

J.P. Koehler's *History of The Wisconsin Synod*

by Irwin J. Habeck

[*The History of the Wisconsin Synod*, by John Philipp Koehler, edited and with an introduction by Leigh D. Jordahl. Published by *Faith-Life*, 2307 14th St., Two Rivers, Wis. 54241; printed by Sentinel Publishing Co., St. Cloud, Minn., 260 plus XXIX pp. \$8.50]

To read through this volume of 289 8" × 10½" pages, each of which has two columns of small print, is no small undertaking—but it is rewarding. At times it becomes almost an autobiography, at times the reader is swamped with a mass of details, at times matters are revealed which might better have been covered with the mantle of charity, but in general the history of the Wisconsin Synod is told in such a way that it becomes evident how the Lord's work went forward in its midst in spite of human unworthiness and imperfection. It is our purpose to focus upon some of the unique features in the history of the Synod in such a manner that the author will frequently be quoted.

Growth toward Confessional Soundness

At its beginning the Wisconsin Synod took no sharply defined confessional position and was involved in unionist associations both in this country and with European mission societies, and in unionist practice in some of its congregations. It even showed an aversion to orthodox Lutheranism because of the rigidity and harsh criticism that it found in the Old Lutheran bodies of the Midwest. Of Muehlhaeuser, the first president of the Synod, Koehler says: "By and large, it must be said that Muehlhaeuser's influence was not along the lines of confessional development which the growth of a Lutheran synod among the Germans of the Midwest called for. His aim was directed toward the gathering of souls... So Muehlhaeuser was not the founder of the Wisconsin Synod's confessionalism, nor did he organize it as it developed. But what he represented was no less great, a personal living faith, child-like trust in his Savior, and a burning zeal to build His Kingdom and spend himself in the work" (p. 72). Though at first there was no clarity, there was desire. Koehler says: "Barring the disproportionately large number of incompetent preachers that at the start victimized the young body, and gave it a bad name before they disappeared from the scene, the old Wisconsin Synod must be credited with the sincere aim and endeavor of being a Lutheran synod" (p. 162). The history shows in detail how the Synod grew into a sound confessional position and in the course of time entered into confessional fellowship with the Missouri Synod and a little later with other orthodox Lutheran bodies in the old Synodical Conference. In retrospect Koehler speaks approvingly of "nearly a century of consistent doctrinal training" (p. 65) in the Synod.

Doctrinal conviction means separation from those who dissent from one's doctrinal position. Koehler writes: "A faithful Christian will not suffer his convictions to be overruled, especially when he has been confirmed in them by a thorough study of the Bible. But this firmness of his need not entail any lessening of his love for the neighbor of another faith... Nor will a faithful Christian suffer any disparagement of the Good Book that has brought him the glad tidings of salvation. A faith that tolerates such a thing has already gone on the rocks... A faithful Christian will not suffer any attack on or compromise of his creed, because that spells a denial of the love for our Savior who paid a great price for us, and of the love for our fellow believers" (p. 7). Koehler speaks of drawing "the necessary Pauline conclusion of separation" (p. 19). He recognizes that this must apply also to prayer: "The fathers were more liberal in receiving advisory members or guests. When a member of Synod presented an acquaintance of his at the synod, he was welcomed as a guest and took part in the deliberations without credentials of an orthodox synod or the certificate of a colloquium. No one had any scruples even about asking such guests to lead the assembly in prayer... It was a lack of sound confessionalism, a sort of camaraderie that the Lutherans of the east had copied from the sects as they became increasingly Anglicized; thence Muehlhaeuser brought it with him to Wisconsin" (p. 72). So growth in confessional

consciousness led to a termination of unionist involvements in this country and abroad and to an endeavor to avoid unionism in congregational and synodical life.

It seems inconsistent that in another connection Koehler says: “A theologian who operates with the *intuitu fidei* is not for that reason a false prophet” (p. 248).

In his presentation of this phase of the Synod’s history Koehler’s deep love for the Word and for the Lutheran doctrine drawn from the Word ring through. These remarks are significant: “When it is a question of divine doctrine, the individual Christian finally has to do with the Word of God alone. When it is a question of history, however, everything that obtains here on earth plays a part; and that often leaves things uncertain, because human matters are looked at from different sides and by different people” (p. 251). Koehler presents an interesting item concerning Director Beer of Michigan Lutheran Seminary in the very early part of this century: “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” (p. 222). Truly, there is nothing new under the sun.

The Historical-Exegetical Approach

The Wisconsin Synod was led into this approach apparently by Koehler, but with the collaboration of his colleagues on the Seminary faculty, Aug. Pieper and John Schaller, which he does not fail to acknowledge. It was opposed to what Koehler calls “dogmatism,” which he in one place describes as “the Old-Lutheran manner of that day of citing the fathers’ writings and arguing on their basis, instead of simply digging into the Scriptures” (p. 33). He comments: “The exclusive study of the fathers has always been accompanied by the dominance of reason, of theory, and of partisanship” (p. 33). With dogmatics itself there was no quarrel. Koehler consistently speaks highly of Drs. Walther and Hoenecke, both of them his teachers. Of the relation between dogmatics, history, and exegesis Koehler has this to say: “In the study of theology, dogmatics and history occupy parallel positions; the former presenting the inner connection of the divine purpose of salvation and its revelation in the Word of God, the latter telling the story of the working out of the divine plan on earth through the ages. The center of study is the exegesis of the Scriptures, which forms the basis both for doctrinal theology and the teaching of history, and it deals with both. Luther knew what he was saying when he urged that the study of the languages be fostered. The immediate word or words of the Scriptures are more important than dogmatical terms... It is significant that such a great part of the Scriptures is devoted to history, which fact alone should suffice to assign history its rightful place alongside of dogmatics as a theological study” (p. 208). Concerning Hoenecke, Koehler says that from him “he learned to observe the right method of the dogmatician, who builds on careful exegesis of language and history to convey to the human mind no more and no less, and hence not otherwise either than Scripture does, the eternal divine truths which the Spirit has revealed unto faith” (p. 214).

The “Analogy of Faith”

Of this term, which is a rendering into English of the Greek in Romans 12:6, Koehler says: “The expression had been used for over fifteen hundred years in the church as a technical principle of interpretation... The general idea remained that every teaching, and hence the interpretation of the respective Scriptures, must be ‘analogous’, that is, conform, to the doctrine of the Bible otherwise. The indiscriminate use of this principle in the attempt to explain the mysteries of Bible truth had served to emasculate some of its most vital teachings, e.g. the doctrine of election” (p. 212). Any interpretation of a passage, no matter how inept it might be, was allowed to stand if it conformed to the “analogy of faith.” On the other hand, no matter how clear a passage might be, if it seemed to conflict with the “analogy of faith,” its meaning was twisted to fit into a preconceived system of doctrine.

Now it is a valid hermeneutical principle that obscure passages of Scripture are to be understood in the light of clear passages that treat of the same matter. “To Hoenecke, Scripture was always clear; in the case of the so-called obscure passages, the lack of clarity is with the reader, not the Word of God; that also applies to enlightened reason” (p. 244). What Koehler objected to was using a passage to say what it was not intended to say, so that there is no Scriptural warrant for the use that had been made of the term “analogy of faith.” “The Apostle is not stating a technical principle of hermeneutics in Rom. 12:6 but saying that in the matter of the gift of ‘prophecy’ such prophesying should be according to the proportion of faith (as it is translated quite aptly in the English Bible); in other words, those in the early church endowed with this particular gift should confine themselves in their prophesying, its content, scope, and exercise, to the measure or degree of faith with which they were endowed, by virtue of which they could exercise such gift through the Spirit; they should not try to go into higher flights of their own (cf. v. 3)” (p. 212).

Predestination

The Wisconsin Synod had come through the controversy concerning predestination and conversion firmly allied with the Missouri Synod in insisting that according to Scripture the grace of God alone is the determining factor. The Ohio Synod took a contrary position and left the Synodical Conference. When after two decades intersynodical meetings were held to try to remove the differences, the historical-exegetical approach again came to the fore, especially in the discussion of Ephesians 1:4: “According as he hath chosen us in him before the foundation of the world.” Those of the other side contended: “The ‘in Him’ belongs to ‘us’, God has chosen us who are in Christ by faith, and that is the *intuitu fidei*” (p. 245). Koehler comments: “The Scripture envisions ‘us’, the Christians, who are by nature sinners, with the assurance that our election has taken place ‘in Christ’. This modifier cannot be taken as an attribute of ‘us’ (‘us who are in Christ, sc by faith’) since that connection would require the definite article in Greek. Rather, ‘in Christ’ is an adverbial modifier indicating that our election has taken place for the sake of Christ. And the emphasis is on this adverbial phrase ‘in Christ’. That appears both in the Greek and in the translation from the rhythmic flow of the language; the ‘according as’ at the beginning of v. 4, too, which refers back to the emphatic ‘in Christ’ at the end of v. 3, indicates that the emphasis in the election statement v. 4 is on its adverbial ‘in Him’ ” (p. 245).

The Church and the Ministry

The historical-exegetical approach also was used in connection with these doctrines. Concerning a general pastoral conference in 1892 Koehler reports on a paper concerning the teacher’s call that was presented by Director Hoenecke of the Seminary. “He attached the teacher’s call to the pastorate in the usual way. Along these lines: Since the public administration of Word and Sacrament is delegated to the pastorate of the congregational body, the parochial teacher, however, also is appointed for public teaching, it becomes necessary, since the Word of God does not specifically mention the parochial school teacher, to incorporate this office in some way with the pastorate. The teacher, then, should receive a regular call from the congregation, in accordance with the Augsburg Confession’s demand that no one is to teach publicly in the church without a regular call. And the teacher’s work is to be subject, of course, to the pastor’s supervision. Thus the call of the teacher is to be considered divine, like that of the pastor.

“This was questioned: ... Why detour through the office of the pastor in order to establish the divine character of the teacher’s call? That which distinguishes the pastor’s call and exalts it above others is the fact that he ‘labors in the word and doctrine.’ That is what the Twelve asserted of themselves (Acts 6:2–4), and the same Paul says of the elders (I Tim. 5:17). It is likewise true of the parochial school teacher; and he is called thereto by the congregation. Why then should not Acts 20:28: ‘The Holy Ghost hath made you overseers over the flock’ apply to teachers as well as to pastors, and to the other church officers whose work does not constitute laboring in the Word in its specific sense, but who are also to be classed with the elders and bishops

(the ‘elders’ of Ephesus are called ‘bishops’ Acts 20, and there were ‘elders’ who did not labor in the Word, I Tim. 5:17). Prof. Hoenecke acknowledged the comment as novel and worthy of careful study” (p. 232).

Concerning the word “publicly” in the Augsburg Confession there is this comment: “*Publice* refers to what is connected with the public, state, community, congregation, and is done by their authority, officially” (p. 232). “So it was a matter of order which on earth is governed by the changes of time and circumstances, just so it is sensible and serves the Gospel. It is not a matter of Scriptural ordinance, and a congregation may very well, for a common-sense reason, make different arrangements than we have at present, regarding the relationship between pastor and teacher and other offices. The Bible itself, indeed, reports on changes, not only between Old and New Testament institutions, but in the organization of the apostolic church during the short space of fifty years” (p. 232).

At another conference in 1909 an essayist set forth this position: “There is only one office in the church, that of the pastor, the pastorate, which is divinely ordained... All other offices that have been created in the course of church history are deaconate offices, that is, auxiliary offices, not ordained by God but branched off from the pastoral office by the church in the exercise of its Christian liberty. Such offices are those of the parochial school teacher, the church council, the high school, college, and seminary professors, the synod presidents, visitors, missionaries, etc. The basis offered for this presentation was the organization of the deaconate, Acts 6.

“Koehler showed that this procedure was a falsely so-called dogmatical method of determining a doctrine by citing doctrinal statements of the Scriptures without paying attention to the historical context and its way of presenting things. The very texts cited to substantiate the divine institution of the pastorate in distinction from other offices are thereby given a wrong slant...

“In the statements about prophets, evangelists, pastors, teachers, miracle workers, healers, rulers, those gifted with tongues, elders, bishops, they are mentioned alongside of the apostles and deacons in that order, so their successive appearance in order of time is indicated thereby; and all these activities are of divine origin, so the ‘God hath set some in the church...’ (I Cor. 12:28) is not simply identical with the institution of the ministry of the Word and Sacraments Matthew 28:19. ‘The Holy Ghost hath made you overseers’ (Acts 20:28) is a figurative expression for divine providence in the propagation of the Gospel, which may differ according to time, place and circumstances, and pertains to the ministry (*διακονία*, both as to commission and execution...)” (p. 232). “This ministry, in its human forms, is no longer, as a matter of New Testament liberty, tied to the Old Testament ceremonial law, though that doesn’t spell freedom to do things contrary to the will of God or without the promptings of the Holy Ghost; it means that Christians are free to organize and carry on their ministry according to the moral values that are inherent in the concept of the fellowship that is sanctified by communion with our Lord and Savior” (p. 237).

What the historical-exegetical approach found in Scripture concerning the church is thus summarized: “Christ has only one concept of the church, but at Matthew 18, He, of course, speaks of the (in time and space) localized church as a part of the whole, the congregation of those Christians directly concerned in the matter of the brother’s sinning. That may mean a synod as well as a so-called ‘*Ortsgemeinde*’ (local congregation). Matthew 18:17 refers to all the believers affected by the sin that is under consideration. They are affected in two respects: the sin is an offense to them, and they want to help the erring brother. As a matter of Christian course, the larger body will consider the smaller group that is involved by further ties with the erring brother. But that cannot mean that a righteous judgment pronounced by the larger body, say a synod, is not honored in heaven until the smaller has had its say. And it is the effectiveness in heaven around which Matthew 18 revolves, not outward organization membership here on earth. Excommunication, finally, rightly understood is not an enforcement of damnation, but should serve the sinner’s ultimate salvation, by bringing him around, and, failing that, serve the sanctification of the church. It is a part of the preaching of the Law and as such as much a part of the individual Christian’s function, as a witness of Christ, as of the individual congregation; and again: as much a part of a synod’s function as of the individual local congregation.

“The contention regarding the present distinction between local congregation and synod, to wit: that the former has the purpose of spiritual edification, the latter that of outward business, is a fallacy, notwithstanding

what synodical constitutions and quotations from the fathers, early and later, may say. As far as the Holy Spirit is concerned, a local congregation and a synod as well are called into being by the same promptings of fellowship and of the purpose to promote the Kingdom. And doctrinally, the only criterion for determining what is meant by ‘church’ is the way the Lord uses the term according to the gospel of St. Matthew. There is no objection to the use of the term ‘Ortsgemeinde’ (local congregation) if it is rightly understood as meaning the congregation of believers at a given time and place concerned with a given matter, and that applies to a synod as well as to the smaller group. To assume that, in keeping with the Jewish synagogue organization, the Lord in Matthew 18 anticipated the founding of local congregations (and that this, in distinction from the synod for instance, was of divine ordinance) is poor exegesis, to say the least” (p. 236).

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In connection with his presentation of facets of the Synod’s history Koehler makes observations which remind one of ideals which are still before us in our synodical life. On Christian education: “In Christian education the Word of God and its Gospel determines everything, and this conception must have become second nature to the educator; thus alone can he fulfill his calling as a Christian teacher” (p. 226). On stewardship: “The right attitude, of course, is that *Christians* are kings and priests by divine right, as which St. Peter and St. John proclaim them, and that they consider it beneath their dignity as such to seek other people’s favor and live by the grace of those supposedly higher up in the church or the world. And that proper self-respect of the Christian will show itself especially in financial matters and cause him to shun the many financial measures employed in the church whereby he loses character as a king and priest before God, and whereby the free grace of God, which alone can build the church, also receives lip-service only. It shows poor Christian tact and taste to ask other people for money to build the church, and so it certainly is not Lutheran” (p. 131). On the duties of the visiting elder: “The visitor is—a visitor who drops in to inquire about the weal and woe of Synod’s brethren, to share in both, and if necessary extend Synod’s help. Such a spirit of fellowship creates a bond that soon makes it mutual. A real visitor does not give himself official airs, which causes fear or distrust, nor does he stoop to snooping or prying, which invites gossip and leads to disrespect. Genuine consideration for both the good and evil fortune of a congregation invites confidence and respect for the larger family of brethren the visitor represents. The whole success of visitation is bound up in the personality of the visitor, probably more so than the work of any other office, and the visitor so gifted by God does not need any rules to tell him what to do. That indicates, however, what a serious concern the selection of a visitor must be” (p. 194).

Two remarks reveal a way of thinking from which the Synod has only in recent decades freed itself, by the grace of the Lord: “In outward matters the church is subject to natural development, like the rest of the world, under God. Not all groups or organizations have the same tasks. There are organizations, like peoples, that remain small in number and in that have a token of their mission to do intensive rather than extensive work, by which the world may even profit more. The Wisconsin Synod had a college that was off to a good start along fundamental educational lines. To maintain and develop that was mission enough for a while. The same applies to the preacher and teacher seminaries and the whole educational system. Then, the numerical growth of the organization ought to have come from within, to assure the compactness of the body and inward strength that grew from close identity and singleness of purpose; instead of having various heterogeneous elements thrown together and scattered units annexed that always required support which ought to have gone to the institutions, and besides did not receive the proper supervision. The result was that, in the field, the work of preachers and missionaries got to be more or less legwork instead of a continued intensive study of the Gospel, and the promising work of the institutions and their training was wasted” (p. 196). “There was something not entirely sound about Synod’s heathen mission endeavor, the idea that a church is not living up to its mission unless it engages in heathen-mission work, according to the Lord’s great commission: Go ye into all the world and preach the Gospel to every creature. That idea is dogmatism, with a streak of pietism, and it provoked the criticism of Prof. Hoenecke” (p. 198).

With that one adverse comment we would be happy to conclude our review. But since it is a historical fact that on the part of some Koehler received an immoderate amount of adulation, of which the editor's introduction is a mild example, we feel constrained to add a few comments about Koehler lest the favorable nature of this review leave the impression that we second all that is said in the introduction. Koehler praised Christian meekness and no doubt strove to cultivate it, and yet at times he could be arrogant and abrasive, witness pp. 182 and 183, or 211. Unfortunately some of those who claimed to be his most ardent disciples imitated and exceeded his manner, as evident from the tenor of some of the articles that were allowed to appear in *Faith-Life*. Koehler attacked dogmatism, but he himself could be very dogmatic about his historical judgments and pooh-pooh those who did not agree with him.

Koehler did not want to become the leader of a separate group. Concerning himself he writes: "He was something of a lone rider, that is to say, he didn't want to be influenced and he didn't want to influence others excepting by impersonal open testimony. By that policy and practice, he had prevented the organizing of a conservative 'younger party' in 1882, because parties are bound to become cliques, especially in a small compass; and two and three decades later he forestalled the founding of a rival school to Northwestern College by those who were dissatisfied with the Ernst regime; and again saved the whole Synod several times from incipient stampedes that, in themselves, were meant well enough" (p. 236). Still it was the tragedy of his later years that a party did form which claimed him as its spiritual leader and drew him into its orbit, with the result that eventually his membership in the Synod was terminated.

It is not our intention to rake over the ashes of those tragic days. We concur with Koehler's brief analysis: "In the meantime the so-called Watertown Case, by all-around bungling, had taken on synodical dimensions that, among other things, resulted in Prof. Ruediger's and the writer's own removal from the Seminary" (p. 253). We do not agree, however, with Editor Jordahl's remark about the "repudiation of John Philipp Koehler by the Wisconsin Synod" (p. VI). We have in the foregoing quoted extensively and approvingly from his volume because we believe that those characteristics into which the Synod grew by God's grace are still very much part of its genius. For the use that the Lord made of Koehler's remarkable gifts in developing this genius, we are thankful.

We believe that this volume deserves to be read by every pastor of our Synod and to be kept available for ready reference. It can render valuable service also to those outside of our fellowship who want to learn better to know the present Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod. We are grateful to the Protestant Conference for having made the publication of this volume possible.