Dr. Henry A. Koch And The Doctrine of Church and Ministry

Final Senior Church History Paper

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In the October 11, 1961 issue of the Gemeinde-Blatt, Dr. Henry Koch made some very strong statements concerning the Wisconsin Synod doctrine of Church and Ministry. He agreed with the Uebersee-theologen that our doctrine stressed subjective faith at the expense of the objective marks of the Church. He called our doctrine a "new" doctrine of the Union Committee and a departure from that of Adolph Hoenecke. In fact, the real point was that this doctrine of Church and Ministry was, as his friends from across the ocean pointed out, a "schriftwidrig" teaching. All this is pretty strong stuff, especially as it came in a Wisconsin Synod publication and was a sharp criticism of the recent suspension of fellowship with the Missouri Synod. What was undoubtedly considered by the editor of the Gemeinde-Blatt to be a report of the proceedings and resolutions of that important convention (August 8-17, 1961) which suspended fellowship, turned out to be a criticism of an ill-advised action taken on the basis of a false conception of a crucial doctrine. The aims of this paper will be to trace the causes of this dissent in the personal history of Dr. Koch, to explain his views, if possible, and refute them, where false, and finally to enumerate some of the consequences of his dissenting opinions in the Synod and his own congregation.

Part I: Causes for Dissent

Dr. Koch was born in August of 1889. He is really of another generation, and this has always been evident to those younger. As one professor put it, he is nearly the last of a vanishing breed in our synod. This vanishing species was a group of men who were staunch individualists, staunch defenders of whatever they believed true, and strong, even dominant, leaders. To say this breed is vanishing is not to say that the WELS is now bereft of leaders or defenders of truth. However, the type of man one might call an echter Deutscher and address with the title der Herr Pastor is fast disappearing. This will be somewhat a loss, somewhat a gain for our synod. Perhaps this strong personality is one of the main underlying causes for Dr. Koch's dissent from the Wisconsin doctrine of Church and Ministry. Leaders rise to the top, like cream, but Dr. Koch never became a

Synod or even District President, or a professor, despite his obvious leadership qualities. It is sometimes difficult to lead a leader whose capabilities have either gone unrecognized or for some reason (perhaps a just one) untapped.

The education of Dr. Koch came from his father (who was both pastor and teacher), then at NWC, from which he graduated in 1909, and finally at the University of Leipzig, where he received his doctorate. How far back does his objection to Wisconsin's "modern" doctrine of Church and Ministry go? He related to me that even in college he held his present view, even though, on the whole "as students we were convinced our professors were right".[1] One of these professors was August Pieper of whom Dr. Koch said that nearly every day he went off on a tangent talking about Church affairs. Dr. Koch did not challenge Prof. Pieper, who was professor of O.T. Theology (Isaiah and Hebrew), though he may have disagreed with his professor's views.[2] Though Dr. Koch has strong convictions, I would imagine that he would have felt it to be impropriety to challenge a professor.

Dr. Koch's views were really shaped by his many years in Germany. He was a student in Liepzig and also an assistant pastor in some sort of unofficial capacity. Then in 1914, Dr. Koch's ministry officially began as he took over Leipzig as his charge. He was there until 1921, at which time he accepted a call to Berlin.[3]

Dr. Koch saw these years in Germany as years in which he could look more objectively at the Wisconsin Synod because he was not as close to it as the men in the United States.[4] In reality, this objectivity was closer to a Missouri bias gained from men in Europe strongly influenced by and closely tied to Missouri. The Wisconsin ties in Germany were weak because the beginning of Wisconsin came through the efforts of a unionistic missionary society with which Wisconsin no longer shared a common faith. Many men serving in the German church received their seminary training at St. Louis, because of the inability of the Germans to provide this seminary training.[5] The Saxon Church in Germany from which the Saxons in Missouri had ventured forth became in this respect a sort of extension of Missouri. This led to the above mentioned Missouri bias brought to bear on Dr. Koch.

It would be unfair to say that his views were Missouri views only because of contact with a Missouri bias. He also read Dr. Walther, Franz Pieper, and Adolph Hoenecke and was convinced that they agreed with the modern Missouri view of the Church and Ministry.[6] One would readily grant that Pieper agrees with the modern Missouri position. In fact, he is the reason for the great number that hold this position. His Christian Dogmatics is a great work and he was an excellent theologian. That part is good. The bad comes in that his book aided, abetted, and entrenched a view of Church and Ministry that was neither Walther's or Hoenecke's, but based on a misunderstanding of their use of terms like Kirche, Gemeinde, Particularkirch, Pfarramt, and Predigtamt. At the center of this was the misunderstanding (not of Walther and Hoenecke, but of their successors) of the term ecclesia.

Dr. Koch, too, developed a Franz Pieper blind spot in this area and no amount of persuasion will convince him that ecclesia in Mt. 16 and 18 is not an Ortsgemeinde.

The Protestant controversy of the late 20's was another step in the firming up of Dr. Koch's resolution. While in his student days the seed was planted, and his relations with men in Germany whom he freely admits were strongly influenced by Missouri, watered the seed and caused it to germinate, the reports he received on the Protestant matter really caused the plant to flourish. "My convictions were only hardened and established when I saw what happened in the Protestant Movement." It was at this time, he asserts, that Wisconsin really went too far. Here is where the "tendency in WELS to believe Synod able to carry out all functions (of Church) including excommunication" showed itself.[7]

When one gets to the nub of the Protestant matter, it becomes evident that Dr. Koch's main complaint here is not with Wisconsin's doctrine of the Church (even though this is where he says the real error in Church and Ministry began), but with the use of the term "excommunication". Here, he states, Wisconsin excommunicated a group of people as a group. This would include Beitz and others. This excommunication thus was wrong, as a body cannot excommunicate people en masse. Also, he contends, this action was not unanimous and was

therefore wrong. Thirdly, "You cannot say of Beitz or those Protestant pastors that they are pagans; this is what excommunication means. I think the whole problem is with terminology." To sum it all up, his contention is that these men were excommunicated when they should merely have been declared out of fellowship.[8]

What really was the case? In talking with a fellow student who studied the Protestant Controversy extensively, he stated that as far as he could tell, no-one was excommunicated, but that they were indeed declared to be out of our fellowship. Of course they claimed to have been excommunicated.[9] Also, Professor Lawrenz affirmed this when he told me that in the case of the Protestant men, not Mt. 18 but Ro. 16:17 was applied. He stated the case of Pastor Itzmann and Immanuel congregation in Manitowoc as an example. In 1938 we severed fellowship from them because they upheld error. Professor Lawrenz did freely admit that "during the Protestant Controversy not everyone spoke as clearly and plainly as he should have."[10]

The situation is this. Dr. Koch's position, by his own admission, was largely formed by contacts with Missouri-influenced pastors in Germany. His opinion was reinforced by his reading of Walther, Hoenecke, and Pieper. It was firmly set by the garbled version of the Protestant matter which he apparently heard while in Germany. The result was his conviction that the Wisconsin Synod was developing a sort of hierarchy based on its false view of the Church and Ministry. Further history of his interaction with Synod members, officials, and conventions will come under the heading of consequences of his dissent.

Part II: Dr. Koch's Dissenting Views

This will perhaps be the shortest part of this paper. First, I have already written a paper that deals with the doctrines of Church and Ministry. Secondly, I am more interested in the historical aspects of this issue. Finally, it is easier to ascertain what Dr. Koch is against and what he is afraid of then to write extensively on his positive assertions.

I might begin by referring to Professor Lawrenz. I believe he is correct in saying that Dr. Koch's views hinge on a disagreement with the antitheses of the "Theses on Church and Ministry" drawn up

by the WELS Commission on Doctrinal Matters for the final discussions within the Synodical Conference which were carried on between January 1957 and May 1960.[11] The antitheses read:

> We hold it to be untenable to say that the local congregation is specifically instituted by God in contrast to other groupings of believers in Jesus' name; that the public ministry of the keys has been given exclusively to the local congregations.[12]

and:

> We hold it to be untenable to say that the pastorate of the local congregation (Pfarramt) as a specific form of the public ministry is specifically instituted by the Lord in contrast to other forms of the public ministry.[13]

Now, certainly Dr. Koch had his views before these theses were written. However, these theses probably crystalized his objections to the "hierarchy" developing in the Wisconsin Synod. These objections centered on the very doctrine expressed so well in the antitheses.

Speaking positively, Dr. Koch stresses the fact that "I stick to Adolph Hoenecke". By that I am sure he means the interpretation of Adolph Hoenecke and, for that matter, C. F. W. Walther, which is considered to be the orthodox "old Missouri" position by people of the spirit and opinion of the LCR.

In saying that he sticks to Adolph Hoenecke, Dr. Koch feels he has come to the authority who supports his and the "old Missouri" position and who proves it from Scripture. The emphasis in this position lies in Mt. 18 and an understanding of the word ecclesia there which stresses the local outward congregation of believers at the expense of the spiritual priesthood.

I must agree with a paper delivered by Pastor Harold Eckert to the Synodical Conference Interim Committee which had discussions on the doctrines of Church and Ministry. In this paper Pastor Eckert points out that at the time of Mt. 18 there was as yet no local congregation as we know it. The local congregation was first manifested at Jerusalem after Jesus' ascension. This historical development cannot be identified with the ecclesia of Mt. 18, for it was not yet in existence.

Dr. Koch, in his understanding of Mt. 18, without question feels this is a reference to a local gathering of confessing believers.

As such, he believes it also includes hypocrites. He says of ecclesia that it is a word referring to those who are called out, and not only called out of the world but into a certain place, that place being the Ortsgemeinde or local congregation. He also cites Paul's addressing of his epistles to individual "churches" in Corinth, Ephesus, Phillipi, etc. as proof that "church" in regard to church discipline and the keys refers to a local gathering - the local congregation.[14]

I did not speak to any length with Dr. Koch on the doctrine of the Ministry but I do not believe it would be misstating his position to say that here, too, he emphasizes his understanding of the Pfarramt as the ministry in the local parish. This was evident in his bemoaning that convention of the Wisconsin Synod at which the office of President of Synod became a full-time call. This divorcing of the President from any involvement in the parish is seen by Dr. Koch as a dangerous evil.[15]

Dr. Koch refers repeatedly to Adolph Hoenecke to support his position. Hoenecke speaks of the synod as ecclesia synthetica or representiva. Dr. Koch says that if we are to uphold the "modern" Wisconsin position we must "knock Adolph Hoenecke's statement 'ecclesia representiva' into a cocked hat." He told me again and again that "we must get down to 'ABC's'". The "ABC's" of Dr. Koch are these: 1) Synod is a representative church; 2) A representative body (e.g. U.S. Senate, Congress) has no authority of itself; 3) Therefore, Synod's authority is a derived authority - derived from local congregations. Because of this, excommunication is the prerogative only of the local congregation.

The outcome of this whole misapprehension of the old orthodox Lutheran theologians is this last point. Dr. Koch admits that a synod is in authority to exercise church discipline but only in the first three steps. The final step of Mt. 18, i.e., excommunication, he reserves to the local congregation. If Mt. 18 applies only to the local congregation when excommunication is involved, it seems reasonable that it should apply only to the local congregation in respect to the other steps and also to administering the means of grace which is the flip side of the ministry of the keys. This however does not seem to be Dr. Koch's position.

When one examines Mt. 18 and other references to the Church (ecclesia) in the New Testament, it is evident that the spiritual fellowship of true believers is of the essence. The local congregation is an historical development beginning at Jerusalem. To restrict the church to a local place is also to misread Walther and Hoenecke. When Walther spoke of the sovereignty of the congregation, this was a sovereignty over against men like Grabau who exercised pastoral tyrrany in their congregations. He was not speaking of the congregation's relation to a synod, though here, too, we readily grant that a synod cannot tyrranize a congregation. As for Hoenecke's representative church, there is no reason to assume that by this term he means to take the ministry of the keys out of its hands. The voters' assembly of every congregation is in a sense also a representative church. The women and children, though members of the church, are not present nor even are all the men, under normal conditions. Yet, Hoenecke would certainly not remove the keys from their hands. In a very real sense theirs, too, is a derived authority, derived from the presence of believers together in fellowship, no church, no authority.

In view of my discussions with Dr. Koch, I must concur with Oscar J. Siegler, now President of Martin Luther Academy, that the central problem is a basic misunderstanding of the term ecclesia. Though I am no expert on Walther and limited by my knowlege of German, when it comes to Hoenecke, it also appears evident that Dr. Koch has misunderstood them. I quote Prof. Siegler:

> I personally felt, for example, that Dr. Koch had not correctly understood the position taken by Dr. Hoenecke in his Dogmatics or by Dr. Walther in his Kirch und Amt -- particularly with respect to their use of such terms as "Kirche", "Gemeinde", "Particularkirch", "Pfarramt", "Predigtamt", etc.. And all this hinged about the New Testament use of the term "ecclesia".[16]

This I believe summarizes the situation.

Part III: Consequences of Dr. Koch's Views

Views which had been attained and refined in Germany did not suddenly disappear when Dr. Koch returned to the U.S. ca. 1936. Rather these views again and again came to the face and caused some considerable conflict in our synod.

In the 40's, Pastor Harold Eckert, a fellow-member of the Manitowoc Conference, was a member of the Interim Committee of the Synodical Conference. He presented a paper on Church and Ministry first to this committee but also then to many conferences of our synod, including the Manitowoc Conference meeting in Collins ca. 1945-1947. Throughout our conferences, this paper was generally received favorably, but in Chilton, Dr. Koch and Dr. Koch alone attacked it as a departure from the "old" doctrine. This debate was waged not only on the conference floor but also later at Dr. Koch's home. It again hinged about ecclesia, but also basileia. While Dr. Koch equated basileia and ecclesia in an attempt to use kingdom passages to prove his point, Pastor Eckert properly held basileia to be an activity of God and ecclesia to be people. God's basileia brings the ecclesia into existence, the two are not equal. Even most of Dr. Koch's library supported Pastor Eckert's view, but the one book with a definition of basileia that suited Dr. Koch was the one to which Dr. Koch adhered.[17] As a footnote, this paper was later used by the study club held at Seminary and accepted by the professors of the Seminary.

The above was not really so serious an incident, but what happened in 1961 at the Wisconsin Synod Convention (Aug. 8-17) and subsequently was quite devisive. In July of 1960, a theologians conference had been held at Mequon. On hand was an overseas delegation composed of Dr. Henry Hammann, Jr. (Evangelical Lutheran Church of Australia), Drs. William Oesch and Manfred Rensch (of Lutheran Free Churches of Germany), Rev. Norman Nagel (Evangelical Lutheran Chruch in England), and Dr. Hans Rottmann (Brazil).[18] These same men were also requested by the Synodical Conference Convention of 1960 "to formulate an evaluation of the statements on fellowship prepared by the doctrinal committees of the four synods". This overseas delegation met with our Doctrinal Commission on April 25,26 of 1961. Their recommendations to us, though from good intentions, bore some of the same doctrinal misunderstanding in the area of the Church as did the modern Missouri position. They said, for example:

> Where the Means of Grace are in operation, there the church is to be found, whole, local, and tangible. The assembly regularly gathered about the pure preaching and the right administration of the Sacraments is called by God Himself

> the church at that place irrespective of the hypocrites, who may be attached outwardly to such assembly. This is no mere organizational form or association of individuals, but the one church that will remain forever . . .[19]

The underlining is mine and indicates the type of teaching which led to the suggestion on the part of the delegation:

> that the goal of the Synodical Conference discussion is to be reached by the traditional highway of the Doctrine of the Church. Since the premature turning off into the byway of fellowship has led to a dead end, it would seem best, first of all, to return to the highway and there move forward together guided only by the marks of the Church.[20]

This was advice that our Doctrinal Commission could not and would not follow. An impasse had been reached on Church Fellowship and it was time to declare this impasse. This was done and the Convention voted 124-49 to suspend fellowship. With forty-nine voting no, there obviously were dissenting voices. Dr. Koch was one of them. His comments stressed our false (schriftwidrig) doctrine in the area of the Church and naturally urged us to accept the advice of the "overseas brethren" and be helped to a Scriptural position. At least one of these overseas brethren, Dr. Oesch, was a friend of Dr. Koch's and occasionally came to visit Dr. Koch in the U.S.. Again, here, Dr. Koch was endorsing a view of the Church that misunderstood Mt.18. His views were duly noted by the Badger Lutheran:

> I am only concerned with our own Wisconsin Synod. The confessional Lutheran world outside does not side with us. Should we not halt, go to the overseas brethren and continue these discussions. I agree with the overseas brethren. I cannot accept the unit concept and I plead with you, it is being weighed and observed carefully by the Lutheran world everywhere . . . . The overseas delegates have said that our unit concept is faulty and unscriptural. . . .[21]

The voice of Dr. Koch was not silenced by the vote of the convention. On the contrary, in his report of the convention in the Gemeinde-Blatt of Oct. 1, 1961, he renewed his criticism of the Wisconsin Synod for ignoring the Uebersee theologen. More important, he continued to criticize our Doctrine of the Church. He again cites our departure from Hoenecke, Walther, and Pieper and challenges doubters to study Hoenecke's Dogmatics objectively without seeking to justify their own position. He laments the fact that we did not

seek a Scriptural (schriftgemaess) understanding in this area before suspending fellowship on the basis of the Doctrine of Fellowship.

Again, this supplied a good deal of fodder to the Badger Lutheran of Jan. 18, 1972. The paper treats Dr. Koch's report extensively, but fails to note the issue of the Gemeinde-Blatt of Oct. 15, 1961. In this issue, Professor Heinrich Vogel, editor of the Gemeinde-Blatt, made the following clarifying statement:

> In his report on the suspension of fellowship with the Missouri Synod in the last issue of the Gemeinde-Blatt (Oct. 1, 1961), the reporter in his otherwise objective and correct presentation of the differences which led to this step gave expression also to his own personal opinions with reference to his Synod's position in the matter. In the opinions the writer expressed his own personal conviction which did not always agree with the official position of the Synod. For that reason the complete text of the Synod's resolutions are printed so that they may know precisely what was resolved and in what manner the Synod came to its resolutions to suspend.[22]

This was obviously ignored by the Badger Lutheran in its discussion of Dr. Koch's reports, even though this comment by Prof. Vogel occurred long before Jan. 18, 1962. However, Rev. James Schaefer corrected the impression to a degree with a letter to the editor of the Badger Lutheran which was printed in the Feb. 15, 1962 issue. The letter contained Prof. Vogel's clarification. This clarification was likewise printed in the March 11, 1962 issue of The Northwestern Lutheran. However, one doubts that the confusion among our members caused by Dr. Koch's statements and quoted freely by Missouri publications could be easily removed.

Because Dr. Koch's statements were so public and critical of our doctrine, which we believe to be completely Scriptural, it became necessary for District President O. J. Siegler of the Northern Wisconsin District to deal with him. Certainly the meetings held by President Siegler with the Visitor of the Manitowoc Conference and Dr. Koch were not altogether easy ones. Dr. Koch tells of a meeting with "two men from Synod" whom he would not identify:

> They wanted a retraction. "We want to draw some conclusions." (Dr. Koch replied) "If that is what you want, conclusions, there is your conclusion", and I pointed to the door.[23]

Even this discussion went on as the other man mollified the situation.

Whether this account of Dr. Koch corresponds to the meetings with District President Siegler and the Conference Visitor is a moot point. At any rate the meetings were eventually successful to the point that Pastor Siegler could report, with Dr. Koch's assent, in the following manner to the District Convention of 1962:

> Last October another member of our District, Dr. Henry A. Koch, felt constrained to voice public disagreement with certain doctrinal formulation of our Synod's Commission on Doctrinal Matters. Subsequent thereto, Dr. Koch, the Visitor of the Manitowoc Conference, and the Chair held several meetings to study the doctrines in question. Although arrangements were made to discuss the matter further, the Chair was unable to carry out the proposed plan for lack of time, and further study and discussion of the doctrines involved ought still be held. In any event, Dr. Koch assured the Chair that his only concern was to guard and preserve the rights and sovereignty of the local congregation, something with which all of us will want to be concerned. Both the Visitor of the Manitowoc Conference and the Chair entertain the hope that no actual difference in doctrine will be found, a hope which Dr. Koch also shares.[24]

It is doubtful that Dr. Koch's views were in any way modified by these discussions. The fact of the matter is that for a number of years after 1962, Morrison Zion Lutheran exchanged pulpits with the Missouri Synod congregation four miles down the road in Wayside. This cannot be attributed so much to congregational indifference as to the views of Dr. Koch. Here again the sovereignty of the local congregation was certainly a concern. When this practice ended, it was not because Dr. Koch changed his views but because of pressure (from individual members at Morrison) to live up to the severing of fellowship the Synod had voted for.

It also becomes evident from Dr. Koch's attendance at the study club held at Mequon after 1961. This consisted of pastors from Missouri and Wisconsin and professors at the Seminary. It was an open meeting and Dr. Koch frequently attended. As Prof. Lawrenz recalls it, Dr. Koch seemed to take the part and position of those men (Rusch, Romoser, McKenzie, McGloughlin) who would later lead their congregations out of fellowship with Missouri into the Lutheran Churches of the Reformation. Here it again became evident that his views hinged on disagreement with the antitheses of our Doctrinal Commission's statement.[25]

Because of his protests to our doctrine, expressed in various media, Dr. Koch was also invited to meet with the Doctrinal Commission and to express in writing his objections to our position. He did attend once ca. 1969-70 but never really broached the subject, speaking instead about the churches in Germany. Despite his views, he never chose to present them officially in writing. Thus it was not really possible for the Commission to deal effectively with his views.

It is evident from a 1970 statement at the LCR convention that Dr. Koch had remained a friend to their position. Pastor Romoser states:

> Please remember that at our last convention I urged our obligation to address the Wisconsin Synod in convention in order to afford opportunity for such (good) men to make known and to press their correct position in and before their synod. I have mentioned that one man, Dr. Henry Koch, is recorded as having done so.[26]

Obviously, Dr. Koch was still active with his opposing views in the 1969 Wisconsin Synod Convention. He still holds views today that see the Wisconsin Synod on a slide into false doctrine because we are ruled by a hierarchy from above. He feels that this will be the cause of our downfall, just as he feels being ruled from above was Missouri's downfall. He also believes that our Seminary stresses exegesis at the expense of dogmatics.

Conclusion: I believe that Dr. Koch is a man of conviction whose ministry in Morrison was blessed because he stood up for the truth. He was a man who cleaned up many shoddy things in the Morrison congregations. But on the Church and Ministry, he was a man with a blind spot. He was so grounded in Hoenecke that when he had a false view based on a misunderstanding of Hoenecke, he could not be convinced of his error even by sound exegesis. His views that too much exegesis and too much hierarchy will be our downfall do not really harmonize. Sound exegesis on the part of all pastors is the only weapon to avoid a self-imposed tyranny of dogmatics that leads to the rebellion of liberal exegesis found today in the Missouri Synod.

For whatever his faults may be, one can only admire Dr. Koch's dedication to the truth and willingness to oppose all error - even though he himself is in error.

FOOTNOTES

1. Dr. Henry A. Koch, Interview, Feb. 23, 1975.

2. Ibid.

3. Ibid.

4. Ibid.

5. Prof. Carl Lawrenz, Interview, March 26, 1975.

6. Koch, op. cit.

7. Ibid.

8. Ibid.

9. Charles Iles, Interview, April 29, 1975.

10. Lawrenz, op. cit.

11. Ibid.

12. "Theses on the Church and Ministry," Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly, Vol. 67 (1970), p. 128.

13. Ibid., p. 130.

14. Koch, op. cit.

15. Ibid.

16. Prof. Oscar Oscar J. Siegler, Letter, April 20, 1975.

17. Eckert, Pastor Harold, Interview, April 26, 1975.

18. Wisconsin Synod Convention Proceedings, 1961, (Aug. 8-17, 1961), pp. 171-173.

19. Ibid., p. 173.

20. Ibid., p. 181.

21. Lorraine M. Radtke, "Wisconsin Synod Breaks Fellowship with Missouri," Badger Lutheran, Vol. 13 (Aug. 31, 1961), p. 3.

22. The Northwestern Lutheran, Vol. 49 (March 11, 1962), p. 66.

23. Koch, op. cit.

24. Oscar J. Siegler, "District President's Report," Northern Wisconsin District Convention Proceedings (July 16-19, 1962), p. 10.

25. Lawrenz, op. cit.

26. Pastor Harold W. Romoser, "Church and Ministry," The Faithful Word, (Dec., 1970), pp. 66-67.

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