

THE WAUWATOSA SPRING:
The Flowering of the Historical Disciplines
at Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary
(1900–1920)
Part III

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Cultivating the Soil: The Church and Ministry Debate

In his introductory essay to John Ph. Koehler's *History of the Wisconsin Synod*, Leigh Jordahl writes:

Koehler's consistent application of his hermeneutical method [as outlined especially in his "Analogy of Faith"] is apparent in all his exegetical work. Coupled with this is his insistence upon historical consciousness. . . . Only with difficulty can one separate the essence of a thing from the historical form in which it finds its expression. Form and content tend to become one. Because this is true there is always the tendency to absolutize and read back into Scripture what were only historical developments. All this is illustrated in the doctrine of Church and Ministry where what had in fact developed historically was treated as though the forms themselves were absolute and valid for all times and in all situations. The Church and Ministry issue becomes an excellent example of the Wauwatosa's historical-exegetical methodology in practice. It is worth noting that on this specific issue Koehler's position was eventually adopted by the Wisconsin Synod. Nevertheless, it might also be suggested that even here what was important—the historical consciousness and the emphasis upon evangelical freedom—was not so well absorbed.¹

Koehler himself recounts the history of the church and ministry debate within the Synodical Conference on the pages of both his *History of the Wisconsin Synod* and the 1930 "Retrospective." By any account, the debate had and continues to have a long and storied history. For the purpose of this study we will begin our account with the infant years of the Synodical Conference in the late-1870s.

Church and ministry questions were not new to American Lutheranism in the 1870s. Thirty years earlier the Missouri Synod's

¹Leigh Jordahl, "John Philipp Koehler, the Wauwatosa Theology and the Wisconsin Synod," Introduction to *The History of the Wisconsin Synod* (Sauk Rapids, Minnesota: Sentinel Publishing Co. for the Prot stant Conference, 1981), xxiii.

C. F. W. Walther and the Buffalo Synod's Pastor J. A. A. Grabau had gone toe-to-toe on this troubling issue. Grabau and his adherents had expressed a strongly Romanizing position, maintaining that "the office of the public ministry is not conferred by the call of the congregation as the original possessor of all spiritual power, but is a divine institution in the sense that it was transmitted immediately from the Apostles to their pupils, considered as a separate 'ministerial order' or caste, and that this order perpetuates itself by means of the ordination."² Grabau also believed that the congregation owed obedience to the pastor in all things—both earthly and spiritual matters—so long as his regulations were not clearly unscriptural.

The Missourians strongly disagreed. In response to Grabau, Walther composed his now-famous "Theses on the Church and Ministry" in which he clearly states in accordance with Scripture that "the holy ministry of the Word is the authority conferred (*übertragen*) by God through the congregation, as the possessor of the priesthood and all church authority, to exercise the rights of the spiritual priesthood in public office on behalf of the congregation" (Thesis VII). The pastor was the servant to the congregation in the same way that Jesus had come to be a servant (Matthew 20:25-28). Walther made it clear that the scriptural idea behind ministry is not about *power*. It has to do with *service*.

Walther's theses won the day, and the matter was settled for the Missouri Synod and the yet-to-be-established Synodical Conference: the pastor has no spiritual power or authority by virtue of his ordination; instead all the spiritual authority he exercises within a congregation is conferred on him by God through the congregation. He receives this authority solely through the call of the congregation, nothing else. End of discussion; the doctrine of the church and ministry had finally been threshed out in its entirety. Or so it was thought.

The Doctrine of the Ministry: Is a Teacher's Call Divine?

By the 1870s additional questions began to arise due to the rapid establishment and expansion of Lutheran elementary schools within the Missouri and Wisconsin Synods. The questions were innocent and obvious ones to raise: What about elementary school teachers? Where do they stand in relation to the public ministry of the gospel? Is *their* call divine like the pastor's? Does the congregation confer the public ministry of the Word on *them* as well? Or are they simply doing a job that has been established by human beings, without divine institution? Koehler recalls the historical background to these questions being asked. His Wauwatosa perspective is unmistakable.

²Franz Pieper, *Christian Dogmatics*, Vol. III (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1953), 447.

At the end of the 70s there was a discussion in Wisconsin among the teachers of the Synodical Conference as to the divineness of the teacher's call. The conferences centering around Watertown, Oshkosh, Manitowoc and Sheboygan were mainly engaged in the discussion. The opinions voiced indicated that there was difference as to whether the Christian school derives directly from divine ordinance or from the course of development in human education. The argument proceeded along the current "dogmatic" lines, i.e., the reasons and counter-reasons advanced were not deduced by careful exegetical examination of the Scriptures and determination of doctrine and history, but from the theories that the current doctrine of the ministry or the ideas concerning the duties and privileges of parents suggested.³

There were two basic answers given to these questions at the time. Some held that the teacher's office received its "divine nature" only through being associated with a pastor. In other words, if a pastor needed assistance in teaching the children, he would simply delegate some of his divinely instituted office to a teacher. Without a pastor, however, the Christian teacher's call would be a purely human arrangement and thoroughly secular.

Others chose to address the question in a different, more round-about way. They suggested that it was the parents' job—not the church's—to secure Christian education for their children, using Ephesians 6:4 as their proof passage. Therefore, since the establishment of Christian schools is nowhere enjoined upon congregations in Scripture, whenever a congregation chooses to establish a school and secures a teacher, this is simply a free human arrangement left to Christian discretion and the teacher's calling is no different than any secular calling.

In Koehler's estimation, both these answers

betrayed the want of understanding for historical development. And the exegetical and historical operations were not calculated to discover the development of the teacher's calling so much as [it was] to formulate a thesis that was in line with the current system of doctrine. That even for the latter purpose something in the nature of historical-exegetical research was prerequisite, entered no one's mind in the dispute. If someone ventured out on that path he was given scant attention, and he himself was handicapped by the sense of being off the beaten track.⁴

³Koehler, *The History of the Wisconsin Synod*, 230.

⁴*Ibid.*, 231. Koehler's last comment would seem to suggest that he wrestled with himself, wondering if he was simply misreading what Scripture actually teaches in this matter. Luther spoke of the same battles, especially concerning the doctrine of justification (*AE* 14:37-38).

Koehler, though, was willing to step off the “beaten track” of these dogmatic formulations to review these questions in the light of an historical-exegetical approach to Scripture. Although still a young pastor several years removed from his Wauwatosa professorship, Koehler began to question the old formulas of answering these inquiries in the mid-1880s.

Koehler recounts the history of his entering the debate:

In the middle 80s a mixed conference of the Synodical Conference pastors and teachers in the Manitowoc-Sheboygan area witnessed a discussion of the subject that at least broke away from the usual line of dogmatizing. . . . At this particular conference Pastor Reinhold Pieper [brother of August and Concordia Seminary Professor Franz] read a paper on the question of the teacher’s call and espoused the “secular” interpretation . . . [The essayist suggested that it was] a commendable conception of their office when the teachers look upon it as divine, and that view of it no doubt will make for faithfulness on their part, but their calling belongs to the same category as that of the Christian cobbler or tailor.⁵

Koehler, who happened to be in attendance at this conference as pastor at St. John, Two Rivers, was not going to let what he thought was such a disparaging remark toward the teaching ministry pass without comment. Instead he contended that “the ministry belongs to the teacher and to every Christian as well as to the pastor. . . . Because the Christian teacher’s whole work of teaching is governed by the Word of God, his work in the school merits the same appreciation of being ‘divine’ as that of the pastor of the congregation.”⁶ Koehler was saying nothing more than his beloved seminary professor, C. F. W. Walther, had said to the 1866 Missouri Synod convention two decades earlier.

The Apology does not have Grabau’s understanding according to which “the office of the ministry” (*Predigtamt*) is always equivalent to “the office of a pastor” (*Pfarramt*), so that therefore the words of the 28th article of the Augsburg Confession: “These gifts cannot be obtained except through the office of preaching,” are equivalent to saying that without the office of the pastor a person cannot obtain either faith or forgiveness of sins or salvation! No, when our old teachers ascribe such great things to the office of the

⁵Ibid., 231. Koehler goes on to comment: “The last three sentences are quoted practically verbatim, in translation, excepting that the German ‘*Schuster und Schneider*’ conveys something of a slight (which the English doesn’t).” One wonders if Pieper may have been referring to the Lutheran theologian Martin Chemnitz, who wrote disapprovingly about the Anabaptists when they claimed that “if anyone understands the doctrine of the Gospel, whether he be a cobbler or a tailor or a blacksmith, he should teach and preach” (*Loci Theologici*, Vol. II, J. A. O. Preus, ed. [St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1989], 698).

⁶Ibid.

ministry, they thereby mean nothing else than the service of the Word, in whatever way (Weise) it may come to us.⁷

We are told that there was “general agreement” at Manitowoc on the young pastor’s statement, but Koehler himself characterized it as “half-hearted progress, . . . [although] it may be said that the Manitowoc discussion signaled the beginning of a real exegetical and historical analysis of such questions in Wisconsin, and beyond, that was destined to have its repercussions.”⁸ The Wauwatosa ideal was ever in sight, even in the face of reprisal.

The public debate would continue within Wisconsin at Koehler’s prompting in 1892. Of particular import was the exchange between Koehler and his future colleague Adolf Hoenecke during a general pastoral conference held at St. Matthew, Milwaukee. There Hoenecke presented a paper on “The Divinity of the Teacher’s Call,” at the behest of August Ernst, the recently-elected and first president of the newly federated synod. Dr. Ernst was a strong proponent of the idea that the teacher’s call had its origin in parental establishment. Hoenecke, on the other hand, stressed that its origin was to be found in the pastoral office because to his traditional way of thinking the *Pfarramt* was the one and only public office in the church. He argued that “the office of the parochial school teachers must be integrated into the pastoral office, because according to the *Augustana* no one is supposed to teach publicly without a regular call,”⁹ though Hoenecke also conceded that “the call of the teacher is to be considered divine, like that of the pastor.”¹⁰

One man in attendance was not content with Hoenecke’s concession, and that, again, was J. P. Koehler. He recounts the ensuing discussion.

This was questioned, even as at Manitowoc: 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.” . . . 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[?] . . . Hoenecke acknowledged the comment as novel and worthy of careful study.¹¹

⁷C. F. W. Walther, “The True Visible Church,” *Essays for the Church*, I (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1992), 102.

⁸Koehler, *The History of the Wisconsin Synod*, 231.

⁹Koehler, “Retrospective,” *Faith-Life* 76, no. 2 (March/April 2003), 18.

¹⁰Koehler, *The History of the Wisconsin Synod*, 232.

¹¹Ibid. In his “Retrospective,” Koehler recalls: “Hoenecke responded to Koehler by saying that his ideas sounded all right, but they would have to be discussed in greater

One disagreement that became especially apparent at this conference was the intended meaning of the word “public” when referring to the *public* ministry. Hoenecke seemed to suggest that “public” (*öffentlich*) had to do with the number of people served by the person called. He “ventured to suggest that when a family, or even two, thus provided for the training of their children [by ‘calling’ a teacher], such a teacher’s call was not a public call. The situation might be different when three or more families acted together.” Koehler quickly spotted the arbitrariness of Hoenecke’s theological mathematics and went on to explain:

Prof. Hoenecke’s statement did not clarify the meaning of the word ‘public’ in the Augsburg Confession; so the writer now enlarged on the Latin term *publice* in the original version of the Confession . . . [because] in the present case the Latin terminology [*publice*] is more significant than the German translation [*öffentlich*] . . . [*Publice*] hasn’t anything to do with numbers, but was aimed at the enthusiasts and radicals who set themselves up as teachers in opposition to the church and state authorities, claiming that the Spirit spoke through them, without the written Word, by direct revelation . . . So it was a matter of order, which on earth is governed by 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.¹²

Even with Hoenecke’s concession that the issue warranted further study, after 1892 public dialogue seemed to die down, although the dispute no doubt continued to simmer behind closed doors.

In 1908 the new Seminary Director John Schaller presented a paper at a mixed conference in Milwaukee on “The One Office of the Pastor.” As can be deduced from the title, he too concluded that there is one divinely ordained office in the church, the pastor’s office. “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

depth sometime. Ernst told Koehler in a private conversation that he thought that Koehler had led the discussion out of its mechanical, external train of logic into a deeper, evangelical perception of all of the ideas concerned.” (*Faith-Life* 76, no. 2 [March/April 2003], 18).

¹²Ibid., 232.

teacher, the church council, the high school, college and seminary professors, the synod presidents, visitors, missionaries, etc.”¹³

Again Koehler publicly objected, though recognizing that Schaller had not been party to previous discussions. He argued that a dogmatic statement—namely, “the pastorate is the only divinely ordained office in the church”—was being presumed at the outset and Scripture passages were being taken out of context and made to support this presumed truth. “Koehler showed that this procedure was a falsely so-called dogmatical method of determining doctrine by citing doctrinal statements of the Scriptures without paying attention to the historical context and its way of presenting things.”¹⁴

Among the disputed passages, 1 Corinthians 12:28 was perhaps the most significant. Here Koehler argued that the extensive list of spiritual gifts mentioned in this passage are all “of divine origin, so the ‘God hath set some in the church . . .’ is not simply identical with the institution of the ministry of ‘the Word and Sacraments.’”¹⁵ God institutes—he sets in place (τίθημι)—every spiritual gift among the Church through the working of the Holy Spirit by means of the gospel. In this way, many forms of ministry are “divinely instituted,” but not in a legalistic way by means of a legal precept. Instead they are naturally and evangelically brought into being by the Spirit through the gospel as historical circumstances dictate.

Koehler mentions that his “views did not meet with vigorous denial; they were tolerantly received, but not followed up. Alongside, there were other discussions that eventually had their bearing on the question of the Church and Office and its practical application and finally led to drastic opposition.”¹⁶

The Doctrine of the Church: Who’s Got the Power?

Sadly, the discussion of church and ministry issues quickly degenerated in the early twentieth century, due mainly to practical concerns arising out of a long and hotly debated case involving a Missouri Synod congregation, Trinity, Cincinnati. Ultimately this case was nothing more than a power struggle.

In 1899 a Mr. Schlueter decided that he was going to remove his eleven-year-old son from Trinity’s school so that the boy could get caught up on his English instruction. The man thought that the Cincinnati public schools would be better suited for the task. Within a

¹³Ibid.

¹⁴Ibid.

¹⁵Ibid.

¹⁶Ibid., 233.

week he was called on the carpet by the congregation for his allegedly scandalous conduct. The church demanded that, in addition to an apology, he return his boy to the parochial school at once. When Schlueter refused, he was classed among those who had excommunicated themselves.

The synod and district officers of the Missouri Synod, most notably Professors Franz Pieper and William Dau, then became involved in the case. They did not approve of the congregation's action, and the final upshot was that Pastors A. and E. von Schlichten and their Trinity Congregation were suspended by the Central District officials of the Missouri Synod.

The whole fiasco touched upon a fundamental issue, namely, whether or not a synod or district had any say in the disciplinary actions taken by a member congregation. Many within both the Missouri and Wisconsin Synods had long held that the local congregation had an absolute and unquestionable autonomy in every matter of doctrine and practice and that the synod had no right to tell a member congregation how to conduct its business. They argued that this was Walther's doctrine of the church (congregational autonomy), as opposed to Grabau's false Romanist view. In order to buttress their point of view, the argument was advanced that the local congregation is the only divinely instituted form of the church. All other forms, including synods, are simply human arrangements.¹⁷ Therefore, the Missouri Synod had no right to "stick its nose" in the Cincinnati congregation's business.

This particular case was eventually brought to a conclusion in 1911, almost by default. One of the Cincinnati pastors had died in 1909; the other was deposed, along with the church council, by the congregation in 1911. A new council and pastor were quickly elected, with one of their first orders of business being the lifting of Schlueter's excommunication.

Even though the Cincinnati case was now resolved, the fundamental questions still loomed large in the minds of many: What authority does a synod have in matters of a member congregation's doctrine and practice? Is synod "church"? Are synods divinely instituted or simply man-made arrangements? Sadly, for many the ultimate question was this: Who's got the power? That such a question would even be raised betrayed a very basic misunderstanding concerning the nature of the church and its ministry. Jesus had to explain to his disciples more than once that the church and its ministry is very different from the

¹⁷This whole argument is directly analogous to the discussion of the church's ministry, concerning which many stated that the only divinely instituted form of the ministry was the pastorate. All other forms of ministry are simply human arrangements.

way the world thinks (Matthew 20:25-28); it's not a question of power but of service. Now that lesson needed to be taught once again. Koehler recalled: "It remained for the three Wauwatosa Seminary men . . . by their joint work to clarify the doctrine of the Church and the Ministry, as a direct outgrowth of that case."¹⁸

Shoulder to Shoulder: The Wauwatosa Gospel Comes of Age

By 1912 it was no longer possible to ignore the reformation that had taken place in the theological perspective and approach at the Wauwatosa Seminary. John Ph. Koehler, August Pieper, and John Schaller had all been convinced how important it was to do solid, confessional, theological work without the burden of preconceived, dogmatic notions. By 1912 all three men had begun that work in earnest so that Koehler could report that "the three Seminary men stood shoulder to shoulder."¹⁹ Nowhere did that become more evident than on the pages of the *Theologische Quartalschrift* between 1912 and 1918. It was in these extraordinary issues that the Wauwatosa men would publicly hash out the comprehensive and scriptural doctrine of church and ministry.

But before that work could be accomplished with the *Quartalschrift* articles, it first had to be completed in the Wauwatosa faculty room. In Koehler's view, both Pieper and Schaller—while acknowledging that there was a problem with the doctrine of church and ministry as it had been traditionally handled in the Synodical Conference—were still approaching the question in the traditional, dogmatic fashion by first formulating dogmatic statements and then going back to Scripture in an attempt to prove their assertions with proof passages that were very often torn out of context. In this way, Koehler recalls that "the Wisconsin position was developed dogmatically (with detailed explanations) by Pieper and Schaller from the premise that the office of the keys was given to the church, not to the local congregation." Koehler, on the other hand, "emphasized on the basis of exegesis that in the Scriptures there is no mention of an institution (*Einsetzung*), which could serve as the basis for [Missouri's] external legalistic claims. . . . There is not enough in Scripture on which to formulate Missouri's teaching of the local congregation and the local ministry [as being the only divinely instituted forms]."²⁰

Pieper's first public attempt in taking up the question came in the form of a 1911 *Quartalschrift* article entitled "*Menschenherrschaft in*

¹⁸Koehler, *The History of the Wisconsin Synod*, 234.

¹⁹Ibid.

²⁰Koehler, "Retrospective," *Faith-Life* 76, no. 2 (March/April 2003), 19.

der Kirche" ("Lording It Over Others in the Church"). Koehler recalled that it met with immediate objection.

What chiefly aroused opposition was the statement that suspension is "*der Idee nach Bann*" which the objector understood to imply that suspension and excommunication are identical, while it does say that suspension to all intents and purposes means excommunication. Another statement that was objected to was . . . that a whole congregation might become subject to the action. The background of Pieper's discussion was an obvious case of impenitence regarding false doctrine or public offense in conduct, of which the body, whether a local congregation or a synod, had to clear its skirts. A suspension ordered in accordance with the synodical constitution should be respected by withdrawing from the accused.²¹

In Koehler's opinion, Pieper's presentation still betrayed a dogmatic approach, especially in his distinguishing between synodical suspension and congregational excommunication, as if synodical suspension was based upon man-made constitutions and excommunication upon Scripture. Koehler concluded that "Prof. Pieper still had the idea that a synod is not of divine ordinance like a local congregation."²² Koehler also questioned what he perceived to be Pieper's emphasis on the idea that suspension and excommunication were practiced for the purpose of "cleaning house." Rather, Koehler later wrote, "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."²³

Synodical dissension finally led to the calling of a Synod-wide pastoral conference, which met at Manitowoc, Wisconsin, on September 27-28, 1911. Pieper was asked to present a paper on "The Doctrine of the Church, of Synodical Discipline, and especially Doctrinal Discipline." In this paper he made it clear that he believed synodical suspension and congregation excommunication were essentially the same thing. When some protested that a synod couldn't exercise the Keys, Pieper reportedly retorted: "If you stick to that, then we have come to the parting of the ways," to which someone responded: "We are ready for that right now."²⁴

It was at this point that Koehler once again intervened with his fresh, exegetical approach. In particular he conveyed his misgivings about the traditional, legal understanding of the word "institution" as it related to the New Testament institutions of our Savior. He now

²¹Koehler, *The History of the Wisconsin Synod*, 236.

²²Ibid.

²³Ibid.

²⁴Ibid.

addressed and answered two fundamental questions at the Manitowoc conference: 1) *What* has the Lord instituted for his New Testament church; and 2) what is the *nature* of our Savior's institutions in the New Testament?

First, concerning *what* our Lord Jesus instituted, Koehler advanced these points:

This "institution" means that the Lord has commissioned his disciples with the ministry of the Word and Sacraments to the whole world, with the promise that he would endue their work with his Spirit, to the end that all believers will be saved. The latter are "his church" (Mt 16:18), which he has built on a rock, the communion of those who eventually will enter into life eternal with him. . . . The use of the Keys here depends on the specific circumstances of time and place, here of course the congregation or body of those that are immediately concerned.

To elucidate: 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). . . . As a matter of 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.²⁵

Based upon his exegetical examination of Matthew chapters 16 and 18, Koehler finally concluded that a synod of Christians established for the purpose of proclaiming the gospel was as much a church or congregation as was a localized congregation of Christians established to do that same work. In addition, every grouping of Christians had the right and responsibility to use the Keys.

The present-day distinction between the local congregation and the synod has no place in the Lord's discourse at Matthew 18. . . . Moreover, 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. . . . There is no objec-

²⁵Ibid.

tion 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.²⁶

And what is the *nature* of our Savior's New Testament institutions? Are they legal or evangelical institutions? Koehler answered:

. . . the Lord's parting statements instituting the ministry of the Word and Sacraments . . . [are] not the creation of a certain office, attached to certain ordained persons, or a distinct clerical order, or of any specified forms of carrying out that ministry to the entire world. . . . [Instead] 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 prompting 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.²⁷

Koehler later recalled the reaction to his presentation, particularly of his two Wauwatosa colleagues. "Pieper and Schaller remained silent." Koehler now aspired to cultivate in his colleagues a deeper appreciation for the theological approach he was espousing.

When we returned home from Manitowoc, Franz Pieper came to visit his brother and their discussion of the matter together raised doubts in A. Pieper's mind, whereupon Koehler said to him: "As long as Schaller and you do not acknowledge clearly the validity of my exegesis, your dogmatical position cannot be tenable." Schaller and Pieper then followed up on this advice with a series of articles.²⁸

Most Wisconsin men were not ready to accept the fresh ideas coming out of the Wauwatosa faculty room, which would now be splashed across the pages of the *Quartalschrift*. Chief among the naysayers was Prof. August Ernst, who prepared sixteen theses for his pastoral conference taking issue with the Wauwatosa position. Of special note was Ernst's contention in theses ten and eleven that "Synodical discipline is not church discipline, but is derived from human regulations, even when administered by Christians according to the Word of God" and "Suspension from synodical fellowship is not excommunication but for the time being discontinuance of synodical fellowship and in itself not discontinuance of church fellowship." Thesis sixteen summed up Ernst's ultimate bone of contention with the Wauwatosa men: "Only

²⁶Ibid.

²⁷Ibid., 237.

²⁸Koehler, "Retrospective," *Faith-Life* 76, no. 2 (March/April 2003), 19.

the local congregation with its pastor can excommunicate, but only its own members."²⁹

Koehler was once more critical of Ernst's traditional, dogmatic procedure which put a serious, exegetical study of Scripture in the backseat. "Each of these sixteen theses was implemented with more or less proof-texts from the Scriptures, the Confessions, Luther's, Hoencke's and Walther's writings. The objections to the Wauwatosa faculty's teachings were refuted in the *Quartalschrift* and at conferences and some of the misunderstood proof-matter, adduced in support of the theses, placed in the right light."³⁰

Among the most important *Quartalschrift* articles written at this time to advance the Wauwatosa approach was August Pieper's January 1912 critique of Walther's book *Die Stimme unserer Kirche in der Frage von Kirche und Amt* (The Voice of Our Church on the Question of Church and Ministry). While granting the strengths of Walther's presentation, Pieper also pointed out that there was "room for misunderstanding the fathers or Walther himself, and that even Walther himself misunderstands at times."³¹ Pieper concluded in typical Wauwatosa fashion: "The third generation of pastors since Walther are now in the ministry. To us applies the proverb, 'What you have inherited from your fathers, acquire anew in order to possess it.' . . . We need to appropriate the doctrines of church and ministry once again with a fresh start through personal and thorough study."³²

In the April 1912 *Quartalschrift* article, "The Doctrine of the Church and Its Marks Applied to the Synod," Pieper continued his study, writing that "wherever on earth, be it in Wauwatosa or Asia Minor, there are two or more believers, there is a congregation; a people of God is present whether or not they have united in an outward church organization, whether they have formed one outward church organization or seventy-three. . . . Not the external association makes the true congregation, but the faith of a number of people com-

²⁹Quoted in Koehler, *The History of the Wisconsin Synod*, 237.

³⁰Ibid.

³¹Ibid., 238. In a later article entitled "Luther's Doctrine of Church and Ministry" (*The Wauwatosa Theology*, III), A. Pieper would write that the Wauwatosa men "do not consider Walther's identification of the public preaching office with the pastoral office as a happy one. From this some people who have not thought or studied independently have drawn the conclusion that the public office, that is the office of the Word which is transmitted from the church to an individual person, and the pastoral office are equal and exchangeable concepts and that therefore only that form of the public preaching office which we call the pastoral office is of divine origin" (193).

³²Quoted in Edward Fredrich, "The Scriptural Basis and Historical Development of WELS Doctrine of Ministry," (WELS Ministry Compendium, 1992), 778.

bined in the same way.”³³ He finally concluded, “In short, the synodical assembly has the infallible marks of the church in the proper sense; therefore it is church in the strict sense of the Word. . . . And the synod itself is church just as certainly. . . . The Wisconsin Synod is church in the strict sense of the word.”³⁴

John Schaller also entered the fray, particularly with his signal treatise on the ministry entitled “The Origin and Development of the New Testament Ministry,” first published in the 1911–12 seminary catalog. Here Schaller concluded, as Koehler had previously, that the pastoral office is not the only divinely instituted office in the Church. Instead Schaller, writing for his Wauwatosa associates, maintained:

If . . . we want to gain a correct understanding of the forms of the ministry as we find them in the church of all times, we have to free ourselves from the thought that only official public proclaiming is gospel preaching. This false view betrays itself immediately when one simply identifies the ministry [*Predigtamt*] with the pastoral ministry [*Pfarramt*], even when the clear presentation of thoughts demands something else, as for example, if one takes the sentence, “The ministry [*Predigtamt*] is the only office [*Amt*] that Christ ordained in his church,” and construes it without further thought as if it were speaking exclusively about the pastoral office. Our studies, which have adhered strictly to what is set forth in the Holy Scriptures, incontrovertibly show that the ministry, that is, the commission to preach the gospel, is given to every Christian; that at conversion not only the ability but also the impetus for this preaching is implanted in him; and that the gospel by its very nature as a message presupposes this preaching activity and at the same time by the effect it has guarantees it will occur.³⁵

Schaller correctly emphasized the service aspect of ministry, whether public or private, when he suggests that the word *Predigt-dienst* (the service of preaching), better than *Predigtamt* (the office of preaching), describes the servant attitude that Christians will have as they fulfill the Great Commission.³⁶ Finally, he also asserted that any and all New Testament forms were of a different sort than those of the Old Testament. In other words, all New Testament forms were not of a legal but of an evangelical kind, set in place (instituted) entirely by the Holy Spirit through the working of the gospel in the hearts, minds

³³August Pieper, “The Doctrine of the Church and Its Marks Applied to the Synod,” *The Wauwatosa Theology*, III (Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, 1997), 64.

³⁴*Ibid.*, 70.

³⁵John Schaller, “The Origin and Development of the New Testament Ministry,” *The Wauwatosa Theology*, III (Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, 1997), 81.

³⁶*Ibid.*, 89.

and lives of Christians. As a result, the Wauwatosa men declared that all New Testament forms of ministry are divinely instituted but not legally mandated or coerced, as such.

As soon as a group of Christians gather together as such in any manner and at any place . . . it must make provisions to let the Word of Christ ring out in its gathering. That this takes place is essential; *how* it takes place is incidental and depends on the circumstances of the congregation and on the opportunity. Among us it usually delegates to a single individual the responsibility to do the formal, solemn preaching on a regular basis, to conduct the public worship services, and in addition to serve the individual members of the congregation with the Word according to their needs. These things could also be arranged in an entirely different way since the pastorate in the form that is customary among us was very likely totally unknown in apostolic times.

As soon then as the congregation has established any such ministry and has called men for it, God gives it his approval and calls the men whom he bestows on this church “gifts” and assures them that they have been appointed by the Holy Spirit. For whatever the Christian congregation decides upon to further the preaching of the gospel it does at the instigation and under the guidance of the Spirit of Jesus Christ.³⁷

E. C. Fredrich wrote that the “three Wauwatosa teachers had not set themselves an easy task in this effort to change traditional thinking. It took many one-on-one discussions, many conference papers and debates, and many articles in the *Quartalschrift* before their position became a generally held position. Some never agreed. . . . The strongest and longest opposition came from the Synodical Conference brethren in the Missouri Synod.”³⁸

The Beginning of the End: The Wauwatosa–St. Louis Debates

The Wisconsin and Missouri Synods always had an interesting relationship during their years together in the Synodical Conference. Even previous to their 1868 declaration of fellowship and the 1872 formation of the Synodical Conference, the two synods had been rivals, with Missouri serving in the role of the domineering big brother and Wisconsin the pesky little one. There is no question that Missouri had had an overwhelming influence upon Wisconsin, both doctrinally and practically. Humanly speaking, the men of the Wisconsin Synod owed many thanks to their brethren in Missouri, yet Missouri seemed always to sense an air of ingratitude—perhaps rightly so—on the part of Wisconsin, especially when their friends to the north would throw

³⁷Ibid., 93-94.

³⁸Fredrich, *Wisconsin Synod Lutherans*, 110.

doctrinal flies in the ointment, as if almost to question Missouri's Lutheran orthodoxy. For this very reason alone there can be little doubt that the Wauwatosa theologians were a source of great irritation in the St. Louis faculty room, leading to a deep-seated suspicion of the Wauwatosa Gospel and its principles.

Nowhere did this rivalry and suspicion become more apparent and intense than in the hotly contested Wauwatosa-St. Louis debates of the 1910s and 1920s concerning the issues of church and ministry. Fredrich quips that "attacks from Missouri leaders were launched almost before the ink had dried on the *Quartalschrift* pages."³⁹ The first formal protest took place at the 1914 Synodical Conference gathering in Milwaukee, when the St. Louis faculty sought an interview with their Wauwatosa counterparts. One session took place during the morning of August 11 in the Missouri Synod's Trinity parish hall; the other in a Wauwatosa classroom on the evening of August 12. Representing the Missouri Synod were Professors Franz Pieper, George Metzger, Ludwig Fuerbringer, Friedrich Bente, and William Dau, along with Pastor William Dallmann. The Wisconsin contingent included Koehler, Pieper, and Schaller, and Pastor Gustav Berge-mann.

Koehler briefly summarized the days' events in his *History of the Wisconsin Synod*.

Since there was no definite program, and the Wauwatosa men mostly replied to objections to their personal statements, it is hard to recall just what was said. The upshot, however, was that there was no agreement, both in regard to the formulation of the doctrine and the method, as well, by which it is to be derived from the Scriptures.⁴⁰

The extant minutes of the August 11 meeting report that August Pieper presented six theses representing the Wauwatosa position, concluding that "proof for the special divine institution and moralistic obligation of the Apostolic episcopacy . . . is impossible and vain. Whoever maintains this must be able to point out a clear and specific word for it or prove that it is contained in either the Law or the Gospel."⁴¹ When Koehler and Schaller assented to their colleague's presentation, the St. Louis men charged that "the Wauwatosa men denied the divine institution of the pastorate."⁴²

³⁹Fredrich, "WELS Doctrine of Ministry," 781.

⁴⁰Koehler, *The History of the Wisconsin Synod*, 238.

⁴¹Quoted in Jon Ladner, "The Church and Ministry Debate Between the Missouri and Wisconsin Synods" (Essay delivered to the St. Croix Conference of the Minnesota District of the WELS, June 12, 2001), 12.

⁴²*Ibid.*, 13.

Finally, a written protest was formulated and sent by the St. Louis faculty on August 3, 1916, "against various statements of the three elder Wauwatosa professors."⁴³ The Missourians were confused, stating "we do not really know what is public doctrine [concerning church and ministry] in the honorable Wisconsin Synod at this time." They observed a difference in recent *Quartalschrift* articles when compared to Adolf Hoenecke's earlier *Dogmatik*, "in which," they stated, "as far as we see, the doctrine of the church and the ministry which has been common among us is propounded." Now the Wauwatosa faculty was publicly claiming to have "an 'understanding of Scripture' in these matters which did not prevail among us before."⁴⁴

Three issues in particular troubled the St. Louis men about the Wauwatosa approach. First, they believed that in Wauwatosa's presentation of this doctrine "the divine arrangement of the public pastoral office is pushed too much into the background, even openly denied," although admitting that the Wauwatosa men did "indeed also speak of a divine origin of the office, and indeed in a preeminent sense over against all other callings, but this only after all manner of detours."⁴⁵ The St. Louis faculty strongly asserted that the office of the pastoral ministry (*Pfarramt*) was a legal command and regulation of God to be enforced within the Church, adding that "one must not be frightened or permit himself to be terrified by 'legalistic' or 'ceremonial laws,' etc. One could with as much right charge that concerning both Sacraments."⁴⁶ Still, the Missourians had to admit that they were "indeed able to offer no word of specific institution"⁴⁷ which set apart the ministry of the congregational pastor (*Pfarramt*) as a specially and legally-binding form of gospel ministry within the Church.

The second area of concern dealt with the meaning of the term "local congregation" (*Ortsgemeinde*). The Missourians asserted that "the local congregation [within a fixed geographical area] is the divinely-willed outward form of the Church, while you assert many outward forms on the Church: synods, conferences, yes, two or three Christians on trips, etc."⁴⁸ They went on to suggest that by taking such an approach "the concept of the local congregation is destroyed" by the Wauwatosa faculty, adding, "we believe that here lies the real basis of the difference, as indeed the treatment of the whole matter in the

⁴³Koehler, *The History of the Wisconsin Synod*, 238.

⁴⁴"Basic Documents in the Church and Ministry Discussions," *The Faithful Word* 7, no. 1 (February 1970), 23.

⁴⁵*Ibid.*, 24.

⁴⁶*Ibid.*, 25-26.

⁴⁷*Ibid.*, 25.

⁴⁸*Ibid.*, 26.

Quartalschrift has been developed from this original point [namely, the Cincinnati case].⁴⁹

The third objection was that the Wauwatosa men placed “various synodical offices, etc., on the same plane with the pastoral office”⁵⁰ in terms of their divine institution. The St. Louis men stated that “with the exception of the ministry of the Word to ‘those without,’ that is, the ministry of evangelization, we find the office and the work of the ministry spoken of only in connection with the local congregation.”⁵¹ Only the congregational pastorate is divinely mandated; all other offices in the Church are simply human arrangements and are to be considered auxiliary.

The two faculties met again on December 20-21, 1916, in Chicago over the Christmas break. Koehler would later reminisce at length about the happenings of those acrimonious days.⁵² Eventually, the two faculties formulated what became known as the Wauwatosa Theses.

1. The Church in the intrinsic sense of the term is the sum total of all those who have come to faith in Christ through the Gospel.
2. Local congregations are organizations of Christians who, conforming to the will of God, according to locality and circumstances, have associated themselves for the public administration of the Means of Grace and for joint work in the Kingdom of God. They are associations formed according to the will of God. An occasional and casual meeting of Christians, also in the name of Jesus, is no local congregation in this sense.
3. The parish pastorate (*Pfarramt*) is the ministry delegated (*übertragen*) by the congregation to persons with the required aptitudes in order to exercise the rights of the spiritual priesthood of all Christians on behalf of the congregation.
4. The office is of divine institution, and its functions are exactly appointed in the Word of God. Hence the establishment of this office is not a matter of the Christians’ option. The external form and arrangement of this office God has left to the wisdom and the liberty of the Christians under the leading of the Holy Spirit.

August Pieper would later comment in 1929: “With the common adoption of certain theses in 1916 the discussions were essentially con-

⁴⁹Ibid.

⁵⁰Ibid.

⁵¹Ibid., 26-27.

⁵²Koehler, “Retrospective,” *Faith-Life* 76, no. 2 (March/April 2003), 20.

cluded, even though unanimity was not attained in all points.”⁵³ However, in a 1970 essay published in *The Faithful Word* outlining the Wauwatosa-St. Louis discussions, Harold Romoser challenged Pieper’s contention. Romoser claimed that “the issues were met and settled” but that the Wauwatosa faculty quickly reneged on the agreement. He points an accusing finger especially at the 1917 publication of Koehler’s *Kirchengeschichte* as the “deal breaker” since, in his opinion, it included an “endorsement of [Johann] Hoefling’s position (p. 659)⁵⁴ and [a] repudiation (p. 712) of the plain statements of the 1916 Theses.”⁵⁵ Romoser, though, offers no evidence that the fundamental issues had

⁵³August Pieper, “Concerning the Doctrine of the Church and of Its Ministry, with Special Reference to the Synod and Its Discipline,” *The Wauwatosa Theology*, III (Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, 1997), 98.

⁵⁴Erlangen professor Johann Hoefling (1802–1853) opined that, while the ministry of the gospel carried out by the priesthood of all believers is divinely instituted, the public ministry as established by the congregation is of human origin “developed from inner necessity.” Most of all, Hoefling was concerned not to make rules, where God made no rules. In his *Church History* text Koehler commented: “In the first years after 1848, a controversy existed over the teaching of Church and Ministry. Kliefoth, Vilmar, Muenchmeyer and Loehe had a High-Church view of the pastor’s office and the church, similar to that of Grabau in America. Most Lutherans of other circles stood against it, especially the Erlangen faculty. Very freely and correctly—according to Scripture—stood only Hoefling with some of his colleagues. This controversy also took place in the Free Church. Huschke held the position that the office was a *juris divini* [divine decision], while the outward form was a *juris humani* [human decision]. Its head opponent was Pastor Dietrich, who in 1861 emerged and established the Immanuel Synod” (659). In his critique of Hoefling, Franz Pieper wrote: “He holds that if one assumes a divine command for the administration of the means of grace by public servants, one carries over into the New Testament Church an Old Testament feature, a legalistic element, a trace of the Old Testament bondage” (*Christian Dogmatics*, Vol. III, 445). It is true that Koehler and the other Wauwatosa theologians were also wary of introducing divine commands where no divine commands existed, but they also stressed that the public ministry and its different forms were all divinely instituted by the Holy Spirit through the gospel. Finally, the definition of the word “institution” became the real sticking point between the St. Louis and Wauwatosa faculties.

⁵⁵Harold Romoser, “The Church and Ministry,” *The Faithful Word* 7, nos. 3 & 4 (August–November, 1970), 45. Concerning the Synodical Conference debate, Koehler states: “In the last few years the faculty of the Wauwatosa Seminary has come out in favor of a presentation of the doctrine of church and office which appears opposed to that held by Walther. Walther identified the pastorate and the preaching ministry and gave greater prominence to the local congregation than to other church bodies in that he claimed a separate special divine institution for both. The Wauwatosa faculty maintains that the pastorate is a species of the preaching ministry that originated first in Germany in the Middle Ages, and likewise that the local congregation is a species of the concept Church; and it maintains in both cases that the term ‘institution’ is not to be understood [as if] God has distinguished these two species by a special ordination compared to other similar forms of Christian and church life which have also been created by the Gospel. On the contrary, by the term ‘institution’ is meant a divine creation of forms (pastorate, local congregation, synod, office of school teacher, office of professor, et al) through the work of the Holy Ghost in Christendom, in which with Christian

truly been resolved with the drafting of the Wauwatosa Theses since their wording tended to be just as ambiguous as that contained in the later Thiensville Theses, drawn up in 1932.⁶⁶

Franz Pieper seemed to blame Koehler for this latest impasse as well. When the two met at the 1917 Missouri Synod convention that next summer in Milwaukee, Pieper stopped Koehler in the corridor and said: "In your *Church History* you touched upon the dispute between our faculties. By that, you made it impossible for us to recommend your history. We shall point out that the local pastor's office (*Pfarramt*) has existed since the time of the Fathers, and before." Koehler calmly retorted: "A correct historical perception, of course, is not determined by the sale of the book, but is guided by the truth. The dispute between us is commonly known among Lutherans. That is why I had to touch upon it. The manner of presentation, I'm sure you will not dispute." J. P. Koehler never saw Franz Pieper again.

To be continued

freedom Christians organize these things as suited to the external existing conditions. The discussions concerning these questions have not yet come to an end, but because both parties at heart take the same evangelical stand toward the concrete things that are concerned, it is to be expected that in the intellectual conception and presentation of the matter there will also come an agreement based on the Word of God" (715).

⁶⁶Koehler viewed the 1932 Thiensville Theses as a compromise that accomplished nothing because they use the "weasel" words, "It is God's will and order." In his *History of the Wisconsin Synod* Koehler posed the question: What is meant by "will" and "order"? Does that mean legal "command" or evangelical "pleasure"? Does that mean legal "ordinance" or evangelical "arrangement"? (239) Koehler commented that these theses "are externalistic, couched in the terms of law, in that they are concerned about jurisdictions, when, of all things, the doctrines of the Church, the Ministry and the Office of the Keys cry for a presentation from the Gospel point of view." The *real* issue separating these two faculties was this: Are New Testament divine institutions law or gospel? St. Louis said law; Wauwatosa said gospel. Both the Wauwatosa and Thiensville Theses are simply ambiguous on this question.