

JOHN PHILIPP KOEHLER  
AND THE  
CHURCH FELLOWSHIP ISSUE

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This paper is one small chapter in Wisconsin Synod Dogmengeschichte. Besides the intrinsic interest of the subject matter, the investigation is motivated by remarks made by Leigh Jordahl in a letter of January 4, 1978 which was subsequently published in Faith-Life. In the course of a historical sketch of the doctrine of unionism among nineteenth century "Old Lutherans," Jordahl presents his evaluation of the Wisconsin Synod's role:

Old Wisconsin did not really know the doctrine in any existential sense. For just that reason Wisconsin (way up into the 20's) was regarded as somewhat deficient in practice by Missouri. Wauwatosa did not cultivate it either and more or less regarded Missouri as a trifle eccentric on that score. What one might call a "tolerable eccentricity." There are traces of the dogma in John Schaller (which helps to explain the Reim-Schaller influence later) but not in Pieper or Koehler. Thus older Wauwatosa trained men did not absorb the doctrines either. The Protestants themselves demonstrate this in their attempt to remain faithful to old Wauwatosa. But it is also true of older Wisconsin men. Such a staunch Wisconsinite as E. E. Kowalke regarded the advice given to my sister in 1946 by a Missouri-trained orthodoxist as "pure fanaticism" (she had been told not to go to church at all when in Decorah because ELC churches were heterodox). Elmer Kiessling verifies also the shift that took place under the "new breed." E. A. Sitz simply states that the "peculiar interpretation of Romans 16:17-18 is one of the beggarly things we picked up along the way from Missouri." All that is not to say that Wisconsin before the 1930's was engaged in indiscriminate fellowshiping (though going back and forth to Iowa or Ohio Synod mission festivals was common and not really much censured), but that its practice was not rooted in the new doctrine of fellowship.<sup>1</sup>

Many of Jordahl's assertions would be difficult to investigate, and until careful historical study determines how much weight should be given to the incidental evidences,

it is best to refrain from apodictic conclusions in either direction.

But one area that can be investigated adequately (it happens to be the chief point of interest for the present writer and presumably for Jordahl as well) is John Philipp Koehler's conception of fellowship. The circumstances of his career were such that he frequently had occasion to express views touching on the matter. In a few of his writings he developed his views at length. His published works furnish a sufficiently large body of evidence to justify a careful assessment of his doctrine of fellowship.

Naturally we must be wary of the danger that attends all research into the history of thought: the danger of reading into old documents current nuances of thought. Dogmengeschichte has always suffered when legitimate dogmatic convictions have colored historical perception. But in the present inquiry the danger is somewhat lessened by the nature of the case. When Koehler addressed himself to the question of church fellowship, he was taking up a topic that had received thorough discussion among American Lutherans, especially among Synodical Conference Lutherans. We are not contemplating the early stages of a theological controversy where one would be most likely to encounter confusion on the part of some or all of the participants in the debate,<sup>2</sup> and where one would weigh the evidence of the documents accordingly. Since Koehler's career comes at an advanced stage in the long controversy about unionism, and since his writings give every indication of careful and penetrating thought on the whole issue, we should be ready to take him at his word even if his views diverge in some

respects from those of other Synodical Conference theologians.

Pertinent statements from Koehler's pen will now receive examination in roughly chronological order. The headings have been chosen for convenience of organization and are not intended to suggest changes or even clearly distinguishable stages in the development of his thought. Koehler's concerns seem to be the same throughout his professorial and post-professorial career. The only line of development which suggests itself is an increasing boldness in expressing his distinctive insights.

#### I. 1906 -- Early Essays

Two conference essays of 1906 had something to say about fellowship. For the Nebraska Synod convention at Plymouth, Koehler presented a paper on church discipline. At the Chicago convention of the Synodical Conference, he discussed the theme, "Endeavor to keep the unity of the spirit."

The essay on church discipline is broad in scope, of course, but it is of interest here because of the emphasis Koehler gives to doctrinal discipline. "The object of church disciplinary action can only be the transgression of a clear word of God, in other words, actual sin. . . .Accordingly, the first thing we should keep pure is the doctrine."<sup>3</sup> This priority characterizes his discussion throughout.<sup>4</sup> "When false doctrine can be presented in the congregation without finally being brought to an end, it has to create doubts about the truth of God's Word and do noticeable damage to the growth and health of congregational life."<sup>5</sup>

After giving due attention to the dangers of sin in matters pertaining to life, Koehler takes up the meaning of exclusion from the congregation. With Matt. 18:15ff. as his basis, he writes:

. . .the congregation declares the stiffnecked sinner to be one who no longer belongs to the congregation as a Christian, as a member of the body of Christ, thereby designating him as one who no longer belongs to Christendom, God's congregation. He is outside of the family of God' children, outside of the brotherhood of Jesus Christ and of the congregation. The Holy Spirit does not rule in him nor does the grace of God rule over him, but rather the wrath of the judgment. Thereby heaven is closed to him; he is a child of Satan. Accordingly one should withdraw oneself from Christian fellowship with him.<sup>6</sup>

He lays stress on such proceedings as "the sharpest preaching of the law" and warns against any behavior that would "break the point off of the seriousness of the exclusion. The excommunicated person must recognize and remain aware that he is regarded as a servant of the devil as long as he persists in his impenitence."<sup>7</sup> This has its place in doctrinal discipline, too. Koehler makes that evident by the priority he gives to doctrinal discipline throughout the essay and by his reference to passages such as 2 John 10 and 1 Timothy 6:5 as part of his discussion of excommunication.

It is puzzling that an essay which is in other respects comprehensive omits any mention of cases of doctrine discipline which would call for a verdict less severe than full excommunication. The distinction between excommunication and suspension was a commonplace in earlier Synodical Conference literature.<sup>8</sup> Strangely enough, we encounter the same omission a few years

later when August Pieper treated synodical suspension as a logical consequence of exclusion from the kingdom of God and declared it to be in all essential respects equivalent to excommunication.<sup>9</sup> When objections were raised against excommunicating whole congregations or proponents of non-fundamental errors, Pieper recognized that he had oversimplified matters and had written in a confusing manner. His published retraction<sup>10</sup> shows that he regarded these flaws in his previous articles as misstatements and not as a theological position which he had subsequently abandoned. Evidently Wisconsin and Missouri were fully agreed on this aspect of suspension (that it is in some cases less than excommunication) even if they disagreed in other respects. Accordingly it would be rash in Koehler's case to infer from his essay on church discipline that his unqualified manner of speaking about excommunication is rooted in an eccentric position.<sup>11</sup> His silence on the matter of suspension is perhaps an oversight; perhaps it stems from the reluctance of an exegete to speak decisively on matters which are not handled directly in Scripture.

As far as it goes, then, the essay is in the mainstream of Synodical Conference theology. But since Koehler did not pursue the implications of doctrinal discipline for non-fundamental errors, there is no way of telling from this essay whether he had a distinctive viewpoint on fellowship with heterodox Christians.

Much the same can be said of his essay for the 1906 convention of the Synodical Conference, "Endeavor to keep the unity of the spirit." In a thorough discussion of Eph. 4:3-6, Koehler interprets the "one faith" in the subjective

sense but also perceives the importance of doctrinal unity for unity in the spirit: "Unity of spirit and purity of doctrine condition each other."<sup>12</sup> In the development of this thought he remarks:

The connection seems to me to be this: We should preserve the unity in the spirit in order to remain firmly in purity of doctrine and through the pure doctrine to grow ever more firmly in the Lord Jesus and in this way to become a perfect man.<sup>13</sup>

Accordingly he has sharp criticism for the unionistic interpretation which stresses peace at the expense of unity:

Unity is the very thing the Union wishes to preserve, but how? Every union proceeds from external considerations--in Germany from political considerations, since the church was tied up with the body politic through the consistory. The people recognized that the Union would be more comfortable for them and used our text; for they incorrectly laid the stress on the word peace, while the unity of the spirit is the main thing in the apostle's eyes. Among the United Protestants (Unierten) the principle obtains: one should not dispute about doctrine since that is not so important. That amounts to saying, "Each may teach as he wishes," or, as someone put it once, "We agree to disagree." Right there it is all over for the truth of the gospel; under those circumstances unity in doctrine cannot be preserved.<sup>14</sup>

The point was sufficiently important to make a second appearance, this time with special application to the Synodical Conference:

In the sects, in the Union, and also among us wherever laxity prevails, people gladly construe this peace in such a way that they abandon purity and unity in doctrine as well as uniformity in practice. Above it was sufficiently demonstrated that purity and unity of doctrine must under all circumstances be preserved through God's Word. But the same is also true of practice. Practice should conform with God's Word, and if it does conform therewith it is uniform. Thus there can be no such peace for the sake of which disagreement in practice arises or is tolerated. According to the Scriptures there can be no talk of a peace (such as the Union imagines it) in which disagreement

in doctrine as well as in practice can arise; rather, the admonition that we should preserve the unity in the spirit through the bond of peace is important only for those who take a decided stand in doctrine and practice. Such a stance is assumed by the Scriptures in connection with this admonition. . 15  
For us, therefore, this exhortation is important.15

Koehler recognizes that unity in doctrine is in itself no guarantee of harmonious relations. His essay contains numerous encouragements toward humility, patience, and love as the proper defence against the egoism and party spirit which could disturb the unity of the Synodical Conference. The warnings were quite general, and the entire presentation was well received. The comments from the floor, printed in digest form, second the essayist's remarks, expand on them, or at most bring out a complementary emphasis. There is no sign of divergence from the traditional position on fellowship in the entire essay.

## II. 1914-1919 A Bolder Statement of Evangelical Concerns

The dates which appear in this heading are meaningful only as an indication of the period in which two major articles were published in the Theologische Quartalschrift: „Gesetzlich Wesen Unter Uns“<sup>16</sup> and „Die Kirchengemeinschaftsfrage.“<sup>17</sup> As was stated in the introductory remarks, evidences of Koehler's special concerns in these matters can be found throughout his career. But it is in these articles that they receive fullest treatment.

Koehler's concerns are summed up most comprehensively in the title „Gesetzlich Wesen Unter Uns“--"Legalism in Our Midst." Since the term "legalism" has suffered some abuse in our circles partly through a misunderstanding of Koehler's pene-



trating work, it is in place to give a pointed restatement of what he means by the word. He is not an antinomian in the historical sense, nor is he eager to soften the preaching of the law by an admixture of the gospel; rather, a confusion of law and gospel is exactly what he seeks to avoid, and this on every level of thought and action. By legalism he means a wrongful use of the forceful principle of law (whether through the misapprehension and misapplication of God's law or, worse yet, through the violent imposition of human ordinances) to condition attitudes and actions in a way that undercuts the gospel or detracts from its character.<sup>18</sup>

The scope of the article „Gesetzlich Wesen Unter Uns" is very broad, but in many places it touches on the matter of fellowship. We will consider only those portions which are pertinent here; then we will turn to the later article with its more circumscribed application of the same theology to the "Church Union Question."

One of the illustrative examples Koehler offers in „Gesetzlich Wesen" shows how far back his attention was occupied with the proper evangelical perspective toward different confessions. From his student days he recalls:

When Moody was in St. Louis at the end of the seventies and proclaimed the gospel of grace in a wonderfully fine manner, Walther in the classroom could not refrain from paying him recognition in the friendliest fashion without then toning this down with reservations in respect to his errors. One could feel that Moody was very dear to Walther. That won my heart at that time for the gospel of Walther and Moody, whereas the silly veneration, often carried on the cuff for Walther and always in opposition to someone else, often spoiled the joy in his presentation.<sup>19</sup>

Such experiences left their stamp on Koehler, as they do on many others; but in his case it was also a matter to be traced to its roots in the gospel and to be presented with all its implications as an integral part of evangelical theology.

Accordingly he had no use for the overdone dogmatism which has sometimes sought to support strict practice by rigorous insistence on the deduction: faced with continuing adherence to error, one cannot be confident of an opponent's personal Christianity. In connection with the distinction between law and gospel, he remarks:

It is not Lutherans alone that in the written and spoken word correctly express themselves with regard to the above facts. Indeed, even with such who theoretically have legalistic leanings one may note that at heart they are truly evangelical Christians. That again does not go for Lutherans only.<sup>20</sup>

But it was just this perception of the gospel among persons outside of one's confession which Koehler found to be somewhat lacking. His point was not that the gospel was actually being denied its efficacy in other confessions, but that this knowledge evidently could leave Lutherans unmoved. Herein he saw a paradox:

It is important to understand how in spite of this "evangelical consciousness," or perhaps by means of it, the legalism of the old Adam grows apace among Lutherans. We say by means of it, for there is an evangelical consciousness that really is none because it exists in the head only and thus operates in such a legalistic manner as though there were no such thing as the gospel.<sup>21</sup>

The implications of such a stance do not include indifference to doctrine or "soft-headedness" in doctrinal definition. That

is clear from the record of Koehler's participation in the intersynodical discussion of the doctrine of election.<sup>22</sup>

Other examples of his care in doctrinal matters are his criticisms of the "soft-headed" approach to confessional subscription<sup>23</sup> and his assessment of Muehlhaeuser's weakness in theological dialectics,<sup>24</sup> as well as the colloquy between the Wauwatosa faculty and Director Beer of Saginaw:

It here became evident that Beer, in deference to human psychology, persisted in the queer doctrine that the Scriptures, though without error, were not infallible, since they had passed through the medium of the human mind in the process of their inspiration and could not but have acquired some of its fallible character. That brought this third colloquium to nought.<sup>25</sup>

For Koehler, such things were not merely to be noted and analyzed. He criticizes also the "lack of character that overlooks the differences, which finally must lead to separation if one wishes to remain truthful."<sup>26</sup> He does not spell out the details of "separation" when it is conceived so generally. But in a case where the Word of God no longer finds a hearing, he recognizes the need for a word of sharp condemnation. Thus he approves Luther's action at Marburg:

Zwingli. . . had demonstrated his full-blown and fundamental rationalism and radicalism, not only in his writings but also in the Swiss position toward the rationalistic Anabaptists. Luther had a fine sense for this. To prove the spirits was a peculiar gift of his, and that right potent and pungent too. Since all efforts to bring all facets and factors of the word of God into play for faith proved futile over against Zwingli's position, Luther's action took the form of an ultimatum. Over against insistent falsity there is finally no alternative. Inner truthfulness demands this. But then it ceases to be a doctrinal discussion and becomes a preaching of the law.<sup>27</sup>

While seconding Luther's rebuke of Zwingli, Koehler by no means recommends that as the invariable treatment of anyone who could conceivably be labeled a persistent errorist. It certainly is not his idea to cultivate such an attitude simply on the basis of synodical membership. As an antidote to a one-sided treatment of errorists he discusses at some length the genuine ecumenical spirit<sup>28</sup>--an appreciation for gospel faith wherever it is found and an eagerness to promote the unifying bond of faith instead of merely dwelling on the existing differences. He adds:

It goes without saying, however, that evangelical sense does not sacrifice truthfulness. Therefore criticism will not be ruled out, but it will be colored by the Gospel. Is it necessary to go into detail to show what is meant by this? Instead of that let me relate two examples.<sup>29</sup>

The examples are the Moody/Walther incident already referred to and an experience which Koehler recalls as a blunder on his own part.

The Lutheran reader of the present generation, recognizing in Koehler's article an aspect of the fellowship question, is probably full of questions at this point. Why doesn't he expand on allowable courses of action? What would he say about prayer fellowship?--Koehler would dismiss such questions as showing a preoccupation with particular forms of fellowship, a shallowness of mind that would distort any answer into an untruth.<sup>30</sup> He preferred to show the nature of his concerns by a concrete example whose rightness would be intuitively obvious. But then someone with a strongly dogmatic cast of mind would ask a different question: Doesn't

this presentation make the status of the errorist too much a matter of doubt and thus undercut vigorous testimony against him?--This again he would dismiss as a desire to have things cut and dried in a way that would finally do violence to the facts of the situation. If the dogmatician warns against softening the law by appealing to the gospel here, Koehler warns against the opposite danger:

When our doctrinal discussions are carried on in such a tone that we are out to show the other: you are wrong, your position is incorrect, ours is correct; when correcting holds the spotlight and the regard for the growth of the unifying bond of faith is crowded into the dim background, then by all orthodoxy in gospel matters, there is present an intermingling of law and gospel, the arts of the legalist.<sup>31</sup>

To put it negatively, only in the face of manifest impenitence does one's testimony become law exclusively.

An occasion to repeat the same concerns presented itself in 1919. Prof. J. L. Neve of Hamma Divinity School at Wittenberg College in Springfield, Ohio published three writings in connection with the formation of The United Lutheran Church in America: The Galesburg Rule, The Justification for the Formation of Synods, and The Matter of Church Union and its Scriptural Base.<sup>32</sup> Neve asked Koehler for a response, and the result was the article "Die Kirchengemeinschaftsfrage."

After summarizing the contents of the three publications, Koehler takes up an extended discussion of the factors involved. Some of the points that emerge from the discussion are the following:

- 1) Explicit fraternal recognition of Neve.
- 2) Disavowal of partisanship and of "the intellectual position of dogmatical construction."

- 3) Analysis of the weakness inherent in the General Synod's concept of gradual education as a substitute for discipline.
- 4) Emphasis on the necessity of giving the objective gospel truths first place and of bringing practice into harmony with them, as in the old Missouri Synod of Walther's day, rather than letting unsound conditions determine the measure of confession and confessional practice. (In this connection Koehler vindicates the Synodical Conference's staunch position on pulpit and altar fellowship and congregational membership.)
- 5) Acknowledgement of shortcomings in Synodical Conference polemics.
- 6) Approval of Neve's concern to arrive at a more precise exegesis of the fellowship passages (though Koehler reasserts their applicability on a more basic level).
- 7) Discussion of the manner in which churches and larger unions are formed, a process which is legitimate only on the basis of confessional union (and this rules out the Roman and sectarian notions of the unity of the church as a matter of external organization).
- 8) Statement of the fellowship-creating character of the gospel under all circumstances.

The entire article is worthy of careful study, but here it will be enough to give additional attention to three of the above points.

The substitution of gradual education for discipline is carefully analyzed and vigorously rejected. Koehler's remarks strike exactly the right note as he steers between the dangers of compromise with sin and of shortchanging the gospel.

Gradual self-training is hardly feasible if one wishes to break the habit of smoking. In the putting aside of sin there is no such thing. . . . Points 2 and 3 of the Akron resolutions [in which the possibility of exceptions with regard to pulpit and altar fellowship is

raised to the level of a principle] as synodical resolutions, as provisions, always constitute an opportunistic maneuver, if not by intent, nevertheless in practice. The thought underlying Dr. Neve's "gradual self-training" is eo ipso a part of the evangelical proclamation of the truth; as soon as one makes a synodical regulation or a preventive measure of it, it becomes either law or politics. Both amount to the same thing. We Wisconsinites experienced this, too, when our synod in those days also resolved that lodge members in the congregation were to be carried as long as they were willing to receive instruction. That is well-meant, but in practice it leads astray. The Gospel must be appropriated and not handled as an expedient (Maszregel). Evangelical proclamation of the truth, that is the great issue.<sup>33</sup>

Secondly, the article closes with an eloquent statement of the proper manner of proclaiming the gospel, a manner which ought to prevail also in doctrinal discussions across denominational lines. The paragraph deserves to be quoted at length:

The Gospel is not a field for partisan contention, not even when face to face with the damned world. Hence it cannot be proclaimed as a partisan program. It is the deliverance, the rescue from all evil that wins the hearts and binds together the hearts thus won, wherever they may be. Hence it goes without saying that we acknowledge a proclamation of the Gospel and confess it, that is, embrace it, however and wherever we find it. This means strengthening what is weak. This does not exclude criticism; on the contrary, it includes it, but makes of it something far different from what the party man offers. Especially does it seek positively to restore and mend and not only negatively to tear down. But the positive building up consists in that I show another person how I am joined with him in sharing the Lord's deliverance, or should like to be thus joined. At the same time, this strengthens the sense for truth, whereas the party spirit on its part makes an untruth even of the Gospel. But it is again clear from this that such a perceptive view of the Gospel dare not be involved in deceitful manipulations or patchwork (unwahre Macherei oder Fixerei), as the whole deluded world, Christians included, now is, in almost every expression of opinion and every mode of procedure.<sup>34</sup>

It becomes obvious from a statement like this that Koehler's concept of fellowship begins with fellowship in Christ and remains firmly rooted on that level instead of shifting subtly toward a primarily denominational view of fellowship. It would be legitimate (though perhaps subject to misunderstanding) to designate his recommendation here as a form of practicing fellowship in the Una Sancta. About other forms of expression of fellowship he says nothing except by implication. His foremost concern in this closing paragraph is that gospel testimony should keep its integrity as a liberating proclamation with respect to both content and manner of testifying.

The third point that calls for comment is Koehler's treatment of Neve--surely a persistent errorist by present standards of identification. Here some of Koehler's abstract conceptions become concrete in a way that can hardly escape notice even by the reader who finds Koehler difficult to follow. The basis on which he makes his evaluation of Neve is stated thus:

In the writings of Dr. Neve we meet up with a behavior pattern based on the Confessions. It seeks without bias to do justice to the questions before which the author is placed through his synodical membership. For which reason already, since here the spirit of the Gospel reigns, one dare not seek to avoid a confrontation; and I have the confidence that no evil wrangling will result if we speak in unvarnished terms of the relevant matters.<sup>35</sup>

Accordingly Koehler gives him this testimonial:

I am convinced that Dr. Neve and I are brothers in Christ, children of God who finally know that we of ourselves and above all also as members of the General Synod and of the Synodical Conference are nothing before God and in the practical life of history, so that everything we wish or do, insofar as it proceeds from us or from our sur-



roundings, is nothing. . . .In this agreement and common unity we, in the light of the truth of the Gospel, wish to consider the practical situation lying before us.<sup>36</sup>

In connection with this instance of fraternal recognition, it is worth noting that Koehler sacrificed nothing of his doctrine to do so: "I am a member of the Synodical Conference and support the confessional stand of my synod in every point."<sup>37</sup> And while giving witness to his doctrinal position, he also puts conservative practice into the best possible light by the profound and deeply evangelical case he makes for it throughout the article. Only the outcroppings of legalism among Synodical Conference members--primarily the failure to give the gospel its due when confessed by an outsider--come in for criticism. Such failings Koehler opposes by word and example.

This aspect of the article is perhaps the most unmistakable evidence for Jordahl's contention concerning a shift on the fellowship issue from the Wauwatosa era to more recent times. When Koehler's abstract concerns take the form of explicit fraternal recognition of Neve, he is doing something which some later writers rule out completely.<sup>38</sup> The latter point of view establishes itself by pressing the traditional stand against unionism to include every conceivable persistent errorist and every conceivable manifestation of fellowship, and by supporting the conclusion with the assertion: faith in the heart is invisible, and confession of the gospel is vitiated by any persistent error. Koehler was evidently aware of the extremes of dogmatism in this area and he rejected them. The soundness of his action over against Neve can be seen in the content and tone of the article: Koehler speaks the truth in love and sacrifices nothing.

The appearance of such an article in the Theologische Quartalschrift has implications for the historian. The viewpoint is Koehler's own, but it can not have been too dissimilar from that of his colleagues on the seminary faculty. Although Koehler omitted the proofreading of his colleagues articles,<sup>39</sup> they were more thorough in this capacity. In the previous year, portions of his „Unsere Schuld am Weltkrieg" had been cut before publication at their instance. The present writer knows of no disagreement on the part of Pieper or Schaller with „Die Kirchengemeinschaftsfrage," nor would one expect it, since the theology of the article is no different from that of a previous Quartalschrift essay, „Gesetzlich Wesen Unter Uns." It would be interesting to find out whether the St. Louis faculty took exception.<sup>40</sup> At any rate, no disciplinary action resulted. If Koehler's criticisms were not welcomed in the Synodical Conference, his position on fellowship was at least tolerated.

### III. A Miscellany from Later Years

The publication of „Die Kirchengemeinschaftsfrage" takes us to the end of the 1910s, at which time the Minnesota intersynodical movement was in progress. Koehler became a participant in the discussions during the next decade when he and John Meyer replaced John Schaller and Herman Meyer as Wauwatosa Seminary representatives (the latter two died in 1920). An editorial note in Faith-Life alludes to that period:

The dogmatism and rigoristic policy in the matter of prayer fellowship which has been observed by the Synodical Conference, specifically the Missouri Synod, has always been frowned upon by the best thought in the Wauwatosa Theology, as for instance at the inter-synodical conferences of the early twenties, though it was never made an issue.<sup>41</sup>

Evidently Karl Koehler is writing here, and the "best thought" points to his father. It is difficult to know exactly how much to make of this reference because of its vagueness. One can hardly reconstruct a comprehensive position on prayer fellowship from such an allusion.

A few additional remarks will help to put the matter into its proper historical and theological context. These intersynodical discussions had the benefit of a very promising beginning in Minnesota pastoral conferences. Prospects were bright for sound confessional unity. The intersynodical committee which pursued the matter also got off to a good start. The report in the 1919 convention proceedings of the Wisconsin Synod showed great strides toward recognizing complete unity and included the favorable observation:

In its report about these discussions your committee wishes to emphasize two things especially: first, that they have all been conducted in a friendly spirit with respect on both sides (not one spiteful word has yet been spoken), and secondly, that they have also been free (as far as men can judge) from unionistic interests. No one seeks to cover differences, but rather to remove them. Thus in Columbus after a vote was proposed, no vote was taken because a member of the Ohio committee expressed fear that the words would not be understood the same by all.<sup>42</sup>

Such was the situation when Koehler became directly involved. In many respects the outlook was similar to the one Walther faced in the free conferences of the 1850s, and Walther had seen fit to practice prayer fellowship. All the same, one can guess why Koehler would not have "made an issue" of

prayer at the discussions if some of the participants were opposed to it. For him the essential thing would be happening anyway: the mutual praise of God's grace by those who confess the same great truths of the gospel. To insist on the outward aspects of joint prayer when the essence of it was there would have been superficial in Koehler's eyes.

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From his last years as a member of the seminary faculty comes a letter (Sept. 24, 1928) to his young friend and former student, Kurt Zorn, in which this reference to the Protes'tant controversy occurs:

It isn't just a happenstance that controversies are arising especially in our Lutheran circles, controversies which are at once blown out of proportion as doctrinal differences. It is self-evident that we consider it of prime importance to uphold doctrinal purity, But Paul says too that we should do so through the bond of peace. Here both contending parties do not want to acknowledge this. And in a given practical case it is not always easy to do that. But in our times especially, it seems to me, matters are of such a nature that we must emphasize peace toward those who carry on the controversy.<sup>43</sup>

It becomes apparent that Koehler's reference to Eph. 4:3 does not reflect a shift from the interpretation he set forth twenty-two years earlier in his Synodical Conference essay. He was convinced that the doctrinal unity which St. Paul presupposes was still present but was being threatened by personal factors on both sides, including a lack of the very thing the apostle urges: a desire to cultivate the bond of peace so that the unity of the spirit may survive.

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A large fund of pertinent material is available in Koehler's History of the Wisconsin Synod. It is too extensive to quote

at length here. The overall emphases are unmistakable: the appreciation for confessional Lutheranism and the practice which promotes it, and at the same time a keen perception of and distaste for polemics which overshoot the mark.

The former concern is evident at every turn and is particularly prominent in his presentation of the early years when the Wisconsin Synod struggled to establish a strong Lutheran position. With respect to that goal there is no difference between Koehler and other Synodical Conference theologians. But the latter concern--the sophrosyne of the theologian<sup>44</sup>--was Koehler's special interest, and so here it is in order to illustrate the care he exercised in this area.

The nature of his caution is seen most clearly in his use of some of the words which convey drastic implications in their original Biblical or historical setting and thus aggravate controversy when used indiscriminately. For example, speaking of the implications of the thought "in Christ," he notes:

However, one who cannot see things this way is not necessarily a heretic; a theologian who operates with the intuitu fidei is not for that reason a false prophet. But John and Luke knew nothing about it, as little as Paul, and the use of the device (which it is) bespeaks a faulty approach to the interpretation of the Bible and a misguided theology. Such a theology, when coupled with traditionalism and dogmatism, is not readily open to conviction, but that is not saying it has no appreciation for the Gospel.<sup>45</sup>

In the same vein he writes:

[A Christian] does not feel the need of protecting the universality of His grace, about which Dr. Schuette was concerned, and, for that purpose, of rationalizing the doctrine of election. And finally, from the same background of faith, he

will not offhand suspect Dr. Schuette of synergism and Pelagianism, but class such procedures with the "inconsistencies" of the opponents, to use Dr. Hoenecke's term.<sup>46</sup>

Another word which figures largely in American Lutheran history and which Koehler discusses and applies with some care is "unionism." Rather than adduce extensive quotations, let it suffice to refer to his distinction between the unionism of the late eighteenth century and that of the nineteenth<sup>47</sup> and to his definition of a "unionistic synod" as one which stands in principle for a union of different confessions.<sup>48</sup>

#### IV. Conclusions

It ought to be clear that Koehler and the rest of the theologians of the Synodical Conference were agreed on at least the larger aspects of the fellowship issue. This conclusion is in part a direct inference from historical fact, above all the fact of his long career as a seminary professor. (That he was suspended from synodical membership in 1933 for fraternizing with the Protestants has little enough to do with his doctrine of fellowship and everything to do with his analysis of and experiences in the controversy.) Secondly, the conclusion follows from the content of his writings, especially his 1906 essays and his 1919 defense of the Synodical Conference position on pulpit and altar fellowship.

In the area of individual attitudes and actions it must be acknowledged that a difference emerges. This is clearest in the matter of fraternal recognition. How far the difference extends is difficult to say.

Whatever judgment will be rendered in this matter will depend largely on the individual's cast of mind. The present

writer is convinced that Koehler's concerns are valid and ought not to be overthrown in the interest of absolute logical consistency--the "intellectual position of dogmatical construction" carried to the extreme. One testing point is provided by Koehler's remark: ". . .it is assumed, is it not, in the contest for the form of sound words, that we have to do with such who are the faithful in Christ Jesus."<sup>49</sup> Perhaps it is not to be assumed so readily in all cases, but that is not a decisive consideration here. What becomes objectionable is the rigorous logic which insists that absolutely no persistent errorist (as those words are understood today) may be regarded with confidence as a Christian. Then one's position would be tinged with fanaticism. The men of the Wauwatosa faculty (not Koehler only) fought the battle for confessional Lutheranism resolutely and profoundly without involving themselves in such a position. The same can be done today.

## NOTES

[Wherever possible the writer has made use of published translations of Koehler's writings as found in Faith-Life or the Protes'tants' edition of his History of the Wisconsin Synod. Only in the case of essays and other items drawn from various convention proceedings is the translation my own.]

- 1) Faith-Life (hereafter FL) LII, 1 (Jan./Feb., 1979), p. 15a,b.
- 2) The early years of the Wisconsin-Missouri discussion of church and ministry afford a notable example of unclarity at the beginning of a controversy.
- 3) Synodal-Bericht. . . der Deutschen Evangelisch-Lutherischen Synode von Nebraska u. a. St., 1906, p. 25.
- 4) Ibid., p. 28.
- 5) Ibid., p. 29.
- 6) Ibid., p. 39.
- 7) Ibid., p. 40.
- 8) This is apparent from references listed in E. Eckhardt's Homiletisches Reallexikon under the entries Bann and Kirchenezucht.
- 9) Theologische Quartalschrift (hereafter TQ), VIII, 2, pp. 106 ff. and 3, pp. 130ff. (April and July, 1911).
- 10) TQ XVIII, 2, pp. 95-97 (April, 1921).
- 11) This is in keeping with Koehler's remarks on Pieper's articles many years later in the closing portions of his History of the Wisconsin Synod (The Protes'tant Conference, 1970), p. 236a.
- 12) Konferenz-Bericht. . . der Evang.-Luth. Synodalkonferenz, 1906, p. 23.
- 13) Ibid., p. 23.
- 14) Ibid., p. 25.
- 15) Ibid., pp. 29-30.
- 16) TQ XI, 4, pp. 231-241; XII, 1, pp. 24-42, 2, pp. 97-108, 3, pp. 147-169 (Oct. 1914-July 1915). Here the quotations will be taken from the translation by Alex Hillmer which was published serially in FL beginning with XXV, 7 (July, 1952), pp. 9ff.



- 17) TQ XVI, 2 (April 1919), pp. 102-120. A translation by Alex Hillmer in FL XLII, 2 (March/April 1969), pp. 7-13 under the title "The Question of Church Union" is the source of the quotations in this paper.
- 18) This summary is substantiated by Koehler's remarks on the word gesetzlich in conjunction with his exposition of law and gospel at the beginning of the article.
- 19) FL XXV, 9, p. 11b.
- 20) FL XXV, 8, pp. 8b-9a. Koehler was not alone in this. August Pieper did not hesitate to speak in a similar fashion while recalling F. Stellhorn in an obituary:

He was Ohio's great leader in the controversy with us, and he conducted it in the strongly personal manner which prevailed at that time, also among us. He was the foremost scholarly defender of Intuitu-fideism. It was a consequence of his kind of theology: logical reasoning. Personally Dr. Stellhorn was known to us as a pious man who clung in his heart to grace alone.

--my translation, TQ XVI, 2 (April 1919), p. 158. Cf. also Pieper's remarks concerning the Reformed, TQ XXVIII, 1 (Jan. 1931), p. 11.

- 21) FL XXV, 8, p. 9a.
- 22) His own account in the History of the Wisconsin Synod, pp. 244b ff., is sufficient evidence.
- 23) Ibid., p. 129a.
- 24) Ibid., p. 40a.
- 25) Ibid., p. 222b.
- 26) FL XXV, 9, p. 11b.
- 27) FL XXV, 9, p. 10b. How much Koehler means to say when he applies the phrase "insistent falsity" to Zwingli (and potentially to other errorists) is not immediately clear. A 1925 publication which was incorporated into the History of the Wisconsin Synod offers some clarification (that Koehler may have reconsidered his evaluation of the Marburg Colloquy between 1914 and 1925 is possible but unlikely). He writes: "At any rate, the political interests and aims of Zwingli and his friends moved them at Marburg, which is not accusing them of a lack of good faith or denying their Christian faith" (History of the Wisconsin Synod, p. 7b). It is difficult to follow all the implications of Koehler's contention here because he on the one hand approves

of Luther's condemnation of the Zwinglians and on the other adopts an assessment of the Zwinglians which falls short of Luther's. Luther did not hesitate to label them extra ecclesiam before, during, and after the Marburg Colloquy.

- 28) FL XXV, 9, pp. 11a-12a.
- 29) FL XXV, 9, p. 11b.
- 30) He said as much later in his article, „Die Kirchengemeinschaftsfrage“; cf. FL XLII, 2, p. 11a,b.
- 31) FL XXV, 9, p. 12a.
- 32) The titles are quoted from FL XLII, 2, p. 7, which is a translation of Koehler's German. Since Koehler had translated Neve's titles from English, there may be some discrepancy between Neve's originals and the titles given here.
- 33) FL XLII, 2, p. 10b. The reference to the lodge issue summarizes a point made at length in the first installment of Koehler's series „Wie greifen wir das Logenwesen recht an?“ (TQ VII, 4 [Oct. 1910], pp. 242ff.). Walther by contrast was so conscious of the debt of love owed to a weak brother that he wrote in a private letter: "If a congregation has the stipulation in its constitution that no member of a secret society can be a member of the congregation, I consider that a mistake and very harmful, especially in areas where those societies predominate" (Walther Speaks to the Church: Selected Letters By C. F. W. Walther, ed. Carl S. Meyer [St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1973], p. 79). That minor difference in conception between Koehler and Walther illustrates the difficulty of formulating rules for practice and the inadvisability of haste in the use of the word "lax." There was nothing essentially lax in Walther's conception, though it might well result in laxity if it were formulated as a synodical rule.
- 34) FL XLII, 2, p. 13b.
- 35) FL XLII, 2, p. 8a.
- 36) FL XLII, 2, p. 9a.
- 37) FL XLII, 2, p. 13a.
- 38) E. g., E. Schaller, "Concerning Christian Brotherhood and Christian Fellowship: Their Relation and Certain Practical Questions Involved" (TQ XLV, 2 [April 1948], pp. 87-97).
- 39) History of the Wisconsin Synod, p. 238b.
- 40) A cursory examination of the issues of Lehre und Wehre subsequent to „Die Kirchengemeinschaftsfrage“ revealed nothing in the nature of a reaction or rebuttal.
- 41) FL XIV, 8 (August 1941), p. 12a.

- 42) Synodal-Bericht. . .der Allgemeinen Evangelisch-Lutherischen Synode von Wisconsin u. a. Staaten, 1919, p. 159.
- 43) FL LIV, 5 (Sept./Oct., 1981), p. 17a.
- 44) History of the Wisconsin Synod, p. 255b.
- 45) Ibid., pp. 248b, 249a.
- 46) Ibid., p. 248a.
- 47) Ibid., p. 50b.
- 48) Ibid., p. 80b.
- 49) FL XXV, 8, p. 9b.