

J.P. KOEHLER:

HIS HERMENEUTIC AND THE WAUTATOSA THEOLOGY

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The purpose of this paper is to provide a brief summary and analysis of the style of interpretation and theology of John Philipp Koehler. The spark for writing this paper is found in the controversy over the place of J.P. Koehler and the Wauwatosa Theology in the history and shaping of the Wisconsin Synod. The opinions regarding Koehler seem to fall into two camps: 1) those asserting that Koehler and his Wauwatosa Theology were a breath of fresh air and a spark of new life in the Wisconsin Synod, which met an untimely death at the hands of the powers that then were in the Protestant Controversy in 1930; 2) those who assert the full continuity of the Wisconsin Synod with its past and insist that what the Wisconsin Synod is practicing and teaching at present is none other than that same Wauwatosa Theology.

It would seem easiest at first to dismiss the thoughts of the Synod's detractors as propaganda or purely subjective, except for some very curious questions which remain. For example, there is a great silence even today about Koehler and his hermeneutic. There seems to be a hesitancy in the Synod to publish his books, which are acclaimed outside our circles. Koehler's death in 1951 went almost unnoticed in synodical publications, even though he had been an

eminent teacher in our midst for over 40 years. This is very curious, if it is the theology of Wauwatosa that we are following at this time. The other fact that drew my attention was that both the Synod and Synodical Conference were polarized in their opinions of Koehler. From this fact, a person would have to leave open the possibility that perhaps an opposing faction had won out and that Koehler's work had been nipped in the bud. On the other hand, it is difficult to believe that the work of such an influential, Christian teacher would be completely lost.

In order to gain a clearer view of Koehler's role in forming our theological position, it seems best to set out on an analysis of his theology and especially of his hermeneutics (since this was his Seminary course, and pervaded all of his work). In doing so, we will begin as Koehler would have, by analyzing Koehler's person, his character and circumstances, to gain an insight into his thought patterns and what he is trying to say. After drawing a brief picture of Koehler, we will look at some of the outstanding features of his hermeneutics and the Wauwatosa Theology, and conclude by reexamining the two current opinions of Koehler's work previously mentioned. We hope to find a solution somewhere between the two options.

Regarding my methods of research in writing this paper, I proceeded mainly by reading Koehler's own writings, many of which are translated in Faith-Life, thanks to the efforts of the Protestant Conference. This proved to be a

vable method, even for gaining a picture of Koehler personally, since glimpses of his personality show through plainly. Finally, I tried to reinforce my impressions by interviews and conversations with people acquainted with Koehler.

One of Koehler's first principles of interpretation is "the good intention of understanding the thoughts expressed according to the meaning intended by the author."¹ To do so it is necessary to understand his situation and his mindset:

Koehler was born in 1859 in Manitowoc, Wisconsin. He was educated in a German-English parochial school, at Northwestern College, and at Concordia Seminary in St. Louis. At St. Louis he became acquainted with the dogmatic method of the Missouri theology and with men like Walther, Pieper, Stoeckhardt--a method and men he would later write about. He returned to Wisconsin and vicared for A. Hoenecke in Milwaukee and for his father in Hustisford. He served as pastor in Two Rivers for six years and was called to Northwestern College in 1888 to teach religion, history, Latin and German. From 1900 to 1930 he taught at the Wauwatosa Seminary in church history, New Testament, hermeneutics, liturgics, and music. He was Seminary president from 1920 until he left in 1930. He lived in retirement following the Protestant Controversy until his death in 1951.

It is quite obvious from his years of service, from

the wide variety of subjects he taught, and from his literary output (a church history, a history of the Synod, commentaries on Galatians, Ephesians, and John, monograph-length essays in the Quarterly) that J.P. Koehler was a very talented man, educated in many fields. Pastor Carl Bolle, a student and personal friend of Koehler, shared with me that Koehler was an extremely well read man in all fields, not just theology, but literature, art, music, history, etc.² Leigh Jordahl spoke of Koehler as multi-talented, an "original thinker," having very much the "nature of an artist."³

As a result of his gifts and talents, and perhaps in spite of them, Koehler was rather intolerant of students who didn't understand him and was quite authoritarian in his teaching style. He asserted strongly the conclusions he had arrived at and the facts of which he was totally convinced. This attitude shows through quite clearly in his writings, especially in his History of the Wisconsin Synod, in his candor to share personal observations and opinions. Jordahl characterized Koehler as a "prima donna," which is very much in the nature of such an artistic and talented person. Bolle drew my attention to Koehler's unusual classroom attire of a riding suit--he appears wearing it in many a graduation photograph.

Koehler wasn't very popular with the students at Wauwatosa, because he required a great deal of work from them. He deplored "copy work" and dictation in class, and he

insisted on student homework and pure exegesis to arrive at a point. He even describes the unfavorable student reaction to his teaching style--the students were used to the old style of dictation and rebelled at studying texts and delivering essays.⁴

In contrast to this classroom image of Koehler, in his theology and dealings with other Christians, he gave an impression of "openness," of enjoying the "great freedom of the Gospel," and not enjoying the "hypercritical attitude" of the Missouri Synod and the 17th century dogmatists.⁵ When he wrote about doctrinal controversies, he opposed the polemical and defensive "orthodox" position.⁶ In this connection, he relates a wonderful little story in his life as a young minister of putting a poor Presbyterian lady on the defensive and really destroying the joy of the Gospel they shared by probing into doctrinal matters.⁷

There did exist some definite, personal friction on the Wauwatosa faculty between Koehler and ^{A.}Pieper, and also between Koehler and the Missouri theologians. The friction between Koehler and Pieper was caused by their very strong personalities. John Brenner remarked concerning the two men that Koehler was "moderately difficult to get along with," and Pieper was "very difficult to get along with." Jordahl described Koehler's relations with Missouri in this way:

Let's put it this way--the Missourians never trusted him. They never said he was a heretic, but they never trusted him because his style of doing things was so radically different from theirs....They always regarded Koehler as dubiously sound. Later on, Pieper raised the charge that he was guilty of historische Anschauung.⁸

There never was much controversy about Koehler's methods among his own faculty, though Missouri often took issue with his historical-grammatical method. The same attitude is witnessed today in the LCR, which espouses old line Missouri theology--they condemn historical-grammatical as the next step to historical-critical.

97 The final observation to be made about Koehler can be easily seen in just a little reading from his works. Koehler had a marvelous ability to make observations about human nature, history, language, etc. He was extremely talented in analyzing a situation, an attitude, in seeing behind the scenes or reading between the lines. Jaroslav Pelikan describes Koehler's abilities in these words:

Viewing the history of the Church within the context of the history of culture, he brought to church history a rare combination of scrupulous scholarship and evangelical insight.... In this writer's opinion, Koehler's Lehrbuch is perhaps the outstanding work of its kind to come out of American Lutheranism, regardless of synod. It is almost uncanny in its penetration into the way such things as the establishment of the canon, the creation of the episcopacy, the cultivation of the liturgy, the zeal for purity of doctrine, and the Christian ethical concern have become tools of legalistic perversion. With this there is combined a wholesome regard for the good, the beautiful, and the true wherever they have appeared in the history of the Church.⁹

We now turn to Koehler's method of doing theology and interpretation, which has been identified with the Wauwatosa Theology. Leigh Jordahl describes the Wauwatosa Theology in this way: "The Wauwatosa Theology, as it has been called,

developed under the leadership of Prof. J.P. Koehler, whose work was mainly in the direction of historical and exegetical emphasis over against the then dominant stress on dogmatic theology."¹⁰ Koehler describes it in this way:

So the present writer, in bringing to a conclusion his history of the Wisconsin Synod, is reminded of the two theological issues for which the Wisconsin faculty stood over against others. They were not the heart and core of the Gospel, on which we had no monopoly, but they concerned the problem of exegetical exactness in theological work to the last detail.¹¹

From this exactness flow the unique elements of Koehler's hermeneutics. Koehler's main tenets were that correct, historical exegesis has been pushed out of the Lutheran Church in favor of dogmatics, and that the only way for a church body to remain alive is through objective and exhaustive Scripture study by all its pastors and members.

If any theme stands out in Koehler's writings on Scripture study, it is his stress on putting dogmatics in its correct place, as a servant of exegesis. He spends much time discussing the period of orthodoxy in which dogmatics was exalted and exegesis neglected. The reverence for this age of dogmatics was brought to America by the Old Lutherans and found its home in the Missouri Synod. Koehler describes the decline of exegesis in this way:

The dominance of dogmatics in the centuries preceding the election controversy actually put the historical study of Scriptures largely out of business....And even where Scripture study was practiced, it bowed under the guardianship of Dame Dogmatics and her compilations so that the flow of life from the fountains of Scriptures was disturbed or even stymied.¹²

He saw dogmatics as a kind of false security, i.e. we imagine that to systematize Scripture truths means to possess them, when actually we must work to possess the truths by intense Scripture study.¹³ Even when Koehler came to the Wauwatosa Seminary, he saw that exegesis was on the decline. In his History of the Wisconsin Synod he notes how history and exegesis were being shortchanged in board reports and in the minds of students. He diagrams the correct course of study in which exegesis occupies the center position, while history and dogmatics occupy lesser, though parallel, roles. Exegesis is the basis for all study, dogmatics or history.¹⁴

A good example of Koehler's break with the dogmatists and his return to exegesis, is his theory that $\pi\acute{\iota}\sigma\tau\iota\varsigma$ in the New Testament is always subjective faith, trust (fides qua creditur). While we can find instances where fides quae does seem to fit well, we see Koehler's point--he was fighting an attitude which wanted to read dogmatics into all of Scripture, which wanted to shift the emphasis from personal faith to the body of doctrine which we hold. Koehler spells out his argument in his essay on the "Analogy of Faith,"¹⁵ and uses the concept in his Galatians commentary. Concerning the "analogy," Synodical Conference men had argued with Ohio Synod men at a conference using "the analogy of faith" from Ro 12:6 as evidence. The Synodical Conference argued that the analogy was the totality of Scripture doctrines, and Ohio saw it as the totality of Scripture which allowed you to reasonably synthesize doctrines which were contradictory. Koehler looks exegetically and historically at

Ro 12:6 and at the technical term "analogy of faith" and concludes that they are not really related. The meaning of "analogy of faith" as a compendium of doctrines comes from the theologians of the Middle Ages, and the passage itself only speaks about prophesying "according to the proportion of your faith," your personal trust in the Savior. This is a prime example of Koehler casting off the dogmatic interpretation of a passage and, by pure exegesis, arriving at the true meaning.

In his Seminary course outline on "Hermeneutics," Koehler details further the effects of dogmatics on exegesis--it leads to traditionalism in a church body and finally to the death of all theological thinking. He describes the process by which a truth is first discovered and then passed down from teacher to pupil:

The pupil swears by the words of his master. What in the latter's case was spirit and life becomes for the former law and rule....Because men no longer have spirit in themselves, they desire to draw on the past. That is not a conservative attitude, but traditionalism....They no longer think through the doctrines of Scripture again and again to have them as their intellectual possession. If they did, the mind in this way would remain versatile and capable of applying firm and settled truth to the changing forms of life so that the truth of the Gospel would rule and in this way preserve the inherited treasure.¹⁶

Some of the terms mentioned in my interviews to describe Koehler's exegesis included "openness," "freedom," "feeling for historical context," working with the "large concepts of Scripture." Koehler deplored the reduction of the Scriptures to proof passages, and he clung to those "large concepts"

and natural interpretation of Scripture. This attitude was very evident in his use of the doctrine of inspiration in interpretation: "This statement (on inspiration) is therefore not a theorem out of which we develop the hermeneutical rules according to laws with logical stringency, but it proclaims a gospel fact which we grasp by means of faith and which then creates the faith-based activity of our exegetical work."¹⁷ Hence he did not see the New Testament quotation of an Old Testament passage as being its authoritative exegesis, but rather "these men quote the Old Testament only to adorn their words and to give them force to impress the word of Scripture."¹⁸ Koehler was constantly on guard against reading too much into a passage--he assumed that the New Testament writers were using quotes as people naturally do, to illustrate and impress a point, and no special interpretation was necessary.

Another unusual feature of Koehler's exegesis is his insistence on "reading between the lines" and seeing the circumstances behind a certain statement. This was Koehler's principle in every matter of interpretation. For correct interpretation it is necessary to project yourself into the other's manner of thinking: "Fairness demands that we seek to understand our opponent not as his words can or even must be understood, but as he wants them to be understood."¹⁹ This insistence on delving into the historical and literary settings combined with his freedom from traditional doctrinal formulations earned Koehler

the accusation of historical criticism from the Missouri Synod. This insistence on complete fairness to what the opponent is saying is what caused Koehler the problems over the Beitz Paper. He disliked the paper, yet insisted on hearing Beitz out and understanding what Beitz had to say. His insistence on seeing the background of the Book of Job as an inspired parable caused him opposition in both the Missouri and Wisconsin Synods, though Hoenecke defended Koehler's right to that interpretation.²⁰

The result of this attitude toward the words of other's was a very irenic attitude toward doctrinal debates. He had seen how ugly these things had become due to the overstress on dogmatics and the intellectual formulations and interpretations of the words of others. He couldn't agree with judging an issue on the basis of the "bare words." These words come from Christian people who have specific thoughts and intentions behind their words. He saw in doctrinal discussions how the whole emphasis of a church body for "right faith" changed from "faith" to "right." This is part of the "Gesetzlich Wesen" he saw in our midst. He speaks of the tone of doctrinal controversy in America in his history of the Synodical Conference:

Thus the trumpet blast of these fighting factions gave forth a very harsh polemical-dogmatical tone so that the controversy could not come to a satisfactory conclusion which might have united the contenders in the handclasp of true Lutheranism. At the same time all kinds of seeds were sown for later dissensions.²¹

It is most obvious that to Koehler dogmatics and polemics

should be set aside in controversy, so that exegesis of Scripture can convince and the Gospel can win over the opponents. Exegesis and the Scripture working plainly and simply with the faith of the believer are the keys to Koehler's method of interpretation.

Finally, we need only consult his "Observations on Preaching" or his conclusions in his history of the Synodical Conference to see Koehler's great love of Scripture study. It is tempting to reproduce the entire page from "Observations," but an illustration will suffice. Koehler describes no easy approach whereby we see passages only as illustrating this or that doctrine, but he speaks of studying the texts year after year constantly correcting, growing, discovering new aspects of the text.²²

After this brief investigation into the theology and hermeneutics of J.P. Koehler, I would refer the reader to the bibliography to read more fully from Koehler's writings. When a person sees Koehler's themes repeated, explained and applied, they fit together much better than in any analysis at the hands of another.

But we should now reexamine the two opinions regarding Koehler which were reported at the outset. The first opinion was enunciated well by Leigh Jordahl in our interview:

I think that if the Wisconsin Synod had taken hold of Koehler's theology and method, we might have the interesting phenomenon, which doesn't exist in American Lutheranism, of a conservative, confessional

group which is also alive theologically and doing historical, Biblical work. We don't have that situation today. We have Lutherans who have bought rather uncritically into the historical-critical method, or you have dogmatic, old Lutherans who don't ask the right questions.²³

The second opinion is enunciated in most of the Wisconsin Synod views of Wauwatosa Theology and Koehler's departure. But it doesn't seem that we are continuing completely in his footsteps; perhaps we needn't be, perhaps we should be. What might have been the result had Koehler stayed on a few more years? Perhaps our attitude toward the Missouri Synod would be different today. Our position on unionism came to us via the Missouri Synod and its Brief Statement, but Koehler enjoyed the Chicago Theses and considered the Brief Statement an overstatement. Perhaps his irenic tone in controversy would have been more compelling to other groups. Carl Bolle theorized that we would not be so "hypercritical." When one examines the Quarterly from Koehler's administration, it is difficult to find as many articles critical of other groups as we find in our publications today. Perhaps in classes here at the Seminary Old Testament passages wouldn't be exegeted mechanically by their use in New Testament quotations. Perhaps scholarship would be met with joy and not with suspicions of lurking humanism. As you can see, we have found some very familiar cords sounding in Koehler's theology and this was one of his intents--that orthodoxy never consider itself only a keeper of truths, but always the one who keeps on rediscovering and rethinking them again and again.

The Wauwatosa Theology hasn't lived on among us as fully as it might have, but there is no doubt that it is still here. The historical-grammatical method is taught explicitly. But in its transference from generation to generation, has it lost some of its life? Do we skim the Scripture because we know its chief doctrinal points without discovering each of those from God's Word for ourselves? Are we apt to draw logical conclusions from a person's bare words without understanding what he means to say by them?

John Philipp Koehler was one of the most original and probing thinkers to exist in our midst in the Wisconsin Synod. His influence, though clouded by the Protes'tant Controversy, is felt in our midst and should become more vivid for us. It is only by each of us appropriating Scripture truths to ourselves that a conservative body will conserve a living faith and theology. As Koehler said of constant, diligent Scripture study: "I do not make a demand, but I pose a precious privilege."²⁴

ENDNOTES

- 1 J.P. Koehler, "Biblical Hermeneutics," Faith-Life, vol. 28 no. 9, p.4.
- 2 Carl F. Bolle, Interview, Mequon, WI, April 23, 1980.
3. Leigh D. Jordahl, Interview, Decorah, IA, April 10, 1980.
- 4 J. P. Koehler, History of the Wisconsin Synod, St. Cloud: Sentinel Publishing Co., 1970, pp. 210-211.
- 5 Bolle, Interview.
- 6 J.P. Koehler, "Gesetzlich Wesen Unter Uns," Faith-Life, vol. 25 no. 9, p. 12.
- 7 Koehler, "Gesetzlich," vol. 25 no. 9, pp. 11-12.
- 8 Jordahl, Interview.
- 9 Jaroslav Pelikan, "J.P. Koehler," (obituary), Concordia Theological Monthly, vol. 23 (Jan. 1952), pp. 50-51.
- 10 Leigh Jordahl, "Protestant Conference," Encyclopedia of the Lutheran Church, Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1965, vol. 3, p. 1978.
- 11 Koehler, Wisconsin Synod, p. 255.
- 12 J.P. Koehler, "The Synodical Conference in the History of the Lutheran Church in America," Faith-Life, vol. 29 no. 5, p. 6.
- 13 Koehler, "Synodical Conference," pp. 7-8.
- 14 Koehler, Wisconsin Synod, pp. 207-208.
- 15 J.P. Koehler, "The Analogy of Faith," Faith-Life, vol. 24 no. 10--vol. 25 no. 5.
- 16 Koehler, "Hermeneutics," vol. 28 no. 11, p. 19.
- 17 Koehler, "Hermeneutics," vol. 28 no. 9, p. 5.
- 18 Koehler, "Hermeneutics," vol. 29 no. 1, p. 15.
- 19 Koehler, "Analogy," vol. 25 no. 5, p. 11.

ENDNOTES, cont.

- 20 Koehler, Wisconsin Synod, p. 214.
- 21 Koehler, "Synodical Conference," p. 3.
- 22 J.P. Koehler, "Observations on Preaching," Faith-Life,
vol. 29 no. 11, p. 13.
- 23 Jordahl, Interview.
- 24 Koehler, "Observations," p. 13.

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