of the Formula with *Bondage of the Will*.

Nor does the *Christian Book of Concord* deny that there is a reprobation in God, or that God rejects some; hence also it does not oppose Luther's statement when he writes in *De Servo Arbitrio* that it is the highest degree of faith to believe that God who saves so few, is nevertheless most merciful.<sup>30</sup>

The Formula then goes on to repaint the fence Luther built at the edge of the abyss of God incomprehensible, by reminding us not to begin our search for salvation with the inscrutable will of God (viewing election *a priori*), for it must lead to despair. Rather, we begin with the universal call of the Gospel, and from it learn of our eternal election (viewing election *a posteriori*), so that we derive comfort from it. This was precisely Luther's point in *Preface to Romans*. More detailed treatment of the Formula we defer for now.

### III The 17<sup>th</sup> Century Theologians<sup>31</sup>

Unfortunately, in the years after 1580, Lutheran theologians chose not to “employ the same expressions concerning” the doctrine of election as the Formula used. Instead, there was a steady move away from the paradox of grace in election to a more rationally satisfying position that seems easier to defend against Calvinism.<sup>32</sup> Rather than quote the theologians at length, we will briefly trace the development of their ideas from 1580-1700.

Shortly after the Formula's adoption, some of its signatories began to wander. In 1582, Heerbrand introduced a false comparison between justification and election, “The cause of predestination is no different from the cause of justification.” This statement can be understood

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<sup>29</sup> *Formula*, XI, 1, Triglot, p. 1063.

<sup>30</sup> As cited by Bente, “Introductions,” p. 226.

<sup>31</sup> Unless otherwise noted, all quotations from the dogmaticians are taken from Robert Preus' article, “The Doctrine of Election as Taught by the Seventeenth Century Lutheran Theologians,” *Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly*, Vol. 55, No. 4 (Oct. 1958), pp. 229-261.

<sup>32</sup> Preus' article, in fact, shows that the theologians sometimes massacred passages such as Acts 13:48 in their eagerness to distance themselves from Calvinism.

correctly; God's gracious will is indeed the cause of both. But in a different (instrumental) sense, faith is also a cause of justification. It is not, however, a cause of election, rather, election causes our faith. But Heerbrand seems to have meant the former; he translated Eph. 1:5, "He predestined us whom he would adopt as his children," instead of "He predestined us for adoption as sons." This translation puts conversion before election logically; Paul clearly says that God predestined us for conversion. Heerbrand has opened the door for crucial errors to come.

In 1596, Hunnius applied the distinction between *voluntas antecedens* and *voluntas consequens* (antecedent and consequent will of God) in the doctrine of election. And in election one might indeed preserve the paradox of grace by saying that God elects antecedently and damns consequently, though this statement is not without weaknesses, as we have seen.

But Hunnius assigned both election and reprobation to the consequent will of God! Because the elect are always referred to as believers, and in order to avoid Calvinism (which places election and reprobation in the antecedent will of God), he made election and reprobation contingent on man's response to grace.

Hunnius also drew a false distinction between foreknowledge and election. One can get greatly confused, both in the Latin of the dogmaticians and in our English; the word "foreknow" can refer to God's omniscience—that he knows everything before it happens. However, when Scripture uses the term προγνωσκω, translated "foreknow," it is a synonym of εκλεγμαι, to elect or choose; it is an act of God's will, not merely of his omniscience.

Hunnius abandoned this vital distinction, and made election dependent on God's omniscience. He coined the term *intuitu fidei*, and the phrase *intuitu Christi meriti fide apprehendi*, "in consideration of the merit of Christ apprehended by faith," to explain his position. Every later theologian used both expressions.

And in Hunnius' definition of his terms, we see the confusion that would reign among all the later theologians. We note a vagueness, or lack of clarity, which stands in sharp contrast to most of the theologians' work..

Just as in the case of justification and salvation God sees nothing in us, the merit or dignity of which moves him to justify or save us, although he does not justify and save in complete disregard of faith; so in like manner in the article of election He does not regard anything in us by the dignity or merit of which He is prompted to choose us, since not even faith in this sense enters into the decree of predestination, but only as it embraces the basis of our election, Jesus Christ.

Certainly God does not elect "in complete disregard of faith;" he elects to faith. But Hunnius is trying to maintain *sola gratia* while viewing faith as a cause, not a result, of election. So he tries to create a gray area, where faith logically precedes election, but is still given by grace alone.

All the later dogmaticians flail around in a similar fashion. They label faith's relationship to election an external less principal cause, less principal impulsive cause or reason, explanatory cause or reason, instrumental moral cause (!), united with Christ's merit as one impelling cause, a condition on the part of the object elected, etc.

This author hesitates to call Hunnius a synergist. One can maintain a form of the true paradox in this way: God gives faith purely by grace, then elects those whom he foresees himself converting. But, of course, if man is truly pure passive in his conversion, *intuitu fidei* clouds the

paradox and explains nothing. The question still remains, “Why are some saved and others damned?”

The later dogmaticians speak of a two-fold sense of election. The election of the means (*electio mediorum*) of salvation, or election in the wide sense, refers to God’s antecedent will to save all through the means of grace. This election causes faith, but embraces all people in general, not individuals in particular. It violates the Formula’s definition of election, “The eternal election of God . . . does not extend at once over the godly and wicked, but only over the children of God . . .”<sup>33</sup>

The election of persons (*electio personarum*), or election in the narrow sense, refers to God’s consequent will to save individuals. This election is *intuitu fidei finalis*, in view of foreseen, persevering faith, and embraces each individual who will be saved. It is ordered and conditioned (*ordinata et conditionata*); it only takes place after man’s faith is foreseen; you are elect if you use the means of salvation to come to and persevere in faith. It is the counterpart to the decree of God to condemn those whose unbelief he has foreseen. (The dogmaticians were much closer to Calvin than they thought.) This election violates the Formula’s definition as well, “The eternal election of God, however, not only foresees and foreknows the salvation of the elect, but is also . . . a cause which procures, works, helps and promotes our salvation and what pertains thereto . . .”<sup>34</sup>

The rigid logic the dogmaticians were applying to the doctrine finally led them to close the last gap—how is foreseen faith still a pure gift of grace? By the late 17<sup>th</sup> century, the dogmaticians distinguish between the natural resistance common to all men by nature, and wanton or malicious resistance which man does not offer of necessity. Those who resist only naturally are converted; those who resist wantonly thwart the Spirit and are lost.

In service to this distinction, an intermediate state (*status medius*) in conversion is necessary. At least logically, there must be a point at which natural resistance is overcome, but before man is converted, at which point man either adds wanton resistance and is lost, or fails to add wanton resistance and is converted. As we will now see, these last two tenets represent a solid step backwards from the edge of the one abyss where Calvin lies, the incomprehensible God—a step which plunges the one who takes it into the twin abyss of synergism.

#### **IV The Roots of the Election Controversy in the Synodical Conference<sup>35</sup>**

Why was there an election controversy among American Lutherans? The similarities between the late 1500’s and the late 1800’s are striking. Both find Lutherans fighting unionism and doctrinal compromise with Calvinists and Semi-Pelagians. In the late 1500’s the Formula’s authors contended with crypto-Calvinists and the Wittenberg Synergists. In the 1800’s, the “Confessional Reawakening” sought to undo the damage done by the dogmaticians’ overreaction to Calvinism, by pietism and rationalism, as well as by the Prussian Union and other forced mergers with Reformed churches (both Calvinists and Arminians). At both times the Lutheran church came face-to-face with false teaching in her own midst and sought to repudiate it. And at both times, the concerns of her theologians embraced the doctrine of election.

In the Missouri Synod’s early years, the effects of the dogmaticians’ errors were quite evident. Otto Fuerbringer was a co-founder of the Missouri Synod. He helped draft its

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<sup>33</sup> XI, 5, Triglot p. 1065.

<sup>34</sup> XI, 8, Triglot p. 1065.

<sup>35</sup> The material for this portion of the paper is largely derived from Haug’s 1000-page opus cited in the Bibliography. Since this work is not generally available, quotations from him will not be footnoted.

constitution, and served as president of its Northern District for almost 30 years. In 1856-57, he wrote a series of articles for *Lehre und Wehre*, “Concerning the Doctrine of Election and Various Related Materials.”

In them Fuerbringer quoted Hutter, “God elects men to salvation in respect to foreseen faith (*respeciu praevisae fidei*).” He claimed that the Formula teaches election *intuitu fidei* simply because it teaches that only those who truly believe will be saved. He went on to say,

From all this there follows at least so much, that also the believers are foreseen from eternity, and in view of their foreknown persevering faith are elected, not because they believe, but in foresight of it.

Fuerbringer’s was a brilliant mind; that got him in trouble. He employed the Hegelian dialectic to bring two antithetical statements (“God’s doing and ordering are the cause of salvation,” and “Man’s freedom in spiritual matters must be maintained”) to a synthesis. He approached the doctrine of conversion with the precept that human freedom is a necessary prerequisite to a just punishment of sin and to a meaningful conversion and salvation.

He did affirm that the fall utterly destroyed man’s freedom in spiritual matters. However, he said, this freedom is restored during the process of conversion. At certain times in a man’s life, the Spirit breaks the inertia of original sin, and overcomes his inborn hatred of the Gospel.

At these times, Fuerbringer says, man is in a neutral position over against God and has *libertas sese convertendi*, freedom for converting himself. Whether he chooses for or against God more often determines his fate. Furthermore, he claims this teaching is not synergistic, since the Spirit, not the man, prepares the man for conversion. Thus he said in the same sentence (good dialectical form) that man has a *servum arbitrium* (enslaved will) and a *liberum arbitrium* (free will); using terms he surely realized Luther and Erasmus had fought over.

Election *intuitu fidei*, then, means that God foresaw how men would use these moments of ethical freedom and chose those who would choose him. Fuerbringer’s error was to locate the paradox of grace within the heart of man. In doing so he was in full accord with the later dogmatians. Fuerbringer dressed the distinction between a natural and willful resistance in fancier, more consistent terminology. His difference with Luther, who called the *liberum arbitrium* in man an “empty title,” and a neutral will in man “a mere dialectical fiction,”<sup>36</sup> is obvious.

One wonders why Walther, the editor of *Lehre und Wehre*, let the article go to press. Perhaps he was so embroiled in the Church and Ministry conflict that he chose not to start a fight with such prominent men in his own Synod (Sihler, another co-founder, had also written in favor of *intuitu fidei*). Or, more likely, Walther may not yet have realized the implications of the dogmatians’ doctrine; perhaps Fuerbringer’s article brought it to his attention.

At any rate, Walther responded very impersonally. Two short, unsigned articles that speak Walther’s language indirectly contradicted the previous articles. Then, in 1863, without naming names, Walther attacked the false doctrine head-on in a lengthy reply to an article from Germany entitled, “Why We Are Not Lutheran, But Reformed.”

The article accused Lutherans of deviations in the predictable areas: an allegedly incomplete break with Roman doctrine, and false doctrines regarding Baptism and the Lord’s Supper. Walther simply and flatly denied these assertions.

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<sup>36</sup> Luther, *Bondage*, p. 115.

But when the article accused Lutherans of synergism, Walther's tone changed. He agreed that many professing Lutherans think in semi-Pelagian thought patterns. He blamed Pietism for this, quoting Spener as saying that election does not cause man's steadfast remaining in grace, but God elected only men who would remain steadfast. He also blamed rationalism, which he said had reduced Christianity to "a heathen moral philosophy."

He traced Lutheran synergism to Melancthon's definition of the *liberum arbitrium*, "Free will in man is the faculty for applying himself to grace, that is, it hears the promise and tries to assent to it, and abstains from sins against conscience." He also quoted Melancthon's famous statement, "In conversion these causes concur: the word of God, the Holy Spirit, who is sent by the Father and the Son, so that our hearts may be enlightened, and our will assenting to and not resisting the word of God."

Walther's only defense against the charge of synergism was that Lutherans should be judged by the Confessions, not the writings of certain theologians. He rightly asserted that the Formula teaches, "As far as conversion is concerned man can maintain only a passive attitude. God does everything."

Then came the frontal assault. He said the doctrine of election is the final evidence of whether a theology is synergistic. There it is evident that many who subscribe to the Confessions word for word are not free from synergistic ideas (Fuerbringer and Sihler?). He then made the bold assertion,

If human faith, foreseen by God, is the cause which moved God to elect some to eternal life, faith can no longer be considered a pure gift of grace, but is a human achievement and merit, and election is based on the moral superiority of one person over another.

He said that the Confessions avoid Calvinism by emphatically asserting that grace is universal. They avoid semi-Pelagianism by teaching that election is *sola gratia*, not based on anything in man. Although this is a gross contradiction, he said, the Formula does not try to solve it because Scripture teaches both truths, and urges us to await eternity for the answer. Walther buttressed his position by quoting Gerhard, but omitting Gerhard's statements concerning *intuitu fidei*.

This article began Walther's effort to return Missouri to the doctrine of the Formula. This effort continued in 1868, when Pastor J. Huegli presented a paper entitled, "Theses Regarding the Doctrine of Good Works on the Basis of the Doctrine of Free Will, Election, and Justification" to the Missouri Synod's Northern District convention. Walther and District President Fuerbringer were present. The pertinent theses read:

1. "Man after the fall is so corrupted through original sin, that he can do no truly good work by his own power." In its discussions, the conference rejected the teaching that election and reprobation are based on God's foreknowledge of man's decision for or against God, and agreed that many preach synergism unknowingly by saying that man can and must decide when touched by grace.

5. "Election is related to this transformation [i.e. conversion] of men in this way, that God, in pursuance of his eternal election also in time out of pure grace for the sake of Christ powerfully works and acts, so that his elect—which are all those, whom he has foreordained to eternal life—also come to the means of grace and are converted."

The conference agreed that Lutherans and Calvinists differ because Lutherans do not answer the question why God removes resistance and death from some but not from others, as

Calvinists do. Luther, it was agreed, taught both that election is a matter of free grace, and that God is sincere in his desire to save all men, because Christ died for all. Although these statements contradict each other, one dare not believe that God's hidden will contradicts his revealed will.

We quote the minutes of the conference at length, and note how the discussion removes the ambiguity in the dogmaticians' treatment:

Faith is not the basis of our salvation, nor is election, but Christ alone.<sup>37</sup> Election is the cause, then, which works our salvation and what pertains to it. Faith is the instrument that lays hold of it [*das ergreifende Mittel*].<sup>38</sup> A beggar does not have something because he lays hold of it, but because it was given to him. The giver does not give him something because he, the beggar, takes it, but he takes it because it was given to him. This is also true for us who are beggars before God. God does not give to us, because we lay hold of, but we lay hold of because he gives to us.

It was argued [by Fuerbringer, perhaps?] that Eph. 1 would say that we are elected through Christ, and that therefore faith is included, since Christ is received through faith, and that therefore the expression of the later theologians, "*intuitu fidei*, in view of faith, God has elected," is justified. To this the response was, "God is not conditioned by anything," (*in Gott fallen keine Bedingungen*), but one would see such [a conditioning] in God, if you would say he has elected in view of faith. The choice is not on this account an absolute [choice]. God has elected us in Christ, i.e. for Christ's sake.<sup>39</sup> Faith cannot be the cause. How can this be a cause, on the basis of which God has done something to us, does something to us? Do you love a beggar because you have given him a gift? How can God will to save us, because he has given us the gift of faith? We find nowhere at all in Scripture, that God has foreseen something on man's part, for the sake of which he saves him . . . One ascribes a free will to men, if one teaches that God has elected them because they will believe.<sup>40</sup> God saw men, one as the others, sunk down deep. What is the reason that these believe, those do not believe? If it is not only and alone God's free mercy that they believe, then they must have had free will to believe.<sup>41</sup>

It is not miraculous that men are damned, since they have all deserved damnation. But this is a wonder to behold, that, while some are saved, others are damned, that in the case of some resistance<sup>42</sup> and death are removed, in the case of others they are not. We cannot

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<sup>37</sup> Denying Calvin's absolute election does not require basing election on a condition in man, as the dogmaticians thought. Election is not absolute if it is conditioned by Christ, Calvin taught that election preceded Christ's atonement in the *ordo salutis*.

<sup>38</sup> Faith is restored to its office as the *organon leptikon*. Seeing faith as an act which conditions election is a warping of its role in our salvation.

<sup>39</sup> Huegli means that God is not conditioned by anything *in man*; he should have said that. For he immediately says election is conditioned by Christ's merit.

<sup>40</sup> As Fuerbringer most obviously had done with the term, *libertas sese convertendi*.

<sup>41</sup> The one-sided statement is in contrast to the dogmaticians' correlation of election and reprobation as two sides of one divine decree.

<sup>42</sup> All resistance in unregenerate men is again placed on one level.

grasp that. We must only wonder at it. We must not together with the Calvinists desire to make the secret, hidden will of God a revealed one.<sup>43</sup>

Concerning the question, to what extent it is Pelagianism, if faith is seen as a middle term (*Mittelglied*), so that the moving cause (*Bewegende*) in election is not faith in and of itself, but Christ apprehended by faith and his merit, it was answered: By that one still says God is conditioned by something (*Damit setzt man doch eine Bedingung in Gott*). Faith is certainly a middle term, but if one says that God has elected in view of faith, then faith is not a middle term, but a condition. One may distinguish ever so subtly, a certain causality is still ascribed to faith.<sup>44</sup> We find, however, nothing said in the Scripture, that we will be saved on account of faith. Faith is means, not cause. Christ is the foundation of salvation, even if he is not apprehended in faith.

This, Huegli asserted, is the only way election can comfort us—if it teaches us that God alone is responsible for our salvation. Although reason is horrified by the true doctrine of election and considers God a tyrant, faith humbles itself and awaits eternity for God’s answer to the paradox.

The District also heard and approved the minutes of a discussion of *Bondage of the Will* in Michigan in 1867, which rejected the assertion that Luther had ever changed his position regarding free will.

The minutes, astonishingly, do not indicate that Fuerbringer even spoke, though the doctrine he had expounded at length was thoroughly repudiated. He skipped the Synodical conventions in 1870 and 1872. Huegli was elected District President in 1872, replacing Fuerbringer; Fuerbringer was returned to office in 1875. We do not hear from Fuerbringer about election again.

In 1871, the Northern District concluded its unfinished discussion of 1868. The essential points from the previous conference were reiterated.

The words which say, that the elect come to the means of grace, do not deny that many of those who are lost come to the means of grace. This, then, should be said against the Calvinists, who teach an absolute election, and maintain that also such [elect] are saved who have not heard God’s Word. God does not save without the Word . . . Without God’s Word nothing happens.

. . . Election is the cause of everything that happens for the salvation of the elect; it is the cause that everyone comes to repentance; it is also the cause if one who has fallen away comes to repentance again. The cooperation of believers is a consequence of election, because it is the cause, that the believers receive an amount of spiritual power and then cooperate through it . . . Prevenient grace unavoidably [inevitably-*unvermeidlich*] affects those who are themselves in the midst of sin, as Paul in the middle of his persecution of Christians was laid hold of by grace. In the case of those who come to faith, the working grace then enters in, in which case however the person indeed still does nothing for himself, after that however the cooperating grace enters in, because the person himself

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<sup>43</sup> The paradox is again placed in the hidden counsels of God, and removed from the hearts of men. Then Luther’s fence at the edge of the abyss is repaired.

<sup>44</sup> The gray area the dogmaticians had tried to create is exposed.

now desires to do good, so the Holy Spirit leads him, becomes his leader and instructor... That some are saved happens out of the pure election of grace, apart from all consideration of men on the part of God . . . An elect person is, in and of himself just as detestable and unworthy as any other . . . Election alone is the cause of the faith of the elect; because of it an elect believes right up to the end, or, if he would fall from faith, still he comes to faith again before his end.

Through Walther's article, and Huegli's vigorous assertion of Walther's views at these conferences, Missouri sought to return to the pure doctrine of the Formula of Concord. This did not yet evoke public reaction within Missouri. But it could hardly be expected that such an open assault on the doctrine of the Lutheran dogmaticians would go unchallenged for long.

### **V The Missouri-Iowa Controversy, 1870-1873**

The election controversy erupted because of a footnote in an article that had nothing to do with election. In 1870, Gottfried Fritschel of the Iowa Synod was trouncing Walther in a dispute about charging interest, which Walther personally considered unscriptural. They were carrying on the dispute in *Theologische Monatshefte*, which its editor hoped would be a forum for resolving theological differences so that American Lutherans could all unite.

Fritschel's footnote read in part:

It would be laughable if today someone wanted to deny that in his earlier period Luther adhered to the particularistic doctrine of election from which he quietly withdrew after 1527. Yet our opponents think that they have to approve and defend Luther's book *De Servo Arbitrio*, 1525, not only with regard to the doctrine of the bondage of man's will... but also with regard to the doctrine of predestination which it contains. Indeed we are of the opinion that he who adopts . . . this book's absolute statements on predestination can only have a false doctrine of election. The Missourian synodical report to which we refer is indeed full of strange and offensive statements about the doctrine of predestination.

Since Luther was attacked in the footnote, Huegli summarized Luther's doctrine in *Bondage of the Will* in ten theses. He proved that, as we have seen, Luther did not teach double predestination, but upheld the universal nature of the Gospel. Yet in his theses he insisted we also see the other side of the paradox of grace, as Luther did, and in doing so gave a good view of Missouri's definition of the paradox of grace.

4) Because men have fallen into infinite corruption, no one can attain to this faith unless it is given to him by God. Moreover, without God's gracious preservation no one can persevere in this faith even for a moment, much less be saved.

5) God has elected from eternity, without consideration of worthiness or unworthiness and out of pure grace for Christ's sake, all those who will come to this faith, persevere in it, and finally be saved, and has resolved to prompt them to believe, to preserve them in this faith, and to save them eternally.

7) Reason, indeed, cannot make sense of this: God says on the one hand, that He is gracious to all people and earnestly desires the salvation of all men; on the other hand,

however, he claims the full, unrestricted right to show mercy on whom he wants to show mercy, and to harden the hearts of whom he wants. [In this regard he went on to say that God is active, not merely permissive, in man's hardening.] Experience confirms the fact that *God does not remove the resistance against his word from many millions of people, though he could have done it as easily as in the case of the elect, since by nature they are in the same state of corruption and are not better than the others.* If we look at God from this side, he indeed is a hidden God, and completely incomprehensible. [Emphasis added]

8) However, it is not proper for us to search for the hidden God, i.e., God so far as He has not desired to reveal himself.

10) Though in the light of reason the hidden will of God often seems to contradict the revealed God, we should nonetheless believe steadfastly that God does not contradict himself, that everything which he has revealed to us in the Scriptures about himself is the eternal truth on which we can steadfastly rely, even if his hidden activity itself often seems so very contradictory to it [his revealed will].

### Iowa's Position

The footnote and Huegli's response set off a controversy between the Missouri and Iowa Synods that lasted for over three years. One of Iowa's articles came from its Vice-President, Deindorfer. He asserted that the Formula entirely rejects Luther's concept of the hidden will, which is not essentially different from Calvinism. Rather,

The limit of our knowledge with regard to the divine will is expressed by the statement that God desires the salvation of all people and with regard to the human will, that grace means everything in man's conversion. God causes man's volition, and yet, the nature of man's will is maintained. Man's will, which is part of his essence, has existed even before the fall, and its continuity is not suspended at the moment of conversion: "You did not want to come to me." [Matt. 23:37; he means to prove that those who do come wanted to.] Grace is not compelling.

To Deindorfer, election is God's decree to save those he foresees will receive Christ by faith, and to condemn those he foresees will reject the word and resist the Holy Spirit. "Yet if it is said that God elects in view of faith, this does not mean that God . . . takes man's attitude toward the means of grace into consideration, but rather that he looks at the divinely intended result which his means of grace bring about in man, i.e. faith." In other words, man's election hinges on his faith, man's coming to faith hinges on his attitude, but his election does not hinge on his attitude. He is solidly in the confusing gray area of the dogmaticians.

Deindorfer attacks an error no Lutheran had made—that God "forces" man to come to faith. Luther, in *Bondage of the Will*, specifically denied this; whether Satan or God rides the human will, man obeys gladly and willingly. By saying that God only draws and invites in the Gospel, and that man's attitude determines whether or not this drawing or calling succeeds, Deindorfer is insisting that man must have a moment of neutrality to choose, or the integrity of his free will is not maintained—much as Fuerbringer had.<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> C.S. Lewis' widely quoted statement that God wants willing children, not unwilling slaves or robots, is similarly used to import synergism into his theology.

Fritschel's articles represented the same position more clearly and consistently. His view of the paradox of grace:

The reason why of two men who hear the gospel one is freed from resistance and death whereas the other is not, lies not in a certain secret, hidden will of God who just happens to choose these men—though we know not why—but in the will of man. The reason for it is that the one persistently, stubbornly and wantonly resists the grace of God, whereas the other permits the Holy Spirit to overcome his natural resistance. The reason for the difference is to be found in man's free self-determination, though this self-determination is made possible through grace.

Conversion cannot be achieved as long as man wantonly resists. God does not force his grace on man. But it is not of necessity that man's natural resistance increases to stubborn, wanton resistance. This wanton resistance—regardless at which point in the process of conversion it sets in and in which form it appears, whether open or hidden—is the decision man makes. At this point he himself decides his eternal destiny.

Fritschel admitted that election *intuitu fidei* can be misunderstood in a Pelagian sense. But it must not of necessity be interpreted this way. He insisted that distinguishing between natural and wanton resistance, and teaching that man's will is active during conversion, is the only way to avoid both Pelagianism and double predestination. Self-determination is simply non-resistance, he said, or perhaps more accurately lack of wanton resistance. But non-resistance is not an effective or meritorious cause of salvation, just the explanatory reason. "It would be nonsense to say that the mercy of God accounts for the difference between the two persons." He assailed the words "as easily as" in Huegli's seventh thesis<sup>46</sup> as a mockery of the teaching that God earnestly desires to save all. In terms of the paradox of grace, he effectively denies the equal guilt of all men.

His view of election follows quite naturally. After describing a general election of the means of salvation for all as the dogmatists had, he went on:

If election is understood as an election of individuals, this election is defined more closely in this way: God has from eternity predestined to eternal life all those whose faith in Christ he has foreseen. Hence he has—according to his free grace—ordained the elect to eternal life *ex praevisa fide*. The others, whose wanton resistance he has foreseen, were predestined by him to their just condemnation.

As the controversy wore on, he tried to refute Walther's accusation he was synergistic. He said the whole work of salvation from beginning to completion is in no way based on man's attitude but only on God's grace; even man's longing for salvation is a work of prevenient grace. However, he refused to accept Missouri's doctrine of election, which he called absolute predestination. That this position is utterly self-contradictory is illustrated in Fritschel's own description of the *status controversiae*:

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<sup>46</sup> "God does not remove resistance against his word from many millions of people, though he could have done it *as easily* as in the case of the elect, since by nature they are in the same state of corruption..."

[Missouri's] teaching is opposed by the other view: God gives his salvation to man out of entirely free grace. Man cannot contribute in any way to its acquisition. Salvation is an entirely free gift and in no way whatsoever can its cause be found in man or his attitude but solely in God's free mercy. God sincerely desires to bestow his grace upon both men who are equally deep in sin and hear the Word of God in like manner. Why is God's desire for man's salvation not materialized in the case of the one as it is in the case of the other? Answer: The reason cannot be sought in God's hidden will which cannot be fathomed but finds its explanation in the different attitudes of both men. The reason for the difference between the two persons cannot be found with God, neither with his will nor his absolute choice which disregards all human behavior. But the diverse destinies are to be explained by the different attitudes of both. For this reason the one, who heard the word of God just the same, is not saved because he wantonly resisted God's grace . . . But with the other one God's work of grace was successful for he did not wantonly resist. However, his salvation is neither earned by him nor caused by anything within him; it is and remains entirely a gift of free grace.

The two statements of Missouri he especially despised were Huegli's seventh thesis stated above<sup>47</sup>, and another of Huegli's statements, "it must always remain a secret why God has not chosen all men as his children, since he has the power to remove from all sinners even the most wanton resistance, as he really does in the case of the elect." He claimed that both statements make a mockery of God's will to save all men, teach irresistible grace, deny that the Gospel is equally efficacious for all, and makes conversion an act of divine force and deprives it of its ethical character.

Fritschel said that Luther's error was not the same as Calvin's because to Calvin, election was the central doctrine. Luther started from his belief in natural corruption and monergistic grace, and unnecessarily concluded that the faithful are chosen by God's unconditional grace, and the rest are left in perdition due to God's unsearchable, majestic decree. But this is not an integral part of his theology, and can be rejected without losing the rest.

He pointed out that there was also a difference regarding the term free grace. Free grace, he said, does not mean God freely selects some people for salvation and simply passes others by, which teaching he ascribed to Missouri. It means mercy without cost. (Though Walther does not seem to have quoted it, the Augsburg Confession says, "Through the Word and Sacraments, as through instruments, the Holy Ghost is given, who works faith, *where and when it pleases God*, in them that hear the Gospel."<sup>48</sup>)

He also constantly accused Missouri of calling the dogmaticians Pelagians, repeatedly citing portions of the 1868 Northern District Report, quoted above; this was an effort to show Missouri had left the doctrine of Lutheranism.

### **Missouri's Position**

Walther dug up a quotation from the theologian Heerbrand which summed up Missouri's position on the paradox of grace quite well:

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<sup>47</sup> [that God does not remove resistance from many] "though he could have done it as easily as in the case of the elect . . .

<sup>48</sup> Augsburg Confession, Article V, Triglot p. 45

If faith is solely a gift of God, why is it given to the one, and not to the other? Answer: God has reserved much for himself in this matter, which he has not revealed to us. Therefore we ought not give our reason its head, but rather must set it in place, from which we follow it up no further than is revealed to us in the Word. God does everything he can to will our salvation. Therefore he sent and sacrificed his Son as the Savior of the world. He has established the office of the Word, through which, according to his will, his Son is to be heard, and through the hearing of the Word he works faith through his Holy Spirit. Now if men are not willing to hear this [Word], then it is by no means surprising, as said above, that they are allowed to remain by the Holy Spirit [*liegen verlassen werden*], and so do not believe, are not saved . . .

Walther pointed out that Fritschel's teaching of self-determination and the distinction between wanton and natural resistance destroys the mystery *cur alii prae aliis* ("Why are some saved and others lost?") by rational arguments. In other words, Fritschel denies there is a paradox of grace. If the answer, as Fritschel insists, lies "simply and only in man's own, free decision foreseen by God," then there is no mystery. Modern theologians are proud, wrote Walther, of reconciling the paradox of grace, which so troubled the old teachers. He contended that they knew this harmonization exists, but rejected it because it contradicts God's Word.

Missouri stoutly defended the paradox of grace as we saw Luther expound it above, and as Walther and Huegli had reiterated it in 1863 and 1868, and assailed Fritschel for refusing to suppress the question, "Why does God, though everything depends on his mercy, take away death and resistance from some, and not others?" The question must be suppressed because Paul (Rom. 9:20) suppresses it.

Huegli and Walther spent the lion's share of their time speaking about the doctrine of conversion. Their attacks on Iowa's doctrine of self-determination came from several different directions.

First, before conversion one simply cannot speak of a free decision because man is spiritually dead. "In spite of all good impressions which man may receive before his conversion," wrote Huegli, "he cannot yet make a decision for salvation." Not until conversion has taken root does the possibility of decision exist.

Walther assailed the idea of human cooperation before conversion, because it makes faith a deed of man. He could agree with expression "man's own free decision," if it meant that in conversion man's will is prompted to be willing. But since Fritschel meant the ability of man's will, freed by prevenient grace, to decide for or against God, it is Pelagianism.

It cannot be said that man converts himself through the strength which he has received. For that strength is not given in advance so that man could afterwards be converted through it, but the donation of spiritual strength in essence constitutes conversion itself.

Fritschel's doctrine also rejected the Formula's pure passive. Fritschel spoke of a "generally recognized limitation of this phrase;" Walther called it an abandonment. Cooperation and passivity, Walther said, are mutually exclusive.

Finally, he said, Fritschel robs God and his grace of the glory for man's conversion. "Everything in man's conversion that is attributed to free will is diverted from divine grace." Fritschel may loudly proclaim *soli Deo gloria*; his teaching still makes it a hollow phrase.

Iowa taught a *status medius*—an intermediate status in which a person has been given an amount of spiritual freedom but is not yet converted. Conversion is then a process, not an event.

However, Walther said, Scripture knows nothing of an intermediate status in man. He is either under sin or under grace, either reborn or not reborn, either dead or alive.

Regarding election, Huegli had this to say about Eph. 1:3 & 11.

It is correct to say we are in Christ only by faith. But the leap would be too bold and big if we were to conclude from this truth that God permitted himself to be influenced in his election by the attitude of man. Then one would also be correct in maintaining that God permitted his election to be determined by the works which he foresaw because faith cannot be without works. We decidedly reject such an exegesis as mere juggling. It is only written that we are chosen in Christ, i.e., for the sake of Christ . . . Faith is taken into consideration in connection with our election, however, not as the cause of our election but as a means of salvation. God, by electing us, resolved in eternity to save us *through* faith, but not *because* he foresaw that we would believe . . . Our attitude has not determined God, but God's attitude has determined the elect.

Both Huegli and Walther denied that Missouri taught absolute election. For God did not elect in total disregard of man's attitude. Faith is a part of election; God elected man to faith, and will not save apart from it. Where Iowa spoke of an election of the means of salvation, Missouri (though they never used the term) spoke of an election to the means of salvation.

Huegli explained the *status controversiae* in this way: Iowa and Missouri agree that the lost are lost by their own fault, and that after conversion man has to some extent a free will to determine the good and do what pleases God. They disagree in answering two questions: To whom does man owe salvation, and why did God choose his elect? Missouri's answer is, solely and only the grace of God; Fritschel's is man's self-determination.

Fritschel had charged Missouri with calling the dogmatists Pelagian in the 1868 District Report. Walther responded that it was slander to say Missouri called the dogmatists Pelagian. Quoting his article of 1863, he said there is a difference between saying God elected those of whom he foreknew that they would believe, and saying he elected because they would believe or for the sake of their faith. The first is correct, he said, the second Pelagian.

But then he said:

“[We] cannot and will not adopt the fashion of teaching of our dogmatists of the seventeenth and eighteenth century. The Synod does so, not because it thinks that our faithful teachers had thereby intended to express a false, Pelagian doctrine, but because this theorem, as orthodox as it was understood by them, if taken seriously, contains something wrong, *viz.*, the doctrine which holds that the elect were chosen for the sake of their faith, that man's faith is the reason, cause and condition for his election to salvation.”

He proved that the dogmatists had their own reservations about the term *intuitu fidei*, and that most dogmatists who use the expression explain it doesn't mean that decree of election is influenced by man's faith as such, that is, as a work in man which motivates God to elect. In other words, what the dogmatists were saying and what Fritschel was teaching were two very different things.

## **VI Comments on the First Stage of the Controversy**

At this point in the controversy, all the theological cards were already on the table. Had the dogmatists been alive to see it, they would have shuddered to see the use that was made of *intuitu fidei*. But Iowa's baldly synergistic doctrine was the fruit of the dogmatists' work. Huegli said it well, "One may distinguish ever so subtly" regarding the role of foreseen faith in election, "one still ascribes a certain causality to faith."

One does wonder why the Missouri Synod men went to such pains to deny they were accusing the dogmatists of synergism. The 1868 report, as quoted above, certainly says an important part of their theology was Pelagian. One understands their desire to absolve these men, but all the essential ingredients for Iowa's position were there in the dogmatists—even wanton and natural resistance.

One sees a more important curiosity in the treatment of the term irresistible grace. Both sides knew they didn't believe in it, but didn't quite know why. Fritschel thought that because he didn't believe in it, he therefore believed in resistible grace. When he charged Missouri with teaching irresistible grace, they denied it because of its implicit denial of universal grace.

Walther would have been better served had he written that irresistible grace is a meaningless term because it straddles the paradox of grace. If you say grace is irresistible, then grace is not universal; if you say grace is resistible, you then have to look to different levels of human resistance to explain why some are lost and others are not. In fact, if one is serious about man's lack of free will, and serious about resistible grace, the only conclusion is that no one at all will be saved.

Grace is, in fact, neither irresistible nor resistible. The paradox of grace is that it overcomes resistance in some men but not in others—but all men receive the same grace. Or, conversely, some men succeed in resisting grace, others do not—but all offer the same resistance.

It is also interesting to note the range of terminology that came with Iowa's position. Their stress on the invitational nature of the Gospel, on the idea that God cannot use his omnipotence to convert or else man's conversion is meaningless from an ethical standpoint, the terms "decision" and "self-determination," are also in vogue today—among the so-called Evangelicals.

## **VII The Election Controversy Within the Synodical Conference and the Missouri Synod**

After the dispute between Iowa and Missouri died down in 1873, the controversy simmered on the back burner for a few years. Even during these "quiet years," however, one finds indications that the bodies in the Synodical Conference were not of one mind regarding the doctrine of election.

First of all, one might note an article by "Interpres" at the end of the Iowa-Missouri conflict. Interpres was none other than F.W. Stellhorn, the Missouri Synod's professor at Northwestern College until he was called to Ft. Wayne in 1874. Interpres argued against Fritschel's doctrine of human decision, saying that God must give man's will not only the strength, but also the desire, to come to him; God, therefore, must give not only strength for repentance, but repentance itself. Fritschel was able to profess agreement with all these expressions; in fact, he had clearly said he believed the longing for salvation is a work of prevenient grace. Interpres had misrepresented Fritschel in his objections.

Interpres agreed with Fritschel at every other point. He accepted faith as an instrumental cause of election. He said that man is converted freely, not with necessity. At a Missouri Synod

pastoral conference in Watertown, Stellohorn set forth the idea that “some measure of self-determination, even though it too was credited to the Holy Spirit, had to be posited, as the free moral act of a moment; only in that way could the responsibility of man over against the law of God be psychologically maintained.”<sup>49</sup> None of the pastors present could match Stellohorn. Then Hoenecke, who attended at Prof. Ernst’s request, took the floor. Stellohorn, “by Hoenecke’s animated gestures, was literally backed up against the wall of the church, where he sat down and admitted his defeat . . . the conference at this point heaved an audible sigh of relief and satisfaction.”<sup>50</sup> This admission proved to be quite fleeting.

Then came the defection of J. Klindworth from the Iowa Synod. In 1875 he accused Fritschel and other leaders in the Synod of untruthfulness and fraud and assailed them on points of doctrine not connected with election. After a special synodical committee found Klindworth’s charges false and slanderous, he left, and joined the Wisconsin Synod. His departure for the Ohio Synod later in the controversy indicates that when he came to Wisconsin, he still held to the substance of his attack on Missouri’s doctrine of election.

Another indication is the case of Professor Asperheim of the Norwegian Synod seminary in Madison. At a pastoral conference he made the remark that the Missouri Synod had weaknesses and imperfections like all other human institutions. When challenged to prove his remarks, he summed up his criticisms in four points. The third of these read,

There exists a tendency toward a certain dogmatic deformity which becomes especially evident in the Missouri Synod’s doctrine of election. By excluding faith as a factor in election, Missouri places itself in a dangerous middle position between the Calvinistic doctrine of predestination, and the Lutheran teaching as it is explained and developed by the later Lutheran dogmaticians, e.g., Gerhard.

Prof. F.A. Schmidt (note the name!) called Asperheim’s remarks a mentality which could not be tolerated in a teacher in the church. The Norwegian Synod dealt with Asperheim by calling him from the seminary to a parish in New York. Once again, a body in the Synodical Conference extended a divine call to a man who had publicly attacked the doctrine of the Conference’s leading member. As one might expect, then, renewed discussion of election re-ignited the controversy, this time within the Synodical Conference.

At its regular meeting in Altenburg, MO, in October, 1877, Missouri’s Western District devoted its doctrinal discussion time to election. The topic was supposed to be twelfth in a systematic series which would cover all points of doctrine, but several topics on the list were skipped because in Walther’s words, “one finds it necessary for the Synod to discuss thoroughly the doctrine of election.” The discussion, led by Walther, was based on these six theses:

1. Prior to the foundation of the world, God had decreed the conversion, justification and salvation of every Christian. This divine plan cannot fail.
2. The eternal election of God not only foresees and foreknows the salvation of the elect, but is also, from the gracious will and pleasure of God in Christ Jesus, a cause which procures, works, helps and promotes our salvation and what pertains thereto.
3. It conflicts with the Word of God when it is taught that not only the mercy of God and the most holy merit of Christ, but that also in us there is a cause of God’s election on account of which God has chosen us to eternal life, be that cause (a) man’s work or sanctification, (b) man’s proper use of the Means of Grace, (c) man’s

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<sup>49</sup> J.P. Koehler, *History of the Wisconsin Synod*, p. 157.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 158.

- self-determination, (d) man's desire [for salvation] and prayer, (e) man's non-resistance to grace, (f) man's faith.
4. The church condemns the teaching that God is unwilling that everyone should be saved, but that some, without regard to their sins, from the mere counsel, purpose and will of God, are ordained to condemnation. Rather, the church teaches that men's condemnation is their own fault because they have despised the word and resisted the Holy Ghost, who through the word wished to work in them. The cause for this contempt for the word is not God's foreknowledge or predestination but the perverse will of man.
  5. In addition to what has been revealed in Christ concerning election, God has still kept secret and concealed much concerning this mystery, and reserved it for his wisdom and knowledge alone, which we should not investigate . . . but should adhere to the revealed word of God, because we cannot harmonize it.
  6. The eternal election of God is to be considered in Christ, not outside of or without Christ.

The discussion shows that Walther had done a great deal of work on this doctrine. He was now able to say that in Romans 8:29, foreknow is a synonym of elect, which represents a change from his position in 1863 and in the conflict with Iowa. "Because through God's election it is already certain that someone gets into heaven, therefore God foreknows it."

In regard to man's condemnation, Walther said,

God has predestined no man to condemnation. He only predestines to life and salvation. It is true, our reason wants to conclude again and again: if man cannot contribute anything to his salvation, then God, consequently, must have predestined to condemnation the person who perishes. But a Christian is used to taking his reason captive under the obedience of faith . . . he humbly waits for eternity, when God will solve the riddle in a most beautiful and clear way. Indeed, these two tenets of Holy Scripture seem to contradict each other, that God out of mere grace has eternally chosen individual persons to salvation, and yet, that it is only man's fault if he perishes . . . We know there is a harmony [Einheit] of both tenets; for God has revealed both and no contradiction exists in God. Only we do not see the harmony. Indeed, here we are charged with inconsistency.

This is certainly superior to another statement from this report which would cause no end of trouble. "God has decided, these persons (whom he has from eternity chosen for salvation) shall and must be saved; and as certain as God is God will they be saved; but no one else, except them." The last clause certainly seems to make reprobation part of God's bare will, instead of part of his mysterious, inscrutable purpose for saving the elect.

He referred to Matt. 24:24 (false teachers would deceive even the elect, "if that were possible,"), "Indeed, there are enough reasons for being led astray . . . but election suppresses all fear and worry. Truly we should jump for joy when we read this passage, for what blessed people we are . . . God's providence is no mere foreknowledge, but a provision (*Vorsorge*) for salvation . . . You are a chosen one. Even though you should lose your faith now, you will not lose it forever, but you shall and must regain it. This is what Christ says to all elect." Regarding Acts 13:48 (when Paul preached in Pisidian Antioch, "as many as were ordained to eternal life

believed”), he made the excellent statement, “[These Gentiles] had obviously been ordained into the number of the elect from eternity, and therefore they now come to believe.” All of this was new material—the first indication that Walther had turned to Scripture, not just the dogmaticians and the Confessions.

However, he also reintroduced the distinction between natural and wanton resistance, which he had attacked in the dispute with Fritschel. “Man can not only do nothing for his conversion but also has the terrible power to resist—which we all do when God wants to convert us. Yet one has to distinguish between the natural and the wanton, malicious, stubborn resistance. God removes the former, but we will not be converted as long as we remain in the latter.”

“[Conversion] is not a matter of necessity and irresistible force, although it is unfailing . . . [God] promises to cause man’s decision for conversion if he is in the workshop of the Holy Spirit and sets no malicious resistance against the means of salvation.” Walther seems to be backing away from Huegli’s statement, “God removes even the most wanton resistance in the case of the elect.” In fact, by even using the term “wanton,” the previous statement is lending a certain legitimacy to the term. In fact, as he said in his third thesis, resistance is resistance in fallen, unregenerate man; non-resistance is not a condition of election or the conversion that stems from it.

Walther does not seem to realize the problem inherent in the idea of “resistible grace,” nor that speaking of “forced” conversion (which only exists in the imagination of a Calvinist) leads one into the very trap Fritschel was in—that only a measure of human self-determination makes conversion ethically real. He seeks to avoid the charge of absolute predestination by again putting a condition in man’s conversion, as the dogmaticians had. For he also goes on to say, “Non-resistance is in no way our work, but the work of God produced in us, a work which we can only resist.” Here he is closer than he would like to speaking of the paradox in conversion as a psychological mystery in man, instead of a divine mystery as he did above.

He again defended the dogmaticians, arguing that Gerhard “did not mean to say faith is a moving cause of election.” But this was also true of Walther’s opponents. The real question is whether it is possible to see faith as a merely instrumental cause of election.

All in all, though, the discussion at Altenberg was a good restatement of Missouri’s position, with new material and insight brought to bear on the question. The statement that God’s foreseeing of faith rests on his election, repudiated *intuitu fidei* and its implications more clearly than before.

This discussion was followed by a series of articles in *Lehre und Wehre* on election, conversion, free will, *Bondage of the Will*, and Pelagianism. Walther realized that the Missouri Synod, and the Synodical Conference, founded at the height of the dispute with Iowa in 1872, needed to come to grips with the false approach to the paradox of grace represented by *intuitu fidei*.

As the Western District Report circulated, some began expressing opposition. Most important among them were F.A. Schmidt, professor at the Norwegian Synod seminary in Madison, Schmidt’s brother-in-law H.A. Allwardt, a Missouri Synod pastor in Lebanon, Wisconsin, and Stellhorn, who was now at Ft. Wayne.

Allwardt always claimed that he arrived at his position through private study alone. However, Lebanon’s proximity to Madison makes it hard to believe he was not influenced by his outspoken relative and friend. At any rate, he presented his views at the fall, 1879 pastoral conference of the Northwestern District in Oshkosh. No conclusions were reached there; the

discussion was carried over to the following year. Allwardt said he considered the doctrinal error serious, but would continue private discussions for years if necessary.

Schmidt is an interesting character. He had served as the Norwegian Synod's professor at St. Louis beginning in 1872 and fought hard against Iowa at that time. In 1876, he was moved to the new Norwegian Synod seminary in Madison. After he brutally rebuked Prof. Asperheim for questioning Missouri's doctrine of election, his motion at the pastoral conference forced his colleague's ouster from the Seminary in Madison in February, 1878.

However, Schmidt changed sides, and his motive seems to have been quite personal. In early 1878, the English professorship in St. Louis was open. Schmidt wanted the call. He sent a postcard to one of the members of the selection committee, asking the man not to consider the Norwegian Synod's needs by not calling him. He wrote that if he did not get the call to St. Louis, which he preferred, he expected to receive and accept a call to Columbus. (Neither call materialized; the Norwegians were blessed with him until 1887. No postcard describing their sentiments is extant.)

His attack on Asperheim occurred during this vacancy. When the committee met in May, he didn't get the call; by fall he was publishing articles in the *Lutheran Standard* (Ohio Synod) about crypto-Calvinism. On January 2, 1879, he wrote Walther and said he could "no longer remain silent" about his opposition to Missouri's doctrine of election. So at Walther's request, he drew up four theses to express his understanding of the Western District Report, and antitheses to express his objections. The two men met after the July, 1879 meeting of the Synodical Conference in Columbus, Ohio.

We will take up Schmidt's objections presently. The meeting led nowhere, and Schmidt was asked not to write publicly until another meeting could be arranged. He would not give his word, saying his reaction would depend on the outcome of the Western District meeting that fall, when the incomplete discussion from 1877 would be concluded.

The 1879 Wisconsin Synod pastoral conference (which was made annual in view of the battle on the horizon) instructed the delegates to the Synodical Conference to ask for correction of certain statements in the 1877 report. As we shall see, because of the ill health of the Conference's president, this request received no official response until 1881.

At the 1879 meeting of the Western District, Walther admitted that because the previous discussion was incomplete, certain statements in the 1877 report could well be unclear and even offensive, especially to someone who was not at the meeting. Unfortunately, he made a bad situation far worse. By and large, the 1879 Report reflects the ideas expressed in 1877, and adds several more questionable statements that fanned the flames of the growing controversy.

Quoting Sebastian Schmidt, Walther said that the elect receive a "richer grace" from God than do the non-elect. All men receive a grace that is sufficient to save them; man's wanton resistance is the reason for the damnation of the lost. But they have no right to complain that they did not receive the richer grace; God owes them nothing and can do whatever he pleases.

Regarding the phrase, "God predestines to faith," Walther said only the Reformed teach that God does not consider faith at all in his election, but elects and rejects men as in a military muster. Lutherans mean that God eternally chooses the elect for salvation through faith, and that if God had not done this, no one would be saved. So far, so good. But he then maintained that if the non-elect would hear the Word often, commune, and receive absolution, it would all be in vain. He is expanding on the phrase from 1877, ". . . as certainly as God is God, so certainly will [the elect] be saved; but no one else, except them."

In better terms, he said that all Christians can and should be certain of their election, by looking to the Gospel revealed in Christ as Luther did. Certainty of election is identical to certainty of salvation, he said, and this unshakable certainty is based on the sure and certain promises of Christ.

He split hairs again, though, when he said this certainty is unconditional and complete, but not absolute. He was trying to say that this certainty is faith's certainty of God's faithfulness, not fleshly security. He would have been much better served to express the paradox of grace at this point: the Gospel teaches I can never fall from faith due to God's grace. The Law teaches I certainly can fall, because I am so weak and sinful. We visit the Law to crush our flesh, and then dwell in the certainty and confidence of the Gospel. His terms confuse, rather than explain, his position.

Without naming names, Walther lashed out at his opponents on this point:

Faith says, "Indeed, I know I could still perish in a thousand ways. But he who has begun a good work in me will also bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ . . . [those who say there is no certainty of election] seem as if they were bright heads and humble spirits, yet, it only seems so . . . Those people want to rap us over the knuckles because in their opinion we have such a doctrine of election; but they have none at all. On account of the uncertainty of election [they teach], they abolish the doctrine itself.

He then called on the pastors of his Synod to decide between the two teachings, "He who wants to believe the word of God, may come to us; yet, he who wants to make it plausible to reason may go to those who deny the certainty of election." The 1879 Report is riddled with such ill-advised statements.

One should realize that Walther was under immense pressure. He'd been continuously involved in doctrinal controversies for over 30 years. Now, for the first time, his own Synod was threatened, as was the Synodical Conference, his life's dream become reality. For the first time, Walther could not rely on the dogmaticians. Since he was primarily a restorer of the old Lutheran faith, his primary theological resource had always been the writings of the Fathers. Now that method would not serve, though he valiantly tried to make it serve. Most of his poorer statements are taken from other men's writings; his search for a reliable systematic dogmatician to cite was simply fruitless. Finally, Schmidt's defection over the St. Louis call was nothing less than betrayal by a beloved colleague and protege—he'd grown up in Walther's Trinity congregation, married Walther's daughter, and taught and fought at Walther's side.

Walther's problems invite our sympathy, but the effects were still disastrous. It undoubtedly became an open secret who Walther's opponents were; certainly Allwardt's district brethren knew. While Schmidt's semi-public circulation of his theses was out of line, Walther's words ended all possibility of dealing with the controversy in private.

Schmidt and Allwardt considered the 1879 District Report a declaration of war. The first issue of Schmidt's *Altes und Neues*, appeared in January, 1880. This polemical monthly bombshell would shatter the unity of the Synodical Conference.

In his preface to the first issue, Schmidt wrote that it was being published to oppose the Missouri Synod's false teaching of election. Especially in the 1879 Western District Report, he said, false doctrine "has reached its full maturity," calling it "crypto-Calvinistic leaven which is dangerous to one's soul."

Schmidt felt the keynote of Missouri's false doctrine was the statement in the 1868 Northern District Report, "God is not conditioned by anything." He claimed he openly opposed this doctrine at the time.<sup>51</sup> The Western District Reports showed him that Missouri's unconditional election not only meant God's free determination of the order of salvation, but also the election of individual persons without consideration (i.e. *intuitus*) of men's different attitudes toward grace. It is simply impossible to believe this was news to Schmidt.

In Missouri's view, he wrote, the election of individual people is not dependent on eternal foreknowledge of faith, but on free, unconditioned divine election. He scored Walther's statements about the "richer grace" given the elect, as well as the two statements Fritschel had found so offensive ten years before. He claimed these teachings were quite dangerous to faith, because they make election a rival to the salvation offered in the means of grace, and therefore undermine the comfort derived from God's general will of grace. It leads the tempted Christian away from the comfort of the revealed Gospel to comfortless despair, because one cannot know whether he has received the "richer grace." He also said Missouri's doctrine led to fleshly security.

One notices that Schmidt made the same accusations Fritschel and Asperheim had. Only the ammunition Walther gave him in the 1879 District Report was new. Less than twelve months after railroading Asperheim out of the Madison seminary for calling Missouri's doctrine of election "a dangerous middle ground between Calvinism . . . and the later Lutheran dogmaticians," he himself was doing and saying the very same thing with far greater vehemence and venom.

In many of his articles, Schmidt stressed that man cannot be certain he has been elected to eternal life in the narrow sense; i.e., that God has foreseen he will persevere in the faith. He can only be sure that he is part of God's general election; i.e. that he is included in God's universal will of salvation, which has ordained the means of grace to call sinners to salvation. He quotes Luther:

"Therefore let anyone who thinks that he stands take heed lest he fall (I Cor. 10:12)." This is a sermon against the self-assured spirits . . . To those he says: No, dear brother, do not think too certain and secure of yourself that you stand. Because if you think you stand fastest you are indeed closest to your fall and you may fall in such a way that you cannot rise again . . . You have merely begun and not yet reached the end. Therefore you must be concerned, must be brave and fight here [on earth] in order to work out your own salvation with fear and trembling, as Paul says.

Schmidt maintained that Luther never said a Christian can receive unailing certainty of his election in the narrow sense, that in fact he teaches the opposfe—one can never say who will persevere to the end. One can be certain that God will not fail to do anything that promotes our salvation, but not certain whether we ourselves will persevere in faith. Our certainty of election can only be hypothetical, "If I persevere in faith, I am elect." He did prove this last was the teaching of the dogmaticians.

He asserted that the vocable ~x.1Eyoyai means that reprobation and election must flow from a common source:

It is simply impossible that election should be accomplished and materialized at a different point of the whole counsel of God from nonelection, so that the elect would already be

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<sup>51</sup> Koehler agrees (p. 157), but cites no evidence; I believe he is taking Schmidt at his word. However, Haug's documentary evidence compellingly indicates otherwise, and if Haug has any bias, it is against Walther. In addition, if Schmidt told the truth, his treatment of Asperheim was staggeringly hypocritical.

ordained to salvation whereas the reprobate would not be condemned until later . . . or that election as selection of the ones from the others would have taken place before the question could be asked whether one believes or does not believe (since this election is to be an election to faith and faith issues from election), whereas non-election or reprobation of the remaining men would have to be placed only after the decision of the question whether one believes or does not believe (because reprobation presupposes stubborn unbelief).

His conclusion was that if one interprets Luther's words in Preface to *Romans* as referring to election of individuals, like Missouri, then it issues from divine providence that some do not believe, which is Calvinism. Schmidt insisted that both election and reprobation must come from the same divine decision. (This from a man who accuses others of Calvinism!) They are two different sides of one divine action. Election must not be considered simply a determination to salvation (!). So when Missouri says that election causes faith, but foreseen unbelief causes reprobation, it is denying the essential meaning of the vocable *eklogomai*. And then, quoting Walther's richer grace statement and the one that said, ". . . these shall be saved as certainly as God is God, but not the others," he claimed to have proven Missouri's essential agreement with Calvinism. He also said that Missouri's teaching of richer grace was the same as the Calvinists' limited atonement, and that Huegli's statement that God overcomes even the most wanton resistance in the case of the elect was Calvinistic irresistible grace.

He claimed the support of the Formula for his view in a simple way. The portions that speak of election as a cause of salvation, he said, speak of God's eternal election of the means of salvation, that is, that God had decided from eternity to save men by calling them to faith in Christ through the Gospel. When the Formula urges us to consider our election only in view of the revealed will of God to save all, he says this proves we must dismiss the notion of an unconditional election of men to salvation without foresight of their faith. Like Fritschel, he all but denies there is anything mysterious about it; in fact, he uses many of the same statements from the Formula, and from Missouri, as Fritschel did. He never, however, mentioned this man he had attacked so vehemently but whose views he now shared.

Allwardt's work was far more peace-loving and objective than Schmidt's, though his position was all but identical. He made some crucially important statements, however, that demonstrate he had thought the question through in a way Schmidt had not.

According to Allwardt, *intuitu fidei* is the only alternative to considering election a "blind catch out of mankind." But he immediately says that the question turns on what the Confessions mean by the term "election." If the Formula speaks of election in two senses (*praedestinatio mediorum* and *praedestinatio personarum intuitu fidei*—the two senses the dogmaticians, Schmidt and Fritschel used), then he, Allwardt, is right. But if the Formula speaks of election only as an election of certain persons to eternal life, then, he admits, the Missouri Synod's doctrine is correct. He then quoted the Formula, XI, 9,<sup>52</sup> which says that election is not to be considered only with regard to the hidden will of God, as though nothing more than his bare will were involved in it.

This "more," he said, is found in paragraphs 15-22, which urge us to consider election only in connection with the revealed will of God to save all men by calling them to faith through

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<sup>52</sup> "Nor is this ordination to eternal life to be considered in God's secret, inscrutable counsel in such a bare manner as though it comprised nothing further, or as though nothing more belonged to it, and nothing more were to be considered in it, than that God foresaw who and how many were to be saved, who and how many were to be damned, or that He only held a [sort of military] muster, thus: 'This one shall be saved, that one shall be damned; this one shall remain steadfast [in faith to the end], that one shall not remain steadfast.'" (Triglot, p. 1065)

the Gospel. (However, paragraph 9 speaks of a way of teaching election that is forbidden, that is not right in any sense. Allwardt claims it is describing election in the narrow sense properly, but admonishing us not to think much about it.) He admitted that paragraph 23 seems to support Missouri's position.<sup>53</sup> But in speaking of the "way just mentioned," he said, it really means that paragraphs 15-22 are an explanation of election in the wide sense.

These are the essentials of the Schmidt-Allwardt position. They also enjoyed comparing Missouri's more extreme statements to the Calvinistic Synod of Dort. Schmidt dragged out his notes from Walther's lectures (1853-1854), in which the twofold sense of election and the election of individuals *intuitu fidei* was affirmed, and Fuerbringer's article, to prove that Missouri's doctrine had changed. He also pointed out that Baier's Compendium was still Walther's dogmatics textbook, though it taught election *intuitu fidei*, and that Dietrich's catechism, used in many Missouri Synod congregations, taught it as well.

Walther responded with a superb effort. His thirteen theses on election became the document around which the Synodical Conference rallied.

1. We believe, teach and confess that God has loved the whole world from eternity, created all men for salvation and none for condemnation, and earnestly desires the salvation of all men. Therefore we wholeheartedly reject and condemn the contrary Calvinistic error.
2. We believe, teach, and confess that the Son of God came into the world for the sake of all men, bore and atoned for the sins of all men, and perfectly redeemed all men without exception. Therefore we wholeheartedly reject and condemn the contrary Calvinistic error.
3. We believe, teach, and confess that God earnestly calls all men through the means of grace, i.e., he calls them with the purpose that through the means of grace they may come to repentance and faith, remain in faith to the end, and thus finally be saved. To this end God offers them through the means of grace the salvation earned by Christ's satisfaction, and the strength to apprehend this salvation by faith. Therefore we wholeheartedly reject and condemn the contrary Calvinistic teaching.
4. We believe, teach, and confess that no man will perish because God did not desire to save him, passed him by with his grace, and did not offer him the grace of perseverance because he did not want to give it to him, rather that all men who will perish, will be lost on account of their own fault, i.e., because of their unbelief and their stubborn resistance to the word and grace to the end. Therefore we wholeheartedly reject and condemn the contrary Calvinistic teaching.
5. We believe, teach, and confess that the object of election or predestination is the true believers who sincerely believe to the end or at their life's end. Therefore, we reject and condemn Huber's error that election is not particular but general and referring to all men.
6. We believe, teach, and confess that the divine counsel of election is unchangeable and that, consequently, no chosen person can become a reprobate and perish, but that

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<sup>53</sup> "And in this counsel, purpose, and ordination God has prepared salvation not only in general, but has in grace considered and chosen to salvation each and every person of the elect who are to be saved through Christ, also ordained that in the way just mentioned He will, by His grace, gifts, and efficacy, bring them thereto [make them participants of eternal salvation], aid, promote, strengthen, and preserve them." (Triglot, p. 1069).

- every chosen man will certainly be saved. Therefore, we wholeheartedly reject and condemn the contrary Huberian error.
7. We believe, teach, and confess that it is foolish and dangerous to one's soul, leading either to fleshly security or to despair, if one wants to become certain of his election or future eternal salvation by searching the eternal, hidden counsel of God. Therefore we wholeheartedly reject and condemn the contrary doctrine as an injurious enthusiasm.
  8. We believe, teach, and confess that a true Christian should seek to become certain of his election in the revealed will of God. Therefore we wholeheartedly reject and condemn the contrary Papist heresy that one can only become certain of his election or salvation through a new, direct revelation.
  9. We believe, teach, and confess that (1) election does not consist in the mere divine foreknowledge of those men who will be saved; (2) election is not the mere purpose of God to redeem and save men so that it would be a general election extending over all men; (3) election does not refer to the temporary believers (Luke 8:13); (4) election is not a mere counsel of God to save those who will believe to the end. Therefore we wholeheartedly reject and condemn the contrary false doctrine of the rationalists, Huberians, and Arminians.
  10. We believe, teach, and confess that the cause, which moved God to choose the elect, is only his grace and Christ's merit, and not something good in them foreseen by God, not even faith foreseen by God. Therefore we wholeheartedly reject and condemn the contrary teachings of the Pelagians, semi-Pelagians, and synergists as blasphemous, horrific heresies which overturn the Gospel and, consequently, the whole Christian religion.
  11. We believe, teach, and confess that election is not only the mere, divine foresight or foreknowledge of the salvation of the elect, but also a cause of their salvation and of everything that belongs to it. Therefore we wholeheartedly reject and condemn the contrary teachings of the Arminians, Socinians, and all synergists.
  12. We believe, teach, and confess that with reference to the secret of election God has "still kept secret and concealed much and reserved it for his wisdom and knowledge alone" [Formula, XI, 52], which no man can nor should investigate. Therefore, we reject if one desires to fathom what is not revealed and to rhyme with his reason what seems to contradict our reason; no matter whether this is done by Calvinistic or Pelagian, synergistic human teachings.
  13. We believe, teach, and confess that it is not only not useless or even dangerous but also necessary and salutary to explain publicly to the Christian people this mysterious doctrine of election as far as it is clearly revealed in God's word. Therefore we do not side with those who maintain that this doctrine should either be totally concealed or only discussed among men of learning.

Without mentioning his opponents, Walther's theses clearly rejected the charges they were leveling at him. His restraint is admirable; in the months during which these articles were appearing in *Der Lutheraner* (the laymen's magazine—an indication of how widely the fire had spread), Walther was labeled a Calvinist, an inventor of new heresies, and worse.

In connection with thesis six, Walther said he still rejected the term absolute necessity in favor of unailing necessity, and finally explained why. He considered "absolute" a description

of the blind Calvinistic decree or of some perfection in the elect, which makes falling away impossible. By “unfailing” he meant that the preserving power of God, Christ’s intercession and power, and the certainty and immutability of God’s eternal counsel make the salvation of the elect necessary.

The theses need little additional comment, except perhaps for how they square with Luther’s statements discussed at the beginning of this paper. Thesis seven is explained with a quotation from the Commentary on Genesis; thesis eight also squares well with what Luther said there. (Walther quotes Luther’s exposition of I Peter 1:2, which clearly shows their agreement.) Thesis twelve clearly asserts there is a hidden God in all this, whom we should not investigate; Luther said as much.

However, the Preface to Romans seems to contradict thesis ten. Walther said in his development of the thesis that Luther’s statement denotes election as the cause of faith, but does not mean unbelief also stems from election, and leaves it at that. This bare assertion says too little; if Luther’s *providentia* or *Vorsehung* is seen as meaning only election, it is untenable.

This writer believes that Luther is not talking about election so much as he is talking about divine providence, and seeing election as a species of the genus providence. “It comes from divine providence whether one believes or not, is rid of sin or not rid of it,” but not in the same way. As Luther explained in *Bondage of the Will*, God’s providence in the case of the hardened assists his gracious purpose in election. Walther is right on the money when he says Luther is not teaching double predestination, but is saying that we are saved because of God’s election. I can find no statement, though, where Walther explains this terse assertion.

In other articles, Walther for the first time demonstrated that the later dogmaticians erred in making *prognoskw* refer to the foreknowledge of faith, instead of the act of divine election. Wisconsin’s Graebner also wrote that the dogmaticians’ doctrine “stands or falls with the interpretation of *prognoskw* as simple foreknowledge,” and proves it wrong on the basis of Acts 2:23.<sup>54</sup>

Stoeckhardt proved that *eklogomai* and its derivatives, by both etymology and usage, mean selecting some from a larger group. This makes the concept of an election in the wide sense a *contradictio in adjecto* (contradiction in terms)—a choice of some sinners, that is said to embrace all sinners, is an absurdity. Regarding certainty of election, he noted that in Eph. 1:4 “he elected us” refers to all Christians Paul addressed in the letter. He regarded them all as chosen even though there were many who may well have been hypocrites or temporary believers in the congregation (just as a Pastor announces absolution to a group that may well include hypocrites, promises eternal life to some who will fall away). He showed that the interpretation of Rom. 8:29, “Whom God foreknew (that they would believe),” is bottomless exegesis.

In another article, he addressed the distinction made between wide and narrow senses of election in the Formula. Paragraphs 13-24, he said, simply show the way God has decided to lead his elect to salvation. The universal promise of the Gospel is the presupposition for the doctrine of election, he said, not included in the definition of election. He finally winds up where Luther had in 1516 regarding the right use of the doctrine of election,

He who can judge spiritual things spiritually and is able to experience in his heart the secret of godliness, understands the admonition, “Work out your own salvation with fear

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<sup>54</sup> “[Christ] was handed over to you by God’s set purpose and foreknowledge, and you with the help of wicked men put him to death by nailing him to the cross.” Far more than knowledge before the fact was involved in Jesus’ crucifixion.

and trembling,” and the firm statement and promise, “God is at work in you both to will and to act according to his good purpose” [Phil 2:12]—the admonition to “make one’s calling and election sure” and the comforting doctrine of the certainty and immutability of election—harmonize very well.

Walther also addressed the varying interpretations of the Formula. Paragraph 88 says, “It is false and wrong when it is taught . . . that also in us there is a cause of God’s election . . . [By God’s grace election is a cause which] promotes our salvation and what pertains thereto [using Acts 13:48 as a proof passage].” Though faith is not expressly mentioned, Walther said, only blind obstinacy can deny that faith is something “in us,” and is included in “what pertains to our salvation.” Acts 13:48 would not be a proof passage for the paragraph if it did not prove that election causes faith, hence is election only in the narrow sense.

Walther rejected his opponents’ charge that the statement, “God is not conditioned by anything,” teaches absolute election, because *in sensu, non in verbis, est haeresis*. However, he admitted it is liable to misinterpretation, and therefore withdrew it.

He also withdrew the statement, “Grace overcomes even the most wanton resistance [in the elect],” because he admitted it was not explained adequately, and open to the charge of teaching irresistible grace. However, it is still true that God could by his power convert all men. With exceptions like Paul and Abraham, though, he said all are called by the same grace, which must be considered sufficient to convert, but not always effective. He also corrected his language regarding the richer grace, saying that although grace does not work the same way in all men—the elect and some of the non-elect have received a richer grace<sup>55</sup>—nevertheless the grace of perseverance is also promised and offered to the non-elect.

He also pointed out that his opponents, if they truly believe that faith is a pure gift of God, also say that God, not man, meets all the conditions of election in the elect. Since they said predestination is absolute if it is “wholly and exclusively determined by God,” by their definition they also taught absolute predestination, or else left room for synergism in conversion.

Franz Pieper laid his finger on the problem in the whole approach of *intuitu fidei*. Theology in the true sense, he said, does not derive doctrines from one or more other doctrines, then use Scripture to test them. It is not, in that sense, a system of thought, although there is an inner connection between the various doctrines. Scripture is not only the norm, it is first and foremost the source of theology. Perfect insight into the connection and harmony between all doctrines must wait for eternity. Therefore, when Missouri’s opponents claim election must be understood according to the “analogy of faith,” they are mixing rationalism and theology. He also (finally!) applied the distinction between Law and Gospel to the statements of Scripture regarding certainty of election and the possibility of falling away from faith.

By the end of 1881, the positions of both sides in the controversy were clear. Missouri’s opponents charged that its doctrine expressed Calvinistic ideas of absolute election, irresistible and therefore limited grace, and perseverance of the saints in a manner that denied the possibility of falling. Some of Missouri’s statements were conducive to these charges, but were corrected.

However, their answer to Missouri’s doctrine, *intuitu fidei*, had the same flaws. If they took seriously the teaching that conversion is by grace alone, and that God elects in foreknowledge of faith, they wound up saying God elected some because he foreknew he would

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<sup>55</sup> Walther seems to think that because certain men, such as Paul and Abraham, were so central in God’s plan of salvation, God “took off the kid gloves” in converting them from idolatry. This is a variation on the “richer grace” idea discussed above.

give them faith—much the same paradox that Missouri taught. However, they claimed their doctrine avoided Missouri’s teaching of the paradox of grace. This is true only if there is a difference among men not caused by grace, a subtle but very real denial that all men’s wills are in bondage.

As the controversy wore on, Missouri’s opponents did end up giving unregenerate man some amount of freedom to “hold himself passive” in conversion. Once again, we see the distinction between God “forcing” men to believe and “inviting,” the *status medius* in conversion (e.g. Loy, “there are persons who have spiritual light and impulses without being children of God”), and the idea that the paradox *cur alli prae aliis* is in the mind or psychology of sinful man, not in the unfathomable mystery we call God. Once again, the phrase “human choice to resist or not to resist divine grace” cropped up. The error in election, inevitably, led to the error in conversion. Missouri’s opponents wound up in Fritschel’s camp—where Stelhorn had in essence been already in 1872.

### **Attempts to Mediate the Dispute**

The Ohio Synod tried to play the role of mediator as Walther and his fellows exchanged salvos with Schmidt, Stelhorn, and Allwardt. Already in February, 1880, the Ohio Synod’s Professor Loy had called for a special conference of all seminary professors and district presidents in the Synodical Conference to examine the doctrine in the light of Scripture. As late as October, 1880, when Loy became synod president and Stelhorn was called to the seminary at Columbus, Ohio still strongly supported Walther’s state synod plan. However, several articles, most notably Loy’s, revealed that Ohio’s sympathies lay with Schmidt, Allwardt, and Stelhorn from the outset.

On September 5, 1880, Missouri Synod President Schwan invited all the Synod’s pastors and professors to a conference in Chicago September 29-October 5. He said it was not advisable to wait any longer for the Synodical Conference to act, and that he wanted to re-establish doctrinal unity at least within Missouri.

431 of Missouri’s pastors attended. Sixteen guests, including Schmidt, Prof. Graebner and Pastor August Pieper of Wisconsin, and three other Norwegian Synod professors, also attended, but were not allowed to participate in discussion.

Eleven morning and evening sessions were held. Walther, Pieper and Stoeckhardt dominated the floor for the one side, Allwardt and Stelhorn for the other. (Since Schmidt was a guest and not a member of the Missouri Synod, the chairman would not recognize his requests for the floor.)

There was a great deal of discussion about the proper interpretation of Article XI of the Formula, which we reviewed above, and of whether one may be certain of his election to eternal life. Stelhorn said,

The elect—for our understanding—are those who are on the way to salvation, i.e., the believers. Because the temporary believers are also on the way to salvation as long as they believe, we have to hold them to be among the elect. Indeed, there is no unfailling certainty of election. I do not know whether I am chosen according to the strict sense of election. This I am to believe and hope.

Allwardt added that when someone asks whether he is elect, he should be pointed to the universal nature of the gospel’s call to faith.

Walther insisted there was no double meaning of the term “election” in the Formula. “Actually,” he said, “the opponents teach no election at all but only justification.” In other words, to speak of a *praedestinatio mediorum* was nonsense; it merely said God planned to justify sinners by faith from eternity, which is certainly true but has nothing to do with election. Certainly those who do not follow and adhere to the means of grace cannot be saved, rather, this is the only way to achieve certainty of one’s election.

Stoeckhardt added the telling historical point that paragraphs 14-24 of the Formula do not appear in the Epitome or in the Swabian Formula. This meant, he said, that they do not belong to the essential nature of election, but are Chemnitz’s reminder to speak of election not only as a hidden counsel, but also as part of the revealed will of God.

After this, attention turned to the expression *intuitu fidei*. Stellhorn and Allwardt said that God chose individuals whom he foreknew would come to faith and remain in it until death. They insisted that faith was not a moving or meritorious cause of election, but only the explanatory reason. Election in the narrow sense is the eternally foreseen application of the general order of salvation. When the same application takes place in time, it is called justification.

Walther reiterated that man is not elected because of faith, but to faith. Election is far more than simply God’s eternal decree that all who believe will be saved; that is not election—which means choosing some from a larger group.

*Intuitu fidei*, he said, is an unfortunate expression because one too easily thinks of faith as a moving cause of election. It means nothing and does not help answer the paradox of grace unless faith is to some degree man’s action instead of God’s. This, he said, is a gross synergistic error.

Pastor Rohe, an ally of Stellhorn, brought up the articles written by Sihler and Fuerbinger from 1855 and 1857. Walther replied, “One sees from this that at that time we yet tolerated among us the second pattern of teaching [Lehrtropus] . . . That was not the voice of our Synod but the private voice of Dr. Sihler and Pastor Fuerbringer. It was not my voice as the editor [of *Lehre and Wehre*] employed by the Synod, and not to mention as a teacher of dogmatics.”

All this discussion accomplished little. Two men who’d been on the fringes of the opposition publicly admitted they had erred but now had come to realize that Walther was right. No one was swayed the other way.

In the last session, the theological discussion was terminated and the group sought ways to restore doctrinal unity. Walther’s opponents were urged to quit writing publicly about the controversy, especially in hostile magazines (i.e. *Altes und Neues*.) The proper method was to bring charges against the Western District before the Synod. From there they had the right of appeal to the Synodical Conference.

Allwardt replied that he had written Schwan privately, and waited all summer in 1879 without getting an answer. Then the Western District Report, he felt, had moved the controversy into the public eye. Schwan replied that he had forwarded the letter to the seminary faculty to initiate further discussions, and had invited Allwardt and Schmidt to visit Fuerbringer with him. Allwardt claimed the invitation had come too late for he and Schmidt to make arrangements to go.

More of Schmidt’s questionable motives were revealed when it was shown that the 1879 District Report had not moved him to publish *Altes und Neues*. In a letter some time before that meeting, he had already said it was his duty to write publicly against Missouri.

Allwardt replied that this charge did not apply to him, and that he had forwarded his grievances about election to his district president before he knew of Schmidt’s similar views.

At the end of the conference, it was decided that whoever wrote against the Synod publicly would no longer be considered a brother. A second pastoral conference was scheduled for Ft. Wayne the following year, to follow right after the Synod's convention.

Finally, in January, 1881, Loy's call for a conference of professors and district presidents from the whole Synodical Conference was realized. The delay was caused primarily by the poor health of Ohio Synod president Prof. Wilhelm F. Lehman. He was Synodical Conference president, and simply did not have enough energy or awareness of the situation to convene the meeting or mediate the dispute in any way.

When he died on December 1, 1880, Prof. Larsen of the Norwegian Synod became the Conference's president and moved with admirable haste. He invited all theological professors and district presidents of all the synods to a colloquium in Milwaukee, January 5-10, 1881. All district presidents came. Seven Missouri professors, including Walther and Pieper, were present, along with Loy and Frank of Ohio, Hoenecke, Notz and Graebner of Wisconsin, and Schmidt, Ylvisaker and Stub of the Norwegian Synod.

The agenda included discussion of Romans 8, Ephesians 1, and Matthew 22. However, the discussion never got further than Romans 8:28-30. Each side presented the same views they had before. Missouri maintained that "purpose" in Rom. 8:28 refers to God's decree to save certain men; the opposition said it includes the rule and order by which God saves men, i.e. "Whoever believes will be saved." The opponents maintained that in Rom. 8:29 meant simple foreknowledge; Missouri maintained it was a more comprehensive term, which included a divine act that makes someone something (e.g. an heir). The discussion soon returned to its old rut—the dispute over the Formula of Concord, and none of the other Scripture passages was examined.

At the end, Loy and Frank suggested that another colloquium be held in the summer, and that in the meantime no one publish articles about the controversy. Schmidt declared this a "unionistic compromise"; he could not consent because he had God's command to carry on the controversy (II Tim 4:2, Is. 58:1), and that he could not agree to such a truce because the false teaching of election had a number of outward (i.e. church political) advantages.

Walther replied, "*Wohlan, ihr wollet Krieg; ihr sollt Krieg haben.*" (Well you want a war; war you shall have!) He said Missouri would no longer keep silent in the face of Schmidt's continuing accusations (it had yet to name him personally in any of its publications.) Walther also brushed aside a proposition that both sides conduct the controversy as impersonally as possible. He said that would not be possible.

From this time on, the controversy became a brutal mudslinging campaign, full of invective and abuse. Little was added to the theological arguments on either side. All that was left for the bodies of the Synodical Conference to do was to separate from the false teachers. At its convention in May, 1881, Missouri resolved to do just that; the discussion included words that are quite haunting to us in the WELS today:

For God's sake we do not want to let things get so far as to tolerate among us different doctrines. This would be horrible in the eyes of God and of the whole orthodox church... We openly and honestly tell everyone among us who teaches a different doctrine... We do not belong together and our ways have to part. This, however, does not mean that we call our opponents heretics and condemn them. We do not do that either in the case of Unionists and Reformed. Thereby we only say this: We can no longer go together. Therefore we also can no longer pray together, because you will pray for our conversion and we for yours. God holds in abomination such a joint praying.

Walther's Thirteen Theses were adopted as the Synod's confession regarding election. Discipline began against the five men who voted against them. Missouri's delegates to the Synodical Conference were instructed not to sit together "with those who decried us as Calvinists," and not to recognize any synod which as a synod had made that charge.

Ohio reacted to these decisions with a special convention in September, the "Extra Meeting" at Wheeling, WV. Four pastors had already left for Missouri. Another pastoral conference had adopted ten of Walther's Theses. At Loy's urging, Ohio simply withdrew from the Synodical Conference because Missouri had adopted a doctrine of election the synod couldn't agree with, and would refuse to seat Ohio's delegates anyway. Loy probably also wanted to sever relations before the split in his Synod became serious. Nevertheless, fourteen pastors withdrew and formed the Concordia Synod, which merged with Missouri in 1886. After Ohio withdrew, the Synodical Conference delayed its October, 1881 meeting for one year, to give synods time to deal with controversy in their own ranks.

Wisconsin, Minnesota, and Missouri suffered relatively little. Hoenecke calmly expounded the paradox of grace, all sides agreed, more consistently than Walther himself; Minnesota followed in Wisconsin's footsteps. Missouri lost about the same number of men and congregations as Ohio—proportional to size, its losses were considerably smaller. Most of the congregations that left lost splinter groups that stayed with Missouri; bitter wranglings about church property in some cases led to shady legal maneuvers, former pastors of congregations returning to interfere with their old charges, and in some cases to public brawls.

The Norwegian Synod was torn asunder. Its catechism, particularly beloved among its members, taught election *intuitu fidei*. Schmidt spread his views widely; he was especially successful with his former students from the Seminary. The synodical leadership, though most were of Missouri's position, did not deal very decisively with Schmidt and his partisans. By 1887, the situation was intolerable; peace could barely be maintained at the pastoral conference.

Schmidt finally led over one third of the synod into a new body, the "Anti-Missouri Brotherhood," in 1888. The Norwegian Synod had withdrawn from active membership in the Synodical Conference in 1883 while its leaders tried to prevent its disintegration. Finally, in 1912, the Synod's next generation subscribed to the Madison Agreement, which allowed either view of election to stand and was the basis for a merger of America's Norwegian Lutherans in 1917. A remnant formed the ELS and joined the Synodical Conference in 1920.

### Conclusions

Shortly after its founding, the Synodical Conference included the majority of America's Lutherans. A robust tide of confessionalism threatened to make the tired old liberal bodies in the General Council irrelevant. Several bodies, including Wisconsin, had left the moderate General Synod to join the new group, and the work of Charles Porterfield Krauth represented a staunchly confessional trend among those who remained.

But within ten years of the Conference's founding, two of its charter members had left. Only Missouri, Wisconsin, and the small bodies which would eventually merge with one or the other, remained. For the rest of its history, the Conference was isolated from the rest of Lutheranism.

Its members did participate in the Intersynodical Movement, which sought to heal the damage by studying the doctrine of election (among others) on the basis of Scripture and the confessions. The Chicago Theses of 1928, which repudiated *intuitu fidei*, were drafted to reunite Ohio, and unite Iowa for the first time, with the Synodical Conference. Both, together with

Wisconsin, adopted the Theses. They died when Franz Pieper led Missouri to declare them inadequate, though Missouri helped forge them. Wisconsin, embroiled in the Protestant Controversy, could do little to resurrect the document. Missouri then developed the Brief Statement of 1932 as her proposal for a union document.

In retrospect, Pieper was right—the Chicago Theses were a fine doctrinal statement, but the bodies which they proposed to unite were not really of one mind; Lenski’s commentaries are proof enough of that. In fact, in this writer’s judgment, Lenski’s rejection of objective or universal justification results from his belief in election *iniuitu fidei*. Calling faith a cause or condition of election warps its role as purely an *organon leptikon*. Lenski simply gave faith the same role in justification as he gave it in election—to him it became a cause or condition of justification.

But this “near miss” helps explain Missouri’s growing desire for fellowship with the ALC (i.e. Ohio and Iowa) beginning later in the 1930’s, in spite of the ALC’s continuing doctrinal deterioration. Eventually, the Missouri Synod abandoned Synodical Conference confessionalism to seek closer ties with the ALC, leaving only the WELS and ELS to carry on the Conference’s heritage. The sad results of the Election Controversy are very much with us today.

Yet at the same time, as J.P. Koehler rightly said, “In the election controversy came the fullest blossoming of Lutheran doctrinal development since Luther’s *De Servo Arbitrio*.”<sup>56</sup> The paradox of grace, another name for the distinction between Law and Gospel, was maintained even though it meant Lutherans had to turn away from their great dogmatists. Rationalism, which seeks to make Scripture free of logical paradox, was repudiated.

This repudiation must be renewed in each generation. For as Professor Becker observed, the paradox of grace, particularly in the areas of conversion and election, maintains itself among Lutherans with great difficulty. For we are sinful and weak, and we want to give our reason its head. Furthermore, he reminds us,

it would almost be unthinkable that a man should call himself a Lutheran and not accept the doctrines of universal atonement, universal reconciliation, universal grace . . . the danger to Lutheranism in this doctrine [conversion] has never come so much from Calvinism as from Arminianism.<sup>57</sup>

You have also eliminated the unreasonable factor [in election] if you assume that some conduct themselves with greater willingness under grace.<sup>58</sup>

Especially as we in the Wisconsin Synod seek to reach out with the pure Gospel to more and more people, we must keep this truth in mind. In fact, evangelism might be described as “seeking out the elect who are not yet converted.” Yet most of those writing about evangelism and outreach today are unabashedly Arminian “evangelicals,” who speak quite plainly of reaching unconverted people who are longing for the Gospel and the comfort it brings on the basis of the natural knowledge of God. They use terms like “decision,” “self-determination,” and a distinction between “forced” and “free” conversion which our Synodical Conference forebears

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<sup>56</sup> J.P. Koehler, “Die Synodalkonferenz in der Geschichte der amerikanisch-lutherischen Kirche.” *Theologische Quartalschrift*, Vol. 19, No. 3 (July, 1922), p. 177. Author’s translation.

<sup>57</sup> Becker, *Foolishness*, p. 213.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 216-217. (Quotation of Th. Graebner.)

repudiated. Were we to adopt this approach, however unwittingly, we would have no Gospel left to offer.

Instead, we will continue where the Scripture led our Fathers. They boldly and without shame said the unreasonable is true, that election is particular and grace is universal, that nothing in man can explain why some believe, nothing in God why others do not. In doing so God used them to give us a beautiful treasure—*sola gratia*. May we cherish it highly and proclaim it boldly.

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