

The Parting of Professor J. P. Koehler and the Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary

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[Written for the WELS Historical Institute, April 20, 1983]

This August it will be exactly fifty years since the break between Prof. J. P. Koehler and the Wisconsin Synod became final. This came about when the Synod convention meeting in August 1933, received this report of Southeastern Wisconsin District officials:

1. That in accordance with resolutions of our District of June 1932 we made another earnest attempt to deal with Prof. Koehler concerning his position toward the Synod, since he is openly practicing brotherly fellowship with those who have severed relation with us, but that the officers did not succeed in getting together with Prof. Koehler.
2. Nevertheless it remains a fact, that Prof. Koehler is still in church fellowship with those who have severed relations with us. This we must consider a severance of church fellowship with us.

Three years earlier Koehler's tenure at Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary had been terminated after thirty years of teaching, the last third of which saw him serving also as school head. It is this "Parting of Professor J.P. Koehler and the Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary" your program committee wants discussed at this evening's Institute meeting.

At the outset it should be noted that such a controversial separation of the Seminary and its head is not unique in the school's history. Of the eight former presidents of the Seminary three have departed amid controversy and conflict.

The very first Seminary head, Doctor Edward Moldehnke set the pattern. After serving three years from 1863 to 1866 he resigned abruptly. In 1866 the Synod convention resolved that a second faculty post should be created combining the work of inspector or dean with teaching and called Adolph Hoenecke to fill the post. Then the 1866 Synod *Proceedings* report that "as a result of this resolution Prof. E. Moldehnke declared that he was resigning his post (as professor and editor of the *Gemeinde-Blatt*).ⁱ The Synod tried to dissuade him but Moldehnke was insistent. It seems that he had no objections to Adolph Hoenecke, an old schoolmate at Halle University, but he sincerely felt that the school in its infant years and with its limited enrollment simply did not need and could not usefully-employ a second faculty man.

Moldehnke must have been the workaholic of workaholics. He in 1866 rejected any relief and help in his arduous and far-reaching assignments as theological professor, editor and *Reiseprediger*. At the time of his resignation he was filling posts now held by Schuetze, Schaefer, Berg and Zwiieg.

To round off the story, after a brief tour of duty in Germany Moldehnke returned to this country, joined the New York Ministerium and became one of its outstanding pastors, writers and administrators. He also served two terms as president of the General Council. One can only regret that his considerable talents were lost to the Wisconsin Synod through a disagreement over Seminary policy.

In 1957 disagreement also ended the presidency of Edmund Reim at Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary. In this instance the issue was the continuing fellowship of the Wisconsin Synod with the erring Missouri Synod. In 1957 it was Reim's conviction that the time for dissolution of that fellowship had definitely come. When the Synod resolved otherwise, Reim found it impossible to continue any longer working at his Mequon post as theological professor and school president. When his considerable talents as a teacher of theology would again be put to use, it would be at the worker-training school of the Church of the Lutheran Confession.

Your concern, however, centers on the other instance of a controversial termination of a Seminary presidency. That is, “The Parting of Professor Koehler and the Seminary.” The concern is understandable. The Moldehnke affair lies so far back in history that it has been almost completely forgotten and it never was all that complicated to start with. Many seem to have been displeased at the prospect of losing Moldehnke and sought to call him as permanent full-time *Reiseprediger*. But the only serious question raised was by the floor committee that wondered, as the minutes tell us, “how it was possible for Professor Moldehnke to exchange for extended periods, his teaching post at the Seminary for the post of *Reiseprediger*.”ⁱⁱ

The departure of Edmund Reim from the Seminary occurred so recently that many can still view it as a contemporary happening instead of clouded history. They and even others that are younger, can quite easily see and agree on what was cause and what was effect. Given the situation that then existed, even members of the Church of the Lutheran Confession, would share with us the view that what happened had to happen.

When Koehler and the Seminary parted company, however, the issue was hotly contested. It is still on occasion hotly contested. While only a few in our ranks were old enough to be aware of what was happening, many of us have to grapple with the issues. The lapse of time and the complexity of the event make difficult a clear grasp of the situation. It is, however, understandable that the WELS Historical Institute should seek some insight into this key event in the history of the Wisconsin Synod and its Seminary and in the life and career of one of the Synod’s two great historians. The other is of course August Graebner.

In the search for an understanding of “The Parting of Professor Koehler and the Seminary” these five steps will be taken:

- I. The Assessment by Koehler on the Main Issue
- II. The Participation of Koehler in the *Gutachten* Preparation
- III. The Opposition of Koehler to the Faculty *Gutachten*
- IV. The removal of Koehler from His Seminary Post
- V. The Departure of Koehler as a High Tragedy

I. Assessment by Koehler of the Issue

J.P. Koehler does not give us his assessment of the situation in his *History of the Wisconsin Synod*.ⁱⁱⁱ He was too good a historian not to be aware of the pitfall of oversubjectivity and exercised great restraint in avoiding the painful and personal subject in his synodical history. He did, however, express himself clearly and forcefully on the issue in other places which do not put such a premium and priority on objectivity.

In his farewell to the Synod he had served for fifty years, a three-part writing with the translated title of “Witness, Analysis and Reply,” Koehler declares flatly and unmistakably “The *Gutachten* was and is and had to be the issue alone that had to be considered.”^{iv} This was in 1930 on June 7.

Three months later he interrupted his packing at Thiensville to reflect. In a letter to a student and friend on another continent he put down these thoughts:

“For me the episode of the past five years since my return from Germany is concluded. I still do not have a conclusive judgment on the whole matter. However, I am inclined to agree with Karl’s (his son’s) judgment that officialdom lies at the bottom of the entire controversy. The respective officials of the Synod believe that they must uphold the forms of Synod’s organizational constitution and therefore they ride these external forms in a way so insensible that I would not have believed it possible. Pieper and Meyer, who in this respect well know where the truth lies, are making use of the situation, instead of directing it into proper channels, so that they don’t have to retract the *Gutachten*.”^v

Koehler in this September 1, 1930, letter seems to be toying with the idea of agreeing with his son, Karl, and other Protestants that the root problem is officialdom, *Beamtentum*. Even then, however, the officialdom is

denounced as a cover-up agent for the *Gutachten*. The *Gutachten* was for Koehler the key issue in his conflict with his Synod. It will be so treated in this description of “The Parting of Professor Koehler and the Seminary.”

Some preliminary explanations are in order. Just what is this *Gutachten* that brought about Koehler’s departure from this Seminary? The *Gutachten* looks like this. This original printing, in German of course, dated June 7, 1927, has 31 pages under the title, *An Evaluation by the Wauwatosa Theological Faculty of the Conference Paper Entitled “God’s Message to Us in Galatians: The Just Shall Live by Faith.”*

In the fall of 1926 at Schofield near Wausau, Pastor William Beitz read to one conference a paper assigned to him by another conference. This was the paper mentioned in the *Gutachten* title. The paper of Beitz, with its lusty criticism of spiritual life in the Wisconsin Synod and with its earnest call to repentance and a life of faith, was controversial in the extreme. A second and a third reading provoked more controversy. In the supercharged synodical atmosphere of that time, with two camps warring over Watertown thieves and Fort Atkinson teachers, the Beitz paper easily fell into the role of catalyst, that speeded and heated up reaction and of shibboleth that separated the men from the boys.

When conflict over the Beitz paper would not die down, President G. Thurow of the embattled Western Wisconsin District arranged with the Seminary head, Professor Koehler, that the theological faculty at Wauwatosa should provide an evaluation of the disputed paper. The result was the *Gutachten* that Koehler regarded as the *numera uno* cause of his conflict with his Synod.

Not all will agree with Koehler’s assessment of the key issue in the controversy. Many like to think and say that the real problem was a J.P. Koehler - August Pieper personality clash. This is an easy out but also in the essayist’s view a cop-out. Sparks can fly when two outstanding men teach side by side. Shades of Doctor Ernst and Doctor Notz, of Hegel and Schliermacher, even of Luther and Melanchthon! But men like that, men like Pieper and Koehler, are more concerned about the *re* than the *persona*, the substance rather than the human element.

This is not to deny that there can be deep-seated clashes between two theological teachers over methodology or personality or teaching discipline. This is not to deny that historical explanations can never rest entirely on a single-cause theory. Other factors can and do play subordinate roles.

In this instance, however, we serve the cause of history, and Pieper and Koehler, best when we yield to the latter’s insistence that the real issue in his departure from the Seminary is the *Gutachten* and not something else.

That is why we should try to understand clearly

II. The Participation of Koehler in the *Gutachten* Preparation

When a third conference reading of the Beitz paper still found its fans and its foes at loggerheads, the Western Wisconsin District’s President, G. Thurow, sent to the Seminary an SOS, a *Notschrei*, as a Pieper writing would have it, seeking an evaluation, a *Gutachten*.^{vi}

Koehler was not unwilling to have the Seminary faculty issue such an evaluation. He was actually already acquainted with the contents of the Beitz paper through a preview that had been granted him.^{vii}

The *Gutachten* was produced in the spring of 1927. This was the procedure, as August Pieper describes it:

“in order to be as correct and careful as possible, it was determined in this important matter affecting the peace and unity of the Synod that each of the four of us should make a written appraisal without prior consultation with the others, that then the four appraisals should be jointly evaluated and then brought together by one of us. The amalgamation should then be again reviewed and after that put into final form.”^{viii}

When the time came to compare the four individual appraisals, only three were at hand. Koehler had not written his, choosing to devote the time to drafting blueprints for the proposed Thiensville Seminary plant. One

who lives on this hill and works in this building cannot but be grateful for any thought and effort that went into the planning of these beautiful buildings and grounds. One could at the same time wish that back in May 1927 a little less thought and effort had been devoted to preliminary blueprints by Professor Koehler and more to a first draft of a *Gutachten*. This whole story might then have had a much different and happier ending.

Professor Koehler was insistent that Pieper's appraisal should be the basis for the final form of the *Gutachten*. When Pieper brought in a revised draft after two weeks of work, Koehler's comments and suggestions involved:

1. a footnote on Beitz' frequent use of *we* that was changed by Meyer to Koehler's satisfaction;
2. the viewpoint of Koehler that what Beitz said about separating justification and sanctification could be correctly understood.

In the second matter, however, Koehler requested no changes in the Pieper text, assuming he could discuss and clarify the matter in a face-to-face discussion with Beitz. When the time for signing the *Gutachten* came, Koehler put his name at the top of the list of signatures.

In fairness to him, it must be remembered that he planned a meeting with Beitz to discuss the two documents with him and wanted the *Gutachten* held back until then. His colleagues had no objections to such an effort on Koehler's part but they pointed out that dealings with Beitz were officially a matter for Western Wisconsin District officials.

By the time Koehler got to see Beitz in the latter half of June the *Gutachten* was already in circulation. It had been sent to President Thurow and he, perhaps not aware of Koehler's intentions, distributed the printed pamphlet. Koehler's meeting with Beitz was unavailing and he put the blame for that on the early release of the *Gutachten*.

III. The Opposition of Koehler to the Faculty *Gutachten*

Upon returning from the fruitless meeting with Beitz, Koehler withdrew his signature from the *Gutachten*. Then he prepared an explanatory communication for Synod's pastors but was prevailed upon at the last minute not to send it. Somewhat later he did get to talk to Beitz but it was not on the basis of the *Gutachten*. Instead, Koehler developed his own writing, referred to as *Ertrag* which later became the basis for his explanation to the Synod in 1929 known as the *Beleuchtung*.

It is obvious that there would be heated discussions, first inside the faculty and then including also Board members and Synod officials. In faculty discussions Henkel, Heyer and Pieper stood by the *Gutachten's* charges that Beitz in his paper confused justification and sanctification, taught erroneously about repentance and judged and slandered. Koehler maintained that there were other ways of understanding what Beitz had written. Soon the divisive issue within the faculty boiled down to interpretation principles. Should a conference paper be judged on the basis of what its words actually say or should there be an allowance for the author's intent and the prevailing situation being addressed?

It is easy to write the whole issue off as a tempest in a teapot, differing interpretations of a somewhat imprecise and overdrawn conference paper. That would be a mistake. These were men who were professionals in the interpretation business. Their differences counted. These were men interpreting documents that had become rallying points in a divided and dividing Synod. One could wish that the Beitz paper and the *Gutachten* had not been elevated to that status. One could argue that neither is without its exaggerations. It is a fact, however, that a fellowship was forming around the Beitz paper and suspensions were being enacted for adherence to it. A division over the issue at the Seminary was hardly tolerable, given the situation that existed.

Even Koehler saw this clearly. At one point in the lengthy discussions, the date is late October 1927, Koehler was ready to "drop" Beitz because of the latter's unwillingness to offer any corrections or clarifications for his writings. In his explanation to those with whom he had been disputing Koehler declares:

“None the less I declare that I regret that I have in the fashion indicated played a part in the confusion of the Synod which I tried to clarify in both directions. If as a result it becomes clear that there is an unbridgeable gap between my view of the interpretation of a writing and that of my colleagues then it is clear to me that I can no longer work at the Seminary and place at your disposal my resignation.”

That was in the fall of 1927. The conflict would continue for three more years. It is understandable that new issues would arise in the prolonged controversy. There were dealings with different committees and on different levels. The telling of all of them would extend this meeting beyond all expectation. But one basic problem remained: Koehler’s opposition to the *Gutachten*.

Finally in the summer of 1929 Koehler tried to bring the dealings to a conclusion. He stated his unwillingness to continue meetings with those who wouldn’t or couldn’t understand him. He prepared a writing for Synod’s pastors prior to the 1929 Synod convention. This was his own *Gutachten* of the Beitz paper and a rejection of the faculty *Gutachten*. It is known as the *Beleuchtung*. That publication led directly, if not immediately, to

IV. The Removal of Koehler from His Seminary Post

The *Beleuchtung* is dated August 1, 1929. The Pieper-Meyer *Antwort* to it is dated August 9, 1929. On August 13, 1929, the Seminary Board supplied Koehler with this communication:

“Worthy Professor:

It is my grievous duty to communicate to you the following dismissal, arrived at by the Board on August 13, after they had read your document and the answer of Professors Pieper and Meyer.

We are unreservedly in agreement on all points with the reply written ... in answer to Professor Koehler’s ‘*Die Beitzsche Schrift und das Gutachten Beleuchtet*’ and therefore declare that Professor Koehler cannot continue in office at our Seminary and expect God to bless his efforts.

On behalf of the Board
W. Hoenecke, Secretary^{ix}

Koehler responded directly to the assembled synodical convention which gave the tragic development its attention. The convention called into being a new committee of five men to help the old and new Seminary Board in their difficult dealings. The Board’s termination resolution did not immediately go into effect. Instead, Koehler was relieved of Seminary teaching and administrative assignments and allowed to devote his time to the ordering of synodical archives and the writing of the synodical history. While these decisions were being made, the new Seminary was dedicated. The school year opened with only two teachers for the three classrooms. Professor Henkel had died. Professors Pieper and Meyer had to do double duty until Frederic Brenner and Max Lehninger accepted their calls.

Nothing was accomplished by the five-man committee appointed to deal with Koehler. Professor Koehler himself insisted that there could be no useful dealings unless there would be a review of the acceptance of the *Antwort*, of the resolution that he could no longer teach and of the subscription to the *Gutachten*. It is obvious that there could be no meeting of minds.

On May 21, 1930, Professor Koehler’s Seminary call was definitely and finally terminated. The stipulation was that on August 1 salary and housing would cease. Koehler made and gained the point that he had been granted a full year. In September he moved to Neillsville where his son Karl lived and worked. Several years later he finished work on his *History of the Wisconsin Synod*.

As has been related, formal ties between Koehler and the Wisconsin Synod were officially declared broken by resolution of the 1933 Convention of the Synod. What remains to be supplied in this writing on “The Parting of Professor Koehler and the Seminary” is a summary evaluation of the happenings and issues. This will be supplied in a closing section titled

V. The Departure of Koehler as a High Tragedy

Let me quote here verbatim from a Koehler letter written in that last sad school year, 1929-1930. It expresses exactly what this essayist is thinking:

“My historical labors cause me much trouble. If one could finish the matter off with a few dogmatic judgments, that would be simple. But to present historical events and circumstances and be just in one’s judgment to the matters in hand, that is difficult in events of the past, and strangely enough, the more intimate the material at hand the more difficult to do justice to it. And this is my situation here. To simply record official statements is not historical presentation. This is one of my peculiar conceptions. But I am thankful to God that I have it.”^x

Faith-Life reported the final May 1930 Board resolution that terminated Koehler’s call under a heading “La Commedia E Finita.”^{xi} The quotation should not be taken literally. It originates in *Il Pagliacci*. The story of “The Parting of Professor Koehler and the Seminary” is tragedy, high tragedy.

There is a form of tragedy where the characters are simply thrown into a tragic situation and without much action or intention move on to the fateful end. They are caught up in a situation. For example, Romeo loves Juliet and Juliet loves Romeo but they are members of feuding families. You can’t blame them for falling in love but when a Montague and Capulet are in love accidents will happen. Plague conditions delay a messenger. Tragedy results. The stage is littered with corpses.

There is something of this kind of tragedy to be seen in Koehler’s departure from the Seminary. Feuding factions got into a conflict at Watertown while Koehler was 4000 miles away. He could not remain aloof from the feuding. Efforts at peacemaking at Fort Atkinson fizzled. Resorting to a *Gutachten* approach only served to fan the flames. The tragedy simply moves on to its end.

Koehler was more onlooker than participant in the first acts and he saw clearly what was happening. Here are some illustrative excerpts from the Koehler-Zorn correspondence previously cited. Already on Sept. 21, 1927 he was writing:

“I fear that here things are developing and heading for a break. That is something that can bring joy to no hearts. But it must come to clean out much soot that has accumulated in the course of a man’s lifetime.”^{xii}

Three months later Koehler wrote this to Kurt Zorn after his offer to resign was not accepted:

“And so the storm passed. But the peace in the faculty has not yet matured to a heartfelt confidence. It is hard to say what will yet develop in the controversy.

It’s still quite probable that I shall have to step aside if the work here at the Seminary is to prosper in peace. The controversy is a crisis in the life of our Synod which I have long anticipated, but had not expected that it would come so soon and would zero in on us here.”^{xiii}

In December 1928 Koehler mentioned that E. Sauer’s tenure at Northwestern had ended and then declared:

“I expect the same in the near future. The dealings concerning this are already underway since the 8th of May. The proceedings have already come so far that a decision regarding me is already in the hands of the Board.”^{xiv}

The sense of the inevitable that Koehler felt and displayed makes the viewing of the happenings all that much more tragic. But there is another, a higher form of tragedy beyond the mere tragedy of the inevitable. It deals with a character, who because of his own character flaw brings tragedy on himself. Macbeth falls because in the pursuit of his ambition he is willing to see his “eternal jewel given to the common enemy of man.”

The suggestion is not that Koehler was ruthless or ambitious. Quite the contrary! The suggestion is rather that what he did and what he left undone played a part in the regrettable end of his Seminary career.

Koehler’s problem was not an overcommitment to history. This point deserves emphasis at this gathering. In his *Antwort*, a reply to Koehler’s *Beleuchtung*, August Pieper traces his colleague’s swing from vacillation to stand-patism back to “his historical viewpoint.”^{xv} Professor Pieper could on occasion exaggerate. This is one of the occasions.

At the same time one must acknowledge that in this crucial matter of the Beitz paper and the *Gutachten* Koehler did not always hew to one line. He was an agent in the *Gutachten*’s production but did not carry out his assignment. He signed the *Gutachten*. Subsequently he denounced it. How can the same person declare of a major section of a document that he signed that “What the *Gutachten*, along with the *Antwort*, says about this section of the Beitz paper is incorrect in every sentence”?

The Protestants point in this connection to the doublecross that forced Koehler to change tracks. He signed the *Gutachten* only with the stipulation that it would not be published before he could consult with Beitz personally. When a violation occurred Koehler had to renounce the *Gutachten* he had signed. One could wish even then that no signing would have taken place. And if “doublecross” is the point at issue, should not the position of cosigners of the *Gutachten* be taken into consideration also when dealings with Beitz proceeded on the basis of a new and different *Gutachten* or *Ertrag* without prior consultation?

Few would agree with August Pieper that Koehler’s approach to interpreting Beitz amounted to a denial of the great interpretation principle of the Reformation.^{xvi} There is and remains a difference in interpreting Scripture and a human writing. Koehler, however, and the Protestants cause trouble when they overstress what a conference paper might be assumed to mean over against what it actually says or could be interpreted to say.

Conference papers ought to be clear. If they are unclear, they ought to be clarified. Clarity is the name of the game. Anyone here who has written conference papers, I’m sure, would agree. One is hard put to go along with the proposition that a conference paper that has engendered its share of confusion must be granted the benefit of every doubt.

One will be ready to sympathize with Koehler in his efforts to espouse the cause of beleaguered women teachers at Fort Atkinson, the cause of an essayist under attack at Schofield and elsewhere and the cause of followers under threat of suspension. He went out on a limb, far out on a limb, for underdogs. That, however, may have been the real flaw, an unwillingness to repudiate followers and friends, disciples and devotees. Shades of Melanchthon and similar problems long ago!

Again, one can have a heart for Koehler’s efforts at peace-making. He came back from Germany to find a controversy raging in the Synod and his son a storm center. He tried to keep the peace when Fort Atkinson had its troubles, when his protege Ruediger was dismissed from his Seminary post, when Beitz and his paper were under attack and when enemy camps had been established. His concluding advice in his *Beleuchtung* states:

“I am of the mind that we should make an end of all strife and celebration (*feiern*); that we quietly in humility do the positive work we are called to do and trust the goodness of God that it will bring us in a quieter mood to knowledge and will bring the separated together again. If we were to agree in this viewpoint then the first step to healing would already have been taken.”^{xvii}

Peace and healing - yes; peace and healing at any price - no. To posture in the fall of 1929 that turning one's back and closing one's eyes to an adversery fellowship, the Protestant Conference, and to its aggressive publication, *Faith-Life*, already in its second volume, does not make sense from either an unsanctified or a sanctified viewpoint.

All this is reluctantly said. There is no joy in belaboring errors or misjudgments Koehler may have made. He remains the Wisconsin Synod's first historian. The point, however, needs to be made that our Synod was not necessarily selling its birthright, repudiating its heritage or forfeiting the "Wauwatosa Theology" when it had to terminate Koehler's Seminary post. Whether we like it or not, whether he wanted it or not, he had put himself in an untenable position by his stand in the burning Protestant controversy. He put himself there according to the dictates of his conscience and according to the viewpoints he held. The Synod reacted, also conscience and conviction bound.

ⁱ *Wisconsin Proceedings*, 1933, pp. 30.

ⁱⁱ *Wisconsin Proceedings*, 1866, p. 34.

ⁱⁱⁱ John Philip Koehler, *History of the Wisconsin Synod* (St. Cloud, Minnesota: Sentinel Publishing Company for the Protestant Conference, 1970). A second edition, necessitated when senior church history classes at the seminary bought out the first edition, appeared in 1981.

^{iv} J.P. Koehler, "Witness, Analysis, and Reply," *Faith-Life*, III (July 1930), Supplement, p. 6.

^v The excerpt is from the recently published "Koehler-Zorn Correspondence." See *Faith-Life*, LV (July/August 1982), p. 22.

^{vi} August Pieper and John Meyer in August 1929 put out a pamphlet, *Antwort* in the interest of refuting Koehler's *Beleuchtung*. The *Notschrei* remark is on p. 8. Hereafter the citation is abbreviated to *Antwort*.

^{vii} The *Antwort* describes this on p. 5. See also *Faith-Life*, II, 13.

^{viii} *Antwort*, p. 8

^{ix} *Faith-Life* reprints this letter in IV (July 1931), Supplement, p 6. See also Koehler's *History of the Wisconsin Synod*, "Introduction," XVIII.

^x *Faith-Life*, LV (January-February 1982), p. 23. This is another selection from the Koehler-Zorn correspondence.

^{xi} *Faith-Life*, III (June 1930), p. 11

^{xii} *Faith-Life*, LIV (September-October 1981), p. 13.

^{xiii} *Faith-Life*, LIV (September-October 1981), p. 16.

^{xiv} *Faith-Life*, LIV (September-October 1981), p. 20.

^{xv} *Antwort*, p. 74.

^{xvi} *Faith-Life* III (July 1930) Supplement, p. 6.

^{xvii} *Beleuchtung*, p. 13.