

Johann Wilhelm Friedrich Hoefling: The Man and His Ecclesiology

Part 1: Hoefling's Life

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With over one thousand veterans of World War II dying every day, dying along with them is an expression that became legendary among the generation who fought in World War II: "Kilroy was here." This saying was written as graffiti on military buildings, vehicles, and equipment wherever American servicemen happened to be. While stories conflict about the exact origin of the expression, in time "Kilroy" came to be seen as an ubiquitous—but never actually seen—American G.I. who had already arrived wherever Americans went to fight in the world.

In some ways the nineteenth-century German theologian, Johann Wilhelm Friedrich Hoefling is like the proverbial "Kilroy" of World War II fame.¹ In Lutheran church and ministry studies since the mid-nineteenth century, Hoefling's name is just about everywhere, yet few seem to know much of anything about him. Only one minuscule portrait of the man is known to exist. Unlike the memorable Kilroy, the name Hoefling engenders no fond memories and no loyalty. Almost universally across the spectrum of Lutheranism, from liberal to conservative Lutherans, the name Hoefling engenders the idea of an enigmatic German theologian who had a spurious view of the ministry—denying the ministry was divinely instituted—and instead teaching that it originated in time through mere expediency. For most, the mere mention of Hoefling's name inspires contempt if not downright revulsion.

Through a number of articles, this series will attempt to tell the story of Hoefling and to describe his ecclesiology. For the first time, a detailed account of his life will appear in English, as well as a description of how he understood the doctrines of the church and its office, the ministry. Since the Wisconsin Synod for a century has been accused of subscribing to Hoefling's supposedly spurious view of the ministry, an honest attempt will be made to present Hoefling's understanding of ecclesiology, followed by a critique of the accusation that the WELS, at least in part, developed its position on church and ministry from Hoefling's position.

Little on J. W. F. Hoefling's life and theology is found in English. What exists is limited to succinct articles in theological encyclopedias. When Dr. David P. Scaer of Concordia Theological Seminary, Fort Wayne authored a *Logia* article in which he was critical of both Hoefling and the Wisconsin Synod's doctrine of the ministry, he went no further than partially reconstructing Hoefling ecclesiology from the index of Pieper's *Christian Dogmatics*.² There are only two books, both in German, which devote more than a few pages to Hoefling's life and theology. What could be regarded as the definitive work on Hoefling to date is Manfred Kiessig's *Johann Wilhelm Friedrich Höfling: Leben und Werk*, published in 1991. This monograph is Kiessig's doctoral dissertation, written under the aegis of the theological faculty of the University of Erlangen-Nürnberg. In his introduction, Kiessig freely admits that until his dissertation was written, with the exception of a brief encomium written by two of Hoefling's Erlangen colleagues, there simply was no general overview of Hoefling's life and work in existence.³ The encomium Kiessig refers to is a fifty-six page booklet written by

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¹ The full name of the theologian being studied is Johann Wilhelm Friedrich Höfling. While known as Wilhelm Höfling during his lifetime in Germany, among English-speaking theologians, he is usually known by just his initials, J. W. F. Hoefling, with his last name spelled without the umlaut and pronounced (HAY-fling). In these *WLQ* articles, the form Hoefling will be used.

² David P. Scaer, "The Lutheran Confessions on the Holy Ministry With a Few Thoughts on Hoefling," *Logia* 8 (Reformation 1999): p 38.

³ Manfred Kiessig, *Johann Wilhelm Friedrich Höfling: Leben und Werk*, Die lutherische Kirche, Geschichte und Gestalten, Band 14 (Gütersloh, Germany: Gütersloher Verlagshaus Gerd Mohn, 1991), p 13.

Karl Friedrich Nögelsbach and Gottfried Thomasius after Hoefling's death in 1853.⁴ The first chapter of Kiessig's monograph will be the main source of information for this article. He presents the most complete biographical account of Hoefling to date. Most of his information is drawn from the Nögelsbach-Thomasius booklet, yet he also provides information on Hoefling from other sources. Kiessig's published dissertation is divided into two sections, focusing first on Hoefling's life and then on a detailed treatment of his theology.

Family Background and Early Childhood

Johann Wilhelm Friedrich Hoefling was born on December 30, 1802 in the Bavarian village of Neudrossenfeld, a hamlet between Culmbach and Bayreuth. He was the son of Johann Paul Hoefling, the local cantor and schoolteacher at Neudrossenfeld and later a Lutheran pastor at Betzenstein, and Maria Elisabetha Ruckdeschel Hoefling, who was from Gesees, Bavaria. Hoefling had an older sister who died while still a child. In part as a result of being left with only one child, Hoefling's parents gave him a rigorous education and upbringing. Young Hoefling responded by diligently applying himself to his studies. He seems to have been the archetype German *Wunderkind*. He received an outstanding education in linguistics from his schoolteacher father, which served him well in his future career as an academician.⁵

Schooling in Bayreuth and Erlangen

Hoefling was well-prepared to enter the gymnasium at Bayreuth, where he studied six years, from 1814-1819. At Bayreuth, he excelled at learning, continually being among the three best students in the class and earning numerous academic rewards, mostly books. Some of his written compositions were accepted into a compilation work, which featured the best academic work at the institution. Hoefling continued his excellence in languages at Bayreuth, once delivering a Latin address at a school function and helping his father prepare for the required examination to be placed in the Lutheran ministry. In the last two years at the gymnasium, Hoefling competed for first place in the class with Max Emanuel Richter, the son of the famous German novelist Jean Paul Friedrich Richter. By the time he graduated in 1819, he stood at the top of his class and earned the top prize, a silver medal.⁶

Since Hoefling began attending the gymnasium at the age of eleven, when he graduated six years later, he was still below the minimum age to attend the University of Erlangen. He applied for and obtained special permission to enroll. At first, Hoefling studied languages and literature. As in his gymnasium days, Hoefling distinguished himself by his profound knowledge. Whether it was philology, Greek, philosophy, mathematics, science, or geography, Hoefling was interested in them all.⁷ Kiessig makes this conclusion: "We can from this information form a picture, how versatile the young Hoefling was in his interests."⁸

While Hoefling was interested in many subjects, he ultimately focused on the study of theology. By the end of his second year at Erlangen, he devoted himself to the subject. In his vita, Hoefling cites his basis for turning toward theology as "an innate duty" and a "desire for lofty ideas."⁹ Furthermore, Kiessig reports that "the recent development of theology" [the theological rationalism of the Enlightenment] "consequently had a strong influence on him."¹⁰ Hoefling himself termed this theological development as "new life clarifying the

⁴ Karl Friedrich Nögelsbach und Gottfried Thomasius, *Zum Gedächtnis Joh. Wilh. Friedr. Häfling's weil. Doctors der Philosophie, Theologie und des Kirchenrechts*, K. B. Oberconsistorialrats (Erlangen: Verlag von Theodor Bläsing, 1853), p 1-56. Karl F. Nögelsbach (1806-1859) was a professor of classics and philology at Erlangen. Gottfried Thomasius (1802-1875) was a professor of dogmatics at Erlangen.

⁵ Kiessig, p 20-21.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p 21.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p 22.

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ *Ibid.*, p 23.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

light of universal theology."¹¹ He also began his preaching career at this time, preaching repeatedly at his father's church and in Erlangen.

Johann Hoefling's development as a theologian was under the aegis of professors who were of various theological stripes. He lists his theology professors as Paulus J. S. Vogel, Johann L. Bertholdt, Gottlieb P. C. Kaiser, and J. G. Veit Engelhardt.¹² Kiessig reports that Hoefling took the greatest interest in the writings of Friedrich Schleiermacher, Karl Daub, Philipp Marheineke, and August Tholuck, whose works he especially studied.¹³

A few other influences must be mentioned regarding his formative years. Manfred Kiessig points out that at the time Hoefling was a student at Erlangen, Friedrich W. J. von Schelling still cast a long shadow over the university.¹⁴ Schelling was the son of a Lutheran pastor and was one of the leading German romantic philosophers. He lived in Erlangen during Hoefling's university years, and Hoefling eagerly attended his engaging lectures. Hoefling later admitted that it was these Schelling lectures which essentially had contributed in confirming for him a respect for the dignity and depth of historical Christianity. Kiessig attributes Schelling's emphasis on the historical nature of Christianity as being a positive influence on many Bavarian theologians and proved to an impetus to the confessional awakening.¹⁵

Another major influence on Hoefling was a local Reformed pastor in Erlangen, Johann Christian Krafft.¹⁶ Kiessig reports that Krafft was a scriptural theologian, who exerted great influence through his lectures, sermons, and through the earnestness of his personality. Hoefling soon belonged to the circle of students which Krafft gathered around himself.¹⁷ Kiessig sums up Hoefling's theological education by concluding that Hoefling ended up rejecting rationalism and instead found a unity employing both faith and reason. He then finishes with a quote from the Nägelsbach-Thomasius booklet about Hoefling's formative years: "He likely never fought a battle between faith and knowledge; the Christian and the theologian were in him quintessentially the same."¹⁸

Hoefling as a Vicar in Würzburg 1823-1827

J. W. F. Hoefling was honorably dismissed from Erlangen in 1823 with a "distinguished" academic predicate. After receiving an "excellent" score on his theological qualifying examination, he was ordained on November 17, 1823 in Ansbach and was appointed to be the city vicar in Würzburg. His ministry in Würzburg

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid. Paulus Joachim Siegmund Vogel (1753-1848) taught theology first at Altdorf and then beginning in 1808 at Erlangen. In his book on the Erlangen Theology, Friedrich Kantzenbach describes Vogel as a moderate rationalist. Johann Leonhardt Bertholdt (1774-1822) served as a theology professor and university preacher. He also was a rationalist. Gottlieb Philippi Christian Kaiser (1781-1848) began his career as a thorough-going rationalist, advocating the idea of a primitive, universal religion. Later he experienced a conversion to Reformation theology and was open to the confessional awakening of the nineteenth century. Johann Georg Veit Engelhardt (1791-1895) was a noted church historian at Erlangen. Kantzenbach notes that while Engelhardt held fast to historical Christianity and the authority of the Holy Scriptures, he also stood hesitantly opposed to the confessional Lutheran revival.

¹³ Ibid. Friedrich Daniel Ernst Schleiermacher (1768-1834) is considered the father of liberal theology and was the most prominent theologian of nineteenth-century German Romanticism. He was also a major proponent of the 1817 Prussian Union and served as both a professor and preacher at Berlin. Karl Daub (1765-1836) was a professor of theology who taught at Heidelberg. Philipp Konrad Marheineke (1780-1846) was a professor of theology at Erlangen, Heidelberg, and finally Berlin, where he was an associate of Schleiermacher. He is most noted for his attempt to present and interpret the doctrines of historical Christianity through the dialectics of Hegelian philosophy. Friedrich August Gottreu Tholuck (1799-1877) was a noted linguist, preacher, and professor of theology at Halle. He exerted great influence in both Europe and America. Adolf Hoenecke was one of his many students. Tholuck supported the Prussian Union but was a staunch opponent of rationalism.

¹⁴ Ibid., Friedrich Wilhelm Johann Schelling (1775-1854) was a prominent philosopher in German Romanticism. He became a bitter rival to George Hegel, a former schoolmate. He taught at Würzburg, Erlangen, Munich, and Berlin.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid. Johann Christian Gottlob Ludwig Krafft (1784-1845) was a Reformed pastor who in 1818 began teaching pastoral theology at Erlangen. He founded a mission society and as a professor exerted a positive influence on Wilhelm Loehe.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid., p 25.

was not without its turmoil. During his university years, Hoefling had been affiliated with a secret student organization (*Burschenschaft*) which was prohibited by the Carlsbad Decrees.¹⁹ This made him suspect to the state authorities and for a time he was put under police surveillance, resulting in his arrest and confinement for fourteen days. Despite this interference from the Bavarian authorities, Hoefling managed to have a fruitful ministry in Würzburg. He became well known throughout the region for his pastoral ministrations in the local hospital and for his sermons. Early on, Hoefling recognized the connection between the warmth of a living faith and doctrine and confession. In the judgment of one of his listeners, one could study dogmatics from Hoefling's sermons. In the summer of 1825, Hoefling took another qualifying examination, and once again received the score "excellent."²⁰ It was also during this time that he began to be a contributor to the theological journal *Homiletisch-liturgischen Correspondenzblatt*.²¹

Hoefling as a Parish Pastor at St. Jobst in Nürnberg 1827-1833 and His Promotion to Doctor of Philosophy

Hoefling was transferred on March 24, 1827 to a new position as pastor at St. Jobst in Nürnberg, a position for which he did not apply. On August 5, 1827, he delivered a memorable inaugural sermon, based on 1 Corinthians 2:1-5, in which he outlined his view of the ministry and his theological position. In his sermon introduction, Hoefling spoke about the magnitude of the office of the ministry. Those who serve in the ministry function as stewards of God's mysteries, standing now in the place of Christ and the congregation to lead God's people in the way of salvation. He then proclaimed a heartfelt sermon to his parishioners in which he reviewed the entire doctrine of salvation, concluding with a prayer asking the Holy Spirit for power to conduct his ministry. Kiessig makes this comment about Hoefling's first sermon at Nürnberg: "The inaugural sermon of Hoefling's clearly breathes the spirit of the awakening movement (*Erweckungsbewegung*), which had rediscovered justification by grace."²² Hoefling's sermons had a profound effect not only on his congregation but also on the city of Nürnberg. A steady procession of spiritually-minded people came from Nürnberg to St. Jobst, to hear Hoefling preach, including the rector of the local gymnasium. Along with his sermons, Hoefling's engaging personality also produced an effect. Candidates of theology frequently visited him in his small parsonage in order to speak with him. They were received hospitably by the affable Hoefling. His colleagues Nägelsbach and Thomasius relate that the conversations Hoefling had with these candidates of theology were doctrinally rich. They concluded that whether the conversations were theological or non-theological, it was impossible not to learn something from Hoefling.²³

While Hoefling had a blessed ministry in Nürnberg, the external circumstances of his parish life were not particularly auspicious. He had to share part of his salary with his retired predecessor, "a notorious miser," and "the parsonage, with the church under one roof, was very small."²⁴ His church, parish house, and school existed as its own complex, situated remotely from the town. In spite of these conditions, Hoefling fulfilled all of his parish duties, especially confirmation instruction, with great faithfulness.²⁵

Despite an eventful parish ministry, Hoefling still found time to earn a doctorate as a young man. Since the time he was home-schooled by his father, Hoefling had demonstrated a great interest and proficiency in ancient languages. Less than three weeks after his twenty-eighth birthday, he submitted a dissertation composed

¹⁹ Ibid. The Carlsbad Decrees were ordinances passed by the German confederation in 1819 at the insistence of Prince Metternich, which were designed to severely restrict liberal political reform in Germany. The decrees suppressed attacks against German state governments and dissolved the university student organizations, many of which championed German nationalism. The Carlsbad Decrees remained in effect until the 1848 German revolutions. Hoefling had been associated with a secret student organization while at Erlangen.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ibid., p 26-28.

²² Ibid., p 30.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Ibid., p 31.

²⁵ Ibid.

in Latin on the topic of the pathos of the Greek poets Aeschylus and Euripides to the faculty at the University of Tübingen. Hoefling won high praise for the quality of his work and the Tübingen faculty on February 16, 1831 promoted him to Doctor of Philosophy, with the academic predicate *post bene comprobata*.²⁶

Hoefling as Professor of Practical Theology at Erlangen 1833-1852

Toward the end of his parish ministry in Nürnberg, Hoefling became involved in two theological disputes, which later proved momentous for his career. One involved providing a biblical approach to a cholera epidemic that had struck Germany. In this incident, Hoefling wrote a response to an erroneous pamphlet about the role of God in the epidemic. This dispute became known as the the Darmer Controversy. The other dispute involved addressing the issue of mysticism, in which Hoefling resolutely defended the confessional awakening happening in Germany and defended the authority of the Bible and the Lutheran Confessions. Especially as a result of his theological leadership when addressing the cholera epidemic, Hoefling, barely thirty years old, attracted the favorable attention of King Ludwig I of Bavaria and the Upper Consistory (*Oberkonsistorium*). The Upper Consistory recommended to the Bavarian king that Hoefling be called to be a professor of practical theology. On May 30, 1833, the king, a reform-minded Roman Catholic, appointed Hoefling to the professorship, a position that was specifically created for him. Although Hoefling at this stage of his career had not made a name for himself in the German university system, his scholarly evaluation of the pamphlet that precipitated the Danner Controversy was the deciding factor for his professorship at Erlangen.²⁷ Soon Hoefling was given additional responsibilities. In 1834 he was appointed the university preacher and co-director (with Veit Engelhardt) of the homiletical seminar and in 1836 he became the sole director.²⁸

Despite having earned a Ph.D., Hoefling did not have a Doctor of Theology degree, "which was a prerequisite for a seat and a voice in the faculty."²⁹ The faculty agreed to permit Hoefling to begin work on his dissertation before he began his lectures. In less than three years, Hoefling was able to complete the work for his doctorate in theology. His dissertation, *De Symbolorum natura, necessitate, auctoritate, atque usu*, focused on the importance of the Lutheran Confessions. He handed in his dissertation at the beginning of 1835 and on April 29, 1835 successfully defended it in a public disputation. Hoefling was then awarded his theological doctorate and was commended by the faculty for his solid contribution to the field of theology. On May 14, 1835 he became a member of the theological faculty and was inducted into the academic Senate at Erlangen on May 30 of that year.³⁰

In addition to his previously mentioned duties, Hoefling was soon entrusted with the position of the *Ephorat*. An exact English equivalent for this word is hard to come by, but based upon Kiessig's lengthy description of the *Ephorat's* activities, it was a position of great responsibility. "Dean or provost for the theological students" is an honest attempt to provide a modern-day equivalent. Hoefling was appointed to this post in 1834. One of the stipulations for the position was that the office holder had to be a professor of practical theology at Erlangen. In this new position Hoefling supervised four tutors/adjunct professors and the academic and student lives of the theological candidates. An important part of his position was to engage in academic and theological discussions with the students in small groups with the help of the tutors. A theology student had to receive certification from the *Ephorat* before he was allowed to take a qualifying exam. Another important part of his duties as *Ephorat* was preparing an annual report to the university's board of control and serving as the university preacher and worship leader. The position of the *Ephorat* was abolished on November 27, 1848 as a result of the fallout from the 1848 revolutions in Germany. In addition to his *Ephorat* position, Hoefling was

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Ibid., p 32-44.

²⁸ Ibid., p 44-45.

²⁹ Ibid., p 45.

³⁰ Ibid.

entrusted twice with the position of *Prorektor* at Erlangen, the faculty member who presided over the faculty senate at Erlangen.

Hoefling's Various Writings

Hoefling's biographer, Manfred Kiessig, in his dissertation makes the point that J. W. F. Hoefling was not a bookish, ivory tower theologian (*Stubengelehrter*), but always wrote to address a concrete situation. His first published writing was the previously mentioned evaluation of a pamphlet which prompted the Darmer Controversy. Another evaluation, addressing mysticism, soon followed. Hoefling's two dissertations have been previously mentioned. Hoefling was one of the founders of the theological journal of the Erlangen faculty *Zeitschrift für Protestantismus und Kirche*, and he contributed many articles to this periodical. The work for which Hoefling is most known, *Grundsätze evangelisch-lutherischer Kirchenverfassung (Principles of Evangelical Lutheran Church Polity)* was first published in 1850 as a lengthy journal article in *Zeitschrift für Protestantismus und Kirche* and was subsequently enlarged and ultimately published in book form in 1853 as a third edition. Other notable works include a major two-volume work on baptism, *Das Sakrament der Taufe* (1848) and the monograph *Die Lehre der ältesten Kirche vom Opfer im Leben und Cultus der Christen (The Doctrine of the Ancient Church on Sacrifice in the Life and Worship of Christians)*, published in 1851, and a fragment of a work Hoefling was writing when he died in 1853, *Liturgisches Urkundenbuch (Liturgical Register)*, published posthumously by his Erlangen colleagues in 1854.

Hoefling's Personality, Family, Final Years, and Death

In the year that he began his Nürnberg ministry at St. Jobst, Hoefling was united in marriage to Johanna Barbara Regina Doehlemann. Their wedding occurred on September 11, 1827 at Deutenheim. Hoefling's wife was born in 1808 and died in 1864. She was a daughter of the merchant Johann Fredrich Doehlemann of Nürnberg. The marriage was blessed with twelve children, but only five of his children outlived him, two sons and three daughters.³¹

What consistently comes through in the descriptions of Hoefling by Nägelsbach and Thomasius is Hoefling's affable and gregarious personality. According to these colleagues, while Hoefling had a few friends with whom he regularly socialized, he readily enjoyed informal conversations and was interested in many subjects, both theological and non-theological. More important than his engaging personality was his evident piety. He exhibited a confessional decisiveness with a right measure of meekness and demonstrated these qualities in all his works. According to his colleagues, while Hoefling clearly and systematically defended the confession of his church and his own theological convictions, he always attempted to see justice done to his opponents and to emphasize the positive in doctrinal discussions. He was also generous with both his counsel and contributions to institutions of mercy. In summary, the empirical evidence suggests that whatever his doctrinal aberrations may have been, J. W. F. Hoefling demonstrated that he lived a consistent life of Christian discipleship and patiently endured numerous personal tragedies, specifically the loss of seven children, only three less than the Old Testament patriarch Job.³²

In the last year of Hoefling's life, on October 1, 1852, at a meeting of the Protestant High Consistory, Hoefling was appointed a councilor of the Bavarian Consistory. In November of that year, the law faculty of the University of Munich conferred upon Hoefling an honorary law degree. Hoefling was preparing to lead the Bavarian Protestant church in adapting new orders for the liturgy when death intervened. Shortly after his mother died and after visiting one of his daughters who was seriously ill, Hoefling died suddenly of a blood disease, four months after his fiftieth birthday, on April 5, 1853. Two days later, his wife, surviving children, relatives, colleagues, and friends buried him at Erlangen in the hope of the resurrection to eternal life.³³

³¹ Ibid., p 63, 66.

³² Ibid., p 63-64.

³³ Ibid., p 64-67.

Epilogue

While J. W. F. Hoefling today may be a relatively obscure and marginalized theologian, during his relatively short lifetime in Germany, he was both famous and well regarded as a pastor, preacher, theologian, and churchman. Suffice it to say that after presenting this brief biographical sketch of the man's life, we see that there is much more to the life and career of Hoefling than his writing on Lutheran church polity, which—fairly or unfairly—has engendered its fair share of discussion and controversy. The next installment of this series on Hoefling and his ecclesiology will bring to light exactly what he taught on the doctrine of the church and how he applied this doctrine to the ecclesiastical life of nineteenth-century Germany.

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