

CELEBRATING THE 175TH ANNIVERSARY OF WELS



“Praise God! We Missourians do not stand in this fight alone! The Wisconsin Synod, in the theologians of its faculty and in its many able members, stands at our side.”

– C. F. W. Walther, 1881, during the Election Controversy when several synods withdrew from the Synodical Conference.

THE ELECTION CONTROVERSY

Why are some saved and not others? Scripture teaches that we are saved by God’s grace alone. Those who are lost can only blame themselves. Using reason, humans want either to blame God for those who are lost or take some credit for their own salvation. The Election Controversy in the Synodical Conference in the 19th century occurred because some wanted to find a cause for election in humans.

The Bible teaches that God planned our salvation in eternity and chose those who would come to faith and be saved. Calvinists teach an arbitrary, unconditional election to both salvation and damnation. Lutherans teach that election pertains only to those who are saved. There are two causes



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of election—God’s grace and Christ’s merits. In opposition to Calvinism some Lutheran theologians began to speak of election *in view of faith*. By this they meant that God’s choice in eternity also included his predetermining that the individual would come into contact with the means of grace and be brought to faith by the Holy Spirit. However, the phrase can be misunderstood as making faith a third cause of election.

In 1877, the great Missouri Synod theologian C. F. W. Walther warned about using this expression because it could lead some to think that there was a reason in us for God’s choice, making faith a *cause* instead of a *result* of our election. Some in the Synodical Conference who were accustomed to using the expression *in view of faith* accused Walther of Calvinism, and the Election Controversy began. As a result, the Ohio Synod left the Synodical Conference. The Norwegian Synod also left to deal with one-third of its pastors who opposed Walther.

Under the leadership of Prof. Adolph Hoenecke, the Wisconsin Synod sided with Walther because Walther stood squarely on Scripture. The groups that opposed Walther and the Wisconsin Synod eventually fell into other errors because they raised human reason over Scripture. Today those groups are part of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA).

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Want to learn more about WELS history?

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