

ZU HALTEN DIE EINIGKEIT IM GEIST  
DURCH DAS BAND DES FRIEDENS

THE EFFORTS OF PROFESSOR JOHN PHILLIP KOEHLER TO  
"KEEP THE UNITY OF THE SPIRIT THROUGH THE BOND OF PEACE"  
THROUGH THE PROTESTANT CONTROVERSY



Church History 3031

Aaron R. Bublitz

December 6, 2010

*“Mein Vater hat uns immer ausreden lassen, ehe e runs zuechtigte”* (My father always heard us out before he chastised us).<sup>1</sup> This is a principle that John Phillip Koehler learned at a very young age. Born in Manitowoc, Wisconsin on January 17, 1859, to Reverend Christian Phillip and Apollonia Koehler, John learned to always strive for “the Pauline ideal of moderation (1 Timothy 2:9), that is, the comprehension of all things in Christ in obedience to the truth of the Gospel; in putting the best construction on everything; and lastly the habit of realistic self-and [sic] social appraisal.”<sup>2</sup>

These are principles that Koehler, by God’s grace and strength, attempted to adhere to throughout his life and ministry. In his dealings throughout his work as a seminary professor, as director of the seminary, and as a major player in the Protes’tant Controversy, he strove to be quick to listen and slow to speak. By examining his writings and the writings of others from his time, we will see that in his involvement in the Controversy he attempted with both sides and in all things, in an evangelical manner to “make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace.”<sup>3</sup>

## **The Fronts of the Storm**

There are many background issues that led to the Protes’tant Controversy of the 1920’s. The situation really was a perfect storm, just as a meteorologist would identify a storm with all of the needed circumstances that come together to create a storm of immense magnitude. Though a complete reconstruction of all of the history can be useful and enlightening, here we are concerned with the setting and the events in which Koehler himself was linked to identify why he involved himself as he did and the way in which he did.<sup>4</sup> There are two main, overarching and connected issues that led to the

---

<sup>1</sup> Philemon Hensel, “A Brief History of the Protes’tant Controversy,” *Faith-Life* Vol. LXXXIII, no. 5 (September/October 2000): 6.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 7.

<sup>3</sup> Ephesians 4:3 (NIV).

<sup>4</sup> A number of histories of the entire Controversy have been written and it is not my intent here to attempt to re-create a complete re-telling of all of the events. As stated, my focus is on Koehler’s direct involvement. The bibliography has a list of documents containing complete histories that I found helpful, enlightening, and most importantly, seemingly accurate.

perfect storm of the Protes'tant Controversy. These two are the advent of the Wauwatosa Gospel and the Church and Ministry issues that were already evident at the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth century.

### The Wauwatosa Gospel

Koehler attended Concordia Lutheran Seminary in St. Louis for his seminary training from 1876 to 1878, where he was privileged to study under a number of gifted theologians, but in particular, C.F.W. Walther and Georg Stoeckhardt. The teaching styles of the two professors differed greatly. Walther was the professor who taught systematically, Stoeckhardt's method was exegetical. It was Stoeckhardt "who introduced Old and New Testament exegesis as well as biblical history to the Concordia Seminary curriculum, albeit the latter in the traditional segmented, rather than sequential, order."<sup>5</sup> Koehler describes conservative Lutheran theology near the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century in this way:

With the Old Lutherans of the 19<sup>th</sup> century it was different. Its sources were the 17<sup>th</sup> century fathers of Lutheran dogmatics and the confessional writings and the struggle was directed against the Prussian Union . . . In going back to those secondary sources, the old Lutherans not only took over the forms of organization and worship, but also the intellectualism which was just as much a part of the mentality of the 19<sup>th</sup> as the two preceding centuries. Whatever obtained in the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries was considered the Lutheran idea and was reintroduced. This was not always prompted by the freedom of the Gospel but by the lack of discrimination of this Romantic period and by the dogmatic ideas . . . So there was no one in those days . . . to pose the question whether or not the forms of the 17<sup>th</sup> century were suited to the 19<sup>th</sup> century ... (or) whether these forms even in the 17<sup>th</sup> century were an adequate expression of the great truths of the Gospel.<sup>6</sup>

What Koehler was against is what he calls "dogmatism" (not dogmatics!), which he explains is "the exclusive study of the fathers [that] has always been accompanied by the dominance of reason, of theory, and of partisanship,"<sup>7</sup> instead of digging into the Scriptures themselves for doctrine. Koehler makes clear that the "historical perspective" means that "one should have for oneself a proper

---

<sup>5</sup> Hensel, "Brief History," 9.

<sup>6</sup> John P. Meyer, "The Historical Background Which Led to the Formation of the Protes'tant Conference," (paper presented to the South Atlantic District Pastoral Conference, at Redeemer, Merritt Island, Florida, September 27-29, 1976): 11. (Meyer does not have a reference for this quote and I was unable to locate an original quote.)

<sup>7</sup> John Phillip Koehler, *The History of the Wisconsin Synod* (Sauk Rapids, MN: Sentinel Printing, 1981), 33.

intellectual [*geistig*] and practical grasp of the facts themselves before attempting to represent them from a theoretical perspective. Not to do so is dogmatism, pure and simple.”<sup>8</sup>

John P. Meyer, who prepared a paper on the causes of the Protestant Controversy in the mid-1970’s, did a study to illustrate what Koehler writes of above concerning the reliance on the writings of previous dogmaticians:

I opened Walther’s *Classic “Kirche and Amt,”* at random, to Thesis VII. The thesis itself requires 7 lines plus 2 words. The “*Beweis aus Gottes Wort*” (Note the proof-text wording) takes 23 lines, including explanations. Quotations from the Confessions takes one and one half pages; quotations from the Dogmatitions (of the past) takes 15 pages, including numerous quotations in Latin. (Scripture, though, is not quoted in Greek or Hebrew) Now, surely Walther knew better and was capable of better, as a study of his sermons will show. But he was bound by this reliance on accepted dogmatic formulas mentality!<sup>9</sup>

From these recognized deficiencies in Lutheran theology the Wauwatosa Gospel was born. The purpose of the Wauwatosa Gospel was to “make an effort to return to the fundamental genesis of Luther’s theology in order to recapture Luther’s insights and apply them to the new historical situation. This would compel the Wauwatosa men to study the Scriptures directly and thus to elevate exegesis and history in the effort to return to the primary sources of Christian faith-life.”<sup>10</sup>

Koehler had no issue with dogmatics (not dogmatism!). In his writings he speaks well of both Walther and Hoenecke, both of whom he was a student of at one time. But he believed that there was to be a relation between dogmatics, history, and exegesis:

In the study of theology, dogmatics and history occupy parallel positions; the former presenting the inner connection of the divine purpose of salvation and its revelation in the Word of God, the latter telling the story of the working out of the divine plan on earth through the ages. The center of study is the exegesis of the Scriptures, which forms the basis both for doctrinal theology and the teaching of history, and it deals with both. Luther knew what he was saying when he urged that the study of the languages be fostered. The immediate word or words of the Scriptures are more important than dogmatical terms . . . It is significant that such a great part of the Scriptures is devoted to history, which

---

<sup>8</sup> J.P. Koehler, “Retrospective,” *Faith-Life* Vol. LXXV, no. 6 (November/December 2002): 18. N.B., “Retrospective” is a series of narrative accounts that Koehler dictated to his son Karl during the 1929-1930 school year as Koehler waited for his dismissal. He refers to this time as his “house arrest.” The series was released over eight issues of *Faith-Life* from Vol. LXXV, no. 4 (July/August 2002) to Vol. LXXVII, no. 6 (November/December 2003). For the sake of clarity, since the series spans nine issues, footnotes for any quotes from “Retrospective” will include full citation information.

<sup>9</sup> Meyer, “Historical Background,” 11.

<sup>10</sup> Leigh Jordahl, introduction to *The History of the Wisconsin Synod*, by John Phillip Koehler (Sauk Rapids, MN: Sentinel Printing, 1981), xviii.

fact alone should suffice to assign history its rightful place alongside of dogmatics as a theological study.<sup>11</sup>

This view on how to handle theology was evident in his teaching and his practical, pastoral care, which is why this is such an important point to the matter at hand of his dealings in the Protestant Controversy. In his work, "The Analogy of Faith," which really expounds the heart of the Wauwatosa Gospel, Koehler writes: "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."<sup>12</sup> This view we will see is faithfully put into practice throughout his efforts in the Controversy.

Unfortunately, as with anything "new" and different, there is much occasion for misunderstanding as well as misuse. Supposedly upon reading "The Analogy of Faith," Franz Pieper, brother of August and professor at Concordia Lutheran Seminary in St. Louis, warned against this idea. On the flip side, Stoeckhardt, who already had used this method himself in his teaching, reportedly loved it.<sup>13</sup> Leigh Jordahl, in his introduction to Koehler's *History of the Wisconsin Synod*, claims that the Wauwatosa Theology was never really understood by the students and it became a bone of contention between those who did not fully grasp the true intent of the three Wauwatosa theologians, Koehler, August Pieper and John Schaller.<sup>14</sup>

A balance in the Wisconsin Synod between dogmatics and the historical-exegetical method had been accomplished by the early 1920's. "This would be the time when we would see a decreasing emphasis on the historical-exegetical method, in its contrasts to dogmatics *et al.* It was apparently this change in pace that some interpreted as a rejection of the historical-exegetical method and a return to

---

<sup>11</sup> Koehler, *History of Wisconsin Synod*, 208.

<sup>12</sup> John Phillip Koehler "The Analogy of Faith," in *The Wauwatosa Theology* Vol. 1, ed. Curtis Jahn (Milwaukee: NPH, 1997), 263. More context of this quote is given later.

<sup>13</sup> Hensel, "A Brief History," 10.

<sup>14</sup> Jordahl, introduction to *History*, xi.

straight 17<sup>th</sup> century dogmatics, a repudiation of the Wauwatosa Gospel.”<sup>15</sup> And so we come to the reason why it was one of the fronts that would collide in the perfect storm. The would-be Protes’tants were, and are staunchly to this day, huge supporters of the Wauwatosa Gospel (almost to a fault) which Koehler was instrumental in instituting, or better, reviving, and they thought it was once again shrinking in the face of the dogmatism of old.

### Church and Ministry

Another major front on the horizon at the time was the issue of *Menschenherrschaft in der Kirche* (Popery in the church). Meyer explains well the situation at the time with the issue of the doctrine of Church and Ministry, which was formed by the Wauwatosa Theology:

In reaction to the idea that the Saxon emigrants [sic] had left the church when they left the state church of Saxony, Walther had debated, and made his point well, that every local congregation, because it is composed of Christians gathered about Word and Sacrament, is church. In time, this clarity on church deteriorated to the idea that the local congregation is the only scripturally instituted form of church. In reaction to this, the Wauwatosa Gospel with its spirit of going back to the Word without preconceived notions, to see what the Word said, not what the Word could be made to prove, led our synod to the conviction that the local congregation, while indeed church, is not the only valid form the church may take; indeed, that the scriptures do not dictate the form that the church must take.<sup>16</sup>

There was a danger, of course, that a certain amount of “overlording” would enter the church, and in reality “there was trouble with the merging of the four synods in 1917 that led to bad leadership and officialdom.”<sup>17</sup> Meyer makes the connection to the Controversy at hand: “Those very proponants [sic] of the Wauwatosa Gospel [the would-be Protes’tants] who feared its loss the greatest seem to also

---

<sup>15</sup> Meyer, “Historical Background,” 11.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 11-12.

<sup>17</sup> Edward C. Fredrich, *The History of the Wisconsin Synod Lutherans* (Milwaukee: NPH, 1992), 155.

have been the ones who show the most confusion about church discipline when practiced by any form of church other than the congregation alone.”<sup>18</sup>

But there was obvious misunderstanding and misuse on both sides. In a letter to a friend after the storm had passed, Koehler wrote, “I am inclined to agree with Karl’s [Koehler’s son] judgment that officialdom lies at the bottom of the entire controversy. The respective officials of the Synod believe they must uphold the forms of Synod’s organizational constitution, and therefore they ride these external forms in a way so insensible that I would not have believed it possible.”<sup>19</sup>

### **Interpersonal Problems**

“It has been often said that personal differences are at the bottom of the present controversy. Referred to specifically are the personal differences between Professors Pieper and Koehler. [sic] There is some truth to this suggestion.”<sup>20</sup> Koehler wrote these words sometime during the 1929-1930 school year while he was suspended from teaching but not yet officially dismissed from his duties. He spends quite a deal of time describing his history with August Pieper to set the backdrop of the animosity which grew and came to a crescendo at the time he penned these words. Without a doubt, there are always two sides to every story, and for the most part, we only have Koehler’s side. Some of Koehler’s recollections may be embellished or judged without proper perspective, but there are others who have attested to Pieper’s foibles as well. The image that one is left with of Pieper after reading of his relations with those around him is that he was controlling and liked to hold the reins of power. It seems that Koehler was quite opposite, tending to be a little more reserved and gentle, especially when it came to leadership.

---

<sup>18</sup> Meyer, “Historical Background,” 12.

<sup>19</sup> J.P. Koehler, letter to Kurt Zorn (September 1, 1930), *Faith-Life* Vol. LV, no. 4, (July/August 1982): 22.

<sup>20</sup> Koehler, “Retrospective,” *Faith-Life* Vol. LXXV, no. 6 (November/December 2002): 16.

Koehler writes in his *Retrospective* that early in their ministries they were “intimate friends” and he “valued Pieper highly as a friend and shared with him the benefits of his own talents which Pieper regarded highly.”<sup>21</sup> Problems began to arise between the two in 1902 when Pieper accepted the call to the seminary and then recommended to his former congregation, St. Mark’s in Milwaukee, that they call his brother, Reinhold, to be his successor. When Pieper asked Koehler what he thought of the situation, Koehler recalls that he criticized Pieper for suggesting such a thing. Pieper did not take it as a loving correction but instead resented Koehler’s remarks. After this, Pieper almost seemed spiteful of any success of Koehler and revengeful of perceived “wrongs” that Koehler had committed.<sup>22</sup> Their personality differences would come to a head in the Protes’tant Controversy, especially in regards to Koehler’s *Beleuchtung* and Pieper’s response in the *Antwort*, where Pieper seem to be no holds barred on how he feels about not only Koehler as a theologian, but also as a person. We will look at the *Antwort* later, but this pre-Protes’tant Controversy interpersonal problem between these two seminary professors is important to keep in mind as we move forward.

## The First Rumbblings

### *The Watertown Case*

The first evidences of the approaching storm began in March of 1924. The faculty of Northwestern College in Watertown handed down punishment to about two dozen students who were found guilty of stealing or involved in the stealing to some degree. The punishment consisted of expulsions, suspensions and campus arrests, based on the students’ degree of involvement. Enter the officialdom issue. Due to pressure on the board by dissatisfied parents, the board decided to thwart the power of the faculty and to carry out their own investigation. Constitutionally, the final decision to

---

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 16.

<sup>22</sup> For extensive examples see Koehler’s “Retrospective” in *Faith-Life* Vol. LXXV, no. 6 (November/December 2002): 16-17, *Faith-Life* Vol. LXXVI, no. 2 (March/April 2003): 13-15. See also Philemon Hensel’s (a Protes’tant) editorial preface to the *Antwort* in *Faith-Life* Vol. LXXV, no. 2 (March/April 2002): 4-10, but due to his church affiliation, read and believe with caution!



suspend students belonged to the Board at that time; although for many years the board had been content to leave discipline in the hands of the faculty.<sup>23</sup> The board decided to reverse most of the faculty's decisions. The faculty was obviously not pleased, especially two of the professors, Herbert Parisius and Karl Koehler. These two dismayed professors resigned from their positions in disgust over the heavy-handed action of the board. Professor Karl Koehler just happened to be the son of Professor J.P. Koehler. So J.P., by no fault of his own becomes involved, if not only indirectly at this time, in the looming Controversy.

At the time of the Watertown case, J.P. Koehler was in Germany doing research for his book on the history of the Wisconsin Synod. His family had not informed him of the situation in Watertown while he was overseas so that he could continue to focus on his work and not be concerned about it. When he came back from Germany he found "a controversy raging in the Synod and his son a storm center."<sup>24</sup> Koehler only mentions the Watertown case once in his writings in this way: "The so-called Watertown case, by all-around bungling, had taken on synodical dimensions that, among other things, resulted in Prof. Reudiger's<sup>25</sup> and the writer's own removal from the seminary."<sup>26</sup>

### *The Fort Atkinson Case*

By the end of 1924, the second warning of the imminent storm occurred. In Fort Atkinson, Wisconsin, two young female teachers were at a logjam with the officials of the congregation and the

---

<sup>23</sup> Notes taken by author in Church History 3031, October 4, 2010.

<sup>24</sup> Edward C. Fredrich, "The Parting of Professor J. P. Koehler and the Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary" (paper presented to the WELS Historical Institute, April 20, 1983): 7.

<sup>25</sup> The case of seminary professor Gerhard Reudiger is not treated in this paper because Koehler did not have much involvement, at least according to written historical accounts that I had access to. The most grievous charge against Reudiger was being guilty of sympathizing with the Protestants, and even doing it in the seminary classroom. The mention of his name here is more than likely an editorial of Koehler on how he was not treated in an evangelical way. Reudiger had been forced, some claim, to make a public confession of his sin, which some believe Pieper actually wrote. Koehler was the only member of the faculty who did not sign the "Absolution." Not because he did not accept his apology, but because he was against the way it had been dealt with.

<sup>26</sup> Koehler, *History*, 253.

pastor. The teachers took an exceptionally conservative, almost pietistic, point of view concerning what individuals and groups in the congregation were doing. They were extremely vocal in their desires for the practices they believed objectionable to be stopped immediately. The pastor was reluctant to side with them on matters that he considered adiaphora. Among some of their concerns were short dresses, bobbed hair, the choir's musical selections and church bazaars. Even the Protes'tant historian Leigh Jordahl admits that "clearly the women by any traditional Lutheran standard exhibited an overt pietism."<sup>27</sup>

The teachers called the pastor a false prophet for not speaking out against these "evils." He had enough and called them "*freche Gruenschnabel*" (saucy greenhorns) for talking to their pastor in such a way. Without a release from the congregation the teachers were recommended to and called by Immanuel in Marshfield where the future Protes'tant leader, Oswald Hensel, was pastor. The Fort Atkinson congregation was so upset at the situation that they even withdrew from the Synod for a period of time.

Koehler was appointed to a committee to work towards reconciliation for the circumstances. He personally met with the two teachers to hear them out and he then wrote a summary and analysis. Koehler found that the situation had gotten well out of hand at the fault of the congregation for not dealing with it in good order: "The case should have never been allowed to develop into a disciplinary action at all, as it did, through the fault of the Pastor and his board [of elders] and the congregation and later the synodical officials and the synodical committees, because there was no sins at the basis of the case."<sup>28</sup> The congregation never heard the case of the teachers and they refused to give them an "honorable dismissal." But in no way was Koehler siding with the two teachers. "For a full clarification of the incident it is, to be sure, appropriate to state that the girls are not free of erroneous

---

<sup>27</sup> Jordahl, introduction to *History*, xxvii.

<sup>28</sup> John Phillip Koehler, "Analytical Account of the Ft. Atkinson Case as Occasioned by the Suspension of the Teachers Koch and Reuter by Praeses Thurow," *Faith-Life* Vol. LXXXIII, no. 6 (Nov/Dec 2000): 21.

perspectives.”<sup>29</sup> So his resolution was to point out the errors that the teachers had committed, and then to encourage the Fort Atkinson congregation, “out of love toward all involved and for the sake of the Synod which found itself in a mental bind,”<sup>30</sup> to take back their protest.

### **Into the Eye of the Storm: The Beitz Paper**

The storm came into full gale force when Pastor William Beitz of Rice Lake, Wisconsin, presented a paper entitled “God’s Message to Us in Galatians: The Just Shall Live by Faith” to the Wisconsin-Chippewa Valley Conference at Schofield, Wisconsin in September of 1926. The paper had actually been assigned by the area mixed conference, where he would read his paper again three weeks later. There would be other public readings and copies were made for anyone to have their own copy to support or denounce its contents. Beitz used the “the just shall live by faith” passage of Habakkuk and Galatians as an attack on the spiritual life of the Wisconsin Synod. The passage was to set the tone that would test harps “to see whether they be in tune with God’s,”<sup>31</sup> meaning if the spiritual life of the Wisconsin Synod was in tune with what God expected. And according to Beitz, the synod failed terribly in basically every aspect of “living by faith.”

Its volatile contents excited some and infuriated many others. Many in the synod, including an official statement from the seminary faculty, would condemn it as containing false doctrine and slander. But the Protestants believed that Beitz was simply trying to uphold Koehler’s theology, but employed the legalistic manner of Pieper: “In this tract Beitz endeavored to strike a blow for the substance of Koehler’s theology, but employed the legalistic manner of August Pieper . . . as he drew heavily and

---

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 21.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 23.

<sup>31</sup> William F. Beitz, “God’s Message to Us in Galatians: The Just Shall Live by Faith,” trans. Rev. Kevin Hastings (May, 1994): 1.

verbatim on Pieper's published critical articles. It was this inversion which thunderstruck the stand-pat ministerium with consternation and this hysterical state of mind led to violence."<sup>32</sup>

The conflict between the historical-exegetical and the dogmatic is an evident theme throughout the paper. "And we have to join in with the plaintive cry of Mary Magdalene: 'They have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid him.' The only method, if you wish to call it such, [sic] that does not do this is the historical, the exegetical, the expository. It is the God-given way. It is the way that appeals to the heart. It is the way of the Savior here on earth. It is the way of Jehovah all thru His revelation of Himself in the Bible."<sup>33</sup> A little later he continues: "Or let us approach the Bible from the angle of dogmatics and we are at once pressing a form upon that life-giving Word. We come with preconceived ideas, either our own or those of others . . . [We think] we are 'improving' upon God's way. Let us not kid ourselves, the Spirit is well able to do that without our tampering."<sup>34</sup> It is obvious to see why both Koehler and Pieper would become indelibly involved in responding to this paper, it cut to the heart of all of their work as professional theologians.

### **First Responder**

When there is a major catastrophe or emergency, it is the job of the first responder to be there immediately, to control the situation, assess what is needed and to give critical care to those who need it most until others arrive. In the agitating of the storm that the Beitz paper could (and would) create, Koehler acted as first responder to the situation. And looking at his method of attention to the matter, he seemed to be the right man for the job.

Koehler was later accused of having read Beitz' paper before it was presented and that he had not done anything about it then when he really should have. Koehler admitted that he had heard an

---

<sup>32</sup> Hensel, "Brief History," 4.

<sup>33</sup> Beitz, "God's Message," 7.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 7.

early version of it, but it was only by accident and he writes that the current version was “much longer and different.”<sup>35</sup> At that time he obviously had no qualms about its content and may have not even known that it was the developing stages of a conference paper.

Just a few weeks after Beitz’ public readings of his paper at the conferences, Koehler wrote Beitz a letter concerning the contents of his paper. As far as it is known, he is the only seminary professor to have made any written remarks about the paper before the *Gutachten*. His letter to Beitz is dated October 26, 1926, which is eight months before the *Gutachten* was issued. Koehler is most certainly the only one who thought it best to approach Beitz personally. This is an opportunity for us to see Koehler apply his principles to a concrete situation. Koehler begins his appeal in a way that has concern for the church-at-large concerning what he written in his paper:

I would like to offer you my opinion in the matter, not as a self-appointed watchman of Zion, rather because I have always cherished the impression that you reserve a place for me in your esteem as a friend as a person you can trust; but also because your tract, as I read it, might ignite a far-reaching movement in Lutheran circles which would call into question all of the interest you mention in your tract: the meaning of the Gospel among us, the historical point of view, vitality in practical action.<sup>36</sup>

Consider the following balanced approach Koehler takes to Beitz. He recognizes that it is easy to see problems around you that need fixing. But, it is by proclaiming the Gospel that our sanctification can increase rather than just complaining about how things are. He then appeals to Beitz’ understanding of this, he is sure that Beitz knows this is true.

You lament, and this humor of lamentation pervades the whole tract. The result will be that the lament and the critique will become the overriding issue. Lamenting and criticizing is the easiest thing to do; mostly everybody is going to pick up that habit, and it isn’t going to rouse the rest from their security. What is called for is getting down to joyful work with a purpose. To make that happen, a whole new attitude has to come about, and that is what we must strive for. How to begin? By pointing out the great, joyous prospect; by actually proclaiming the Gospel. This is the only way a sharp critique will gain the cutting edge. I know that I don’t have to explain something so elementary to you. You yourself make the same point in the tract. But mentioning itself isn’t enough, the tract itself should have demonstrated this.

---

<sup>35</sup> John Phillip Koehler, “Retrospective,” *Faith-Life* Vol. LXXVI, no. 5 (September/October 2003): 33.

<sup>36</sup> John Phillip Koehler, letter to William Beitz (October 26, 1926), *Faith-Life* Vol. LXXIV, no. 3 (May/June 2001): 20.

Don't you see that [your] Gospel of faith, even if not exactly Law, nevertheless amounts to an ordinance?<sup>37</sup>

Again, Koehler is establishing common ground so that his message will be received and its recipient understands that it is out of love and concern that Koehler writes to him. And he again appeals that when we do address problems we see, it must be for the glory of the Gospel.

Don't think I don't know how a humor like this develops, because I have experienced it in myself. A man sees what is going wrong . . . and comes to realize what is the right position, and takes for granted that the communion of saints ought to know about it . . . It is really getting to be a nuisance for me to have to spell out in detail self-evident matters, and to repeat them over and over. But still, you have to do it. We must exercise caution, even in combat. We must help the opponent make the right moves. When all is said, that is our principal assignment, to publicize the glory of the Gospel in the face of every detraction . . . Recognizing [the] reality [that] critical opinion remains clear of legalistic judgment, and we learn little by little to put up with a lot, despite so many shortcomings, as long as the sanctity of Grace outweighs everything else. That is the only way criticism is going to have any salutary effect.<sup>38</sup>

It is obvious from his letter that even in spite of his differences with him on how he presented his views in his paper, Koehler considers Beitz a brother in faith and in the ministry. Near the end of his letter Koehler even asks Beitz to help him translate an upcoming article for the *Quartalschrift*.<sup>39</sup> The overall feeling of the letter is one of evenness. Koehler wishes to understand Beitz as best he can, but he maintains that the message of the Gospel cannot be confounded.

### **The Storm Goes from a Category Two to a Category Five: The *Gutachten***

The Western Wisconsin District, under the leadership of District President Praeus Thurow, was unsure how to handle this storm that they felt had grown to the point of being out of control. Thurow appealed to the seminary faculty to issue an evaluation of the paper in the form of a *Gutachten*.<sup>40</sup> Normally considered negative, *Gutachten's* were statements issued "from above." Opinions issued by

---

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 20-21.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 21.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 21.

<sup>40</sup> *Gutachten* means "report" or "opinion" and sometimes even "judgment."

the seminary faculty were common in the Missouri Synod, but not from the seminary of the Wisconsin Synod. Koehler was not for them and his writings made that clear on numerous occasions.<sup>41</sup> But in this situation, the director of the seminary, Koehler himself, conceded.

The method which Koehler himself decided they would implement would be for the four members of the faculty (Pieper, Meyer, Henkel and himself) to write their own individual *Gutachten* without consulting each other and for them to then meet and decide what would be the best approach to take to respond officially.

Pieper, Meyer and Henkel wrote their evaluations of the Beitz paper but Koehler did not. His excuse was that he had been too busy preparing the blueprints for the new seminary construction in Thiensville. One has to wonder if this was just an excuse because he later realized this was not the best way to handle the situation. Though he had written his letter of initial reaction to Beitz, years later he still regretted that before writing and releasing a *Gutachten* they did not sit down and talk with Beitz face-to-face.<sup>42</sup> Meyer in his conference paper puts it well:

He felt that the faculty should first talk with Pastor Beitz to determine just what he meant by what he wrote. This was sage advice, as any will recognize, who have ever been in the situation of having to say: "I know you believe you understand what you think I said, but I am not sure you realize that what you heard is not what I meant." It is the opinion of the essayist that much tragedy might have been avoided, had Koehler's advice been heeded.<sup>43</sup>

But Meyer also perceptively recognizes the other side of the argument as well: "The Beitz paper was not a private writing; by this time it had spread well beyond the confines of his own conference, or even the Western Wisconsin District, and that, at such troubled times. Such a paper was, *de facto*, if not

---

<sup>41</sup> John Phillip Koehler, "Retrospective," *Faith-Life* Vol. LXXV, no. 4 (July/August 2002): 35.

<sup>42</sup> Koehler, "Retrospective," *Faith-Life* Vol. LXXVI, no. 5 (September/October 2003): 35.

<sup>43</sup> Meyer, "Historical Background," 4.

*de jure*, fast becoming public doctrine of the church, and a public reply, favoring or disfavoring it, was needed."<sup>44</sup>

Koehler, in consultation with the faculty, decided that the main content of the official *Gutachten* would be Pieper's version and the work Meyer and Henkel would be integrated. The basis of the charges against Beitz' paper was:

- 1) It mixed justification and sanctification by using the justification passage in Galatians as a pretext for a sanctification discussion.
- 2) It harbored erroneous statements about the role of the Law in repentance.
- 3) It judged hearts and slandered.<sup>45</sup>

Koehler did suggest a couple of changes to the official evaluation that was to be released. There was a footnote that recognized that Beitz used the pronoun "we" to include himself in the condemnations, and that even in the one instance he explicitly asserts that he wants to be included, "nevertheless, the course of his discussions clearly gives evidence that he uses the word 'we' (no doubt quite unconsciously) merely to express his external membership in our church corporation while in reality he is excluding himself from his condemning verdicts."<sup>46</sup> Koehler believed that "the writers of the *Gutachten* should correct it in order to get a feeling for their own fallibility (especially Pieper)."<sup>47</sup> Pieper and Henkel wanted to delete the footnote entirely, but Meyer sided with Koehler that it should be corrected so that it was noted that "as least in one instance Beitz was not guilty of the charge registered against him in the original version of the footnote."<sup>48</sup> Later, Meyer told him it was changed, but when

---

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., 4.

<sup>45</sup> Theological Faculty of Wauwatosa, "The Opinion (*Gutachten*)," *Faith-Life* Vol. XXXIII, no. 7-8, (July/August 1960): 17-18.

<sup>46</sup> *Gutachten*, 6.

<sup>47</sup> Koehler, "Retrospective," *Faith-Life* Vol. LXXVI, no. 5 (September/October 2003): 34.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid., 34.



Koehler finally saw it a year and a half later it had not been corrected. "When I looked at the *Gutachten* I discovered that I had really been deceived by the dubious improvement of the footnote."<sup>49</sup>

The other issue that Koehler took with the *Gutachten* before it was made public was that he believed that all three of the authors had interpreted the paper falsely and that it could be understood in another way. Koehler recalls that "the real author of the *Gutachten* [Pieper] said to me pompously: 'I have compared the *Gutachten* seven times word for word and sentence for sentence with the Beitz paper. I know what I have written.'"<sup>50</sup> Koehler retorted to Pieper, "You know that I am not going to dispute this any longer. In spite of my reservations, I will sign the *Gutachten* and will represent it to Beitz."<sup>51</sup> Koehler relates in his *Retrospective* that, at least in his mind, "from my words [to Pieper] three things were clear: 1.) My signature gave me the right to deal with Beitz on the basis of the *Gutachten*; 2.) The *Gutachten* would have no validity in my eyes until Beitz himself confirmed that the *Gutachten's* interpretation of his words was correct; 3.) The *Gutachten* should not be published before I speak with Beitz."<sup>52</sup>

Koehler did not actually sign the *Gutachten* until all the faculty members had one more opportunity to review it. At the time of the actual signing he "again explained that I would be discussing the *Gutachten* with Beitz first."<sup>53</sup> It seems that the rest of the faculty did not feel that a meeting with Beitz was either necessary or proper. The *Gutachten* was clear, so why was a meeting necessary? And this was a district issue so a meeting with Beitz was not really proper and in good order. One has to wonder though, why then did they agree to write the *Gutachten* in the first place if this was just a district level issue? Koehler obviously thought it best that if they were the ones reacting and signing

---

<sup>49</sup> Ibid., 34.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid., 34.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid., 34.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid., 34.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid., 35.

their names to an evaluation of his paper, then it is really proper and in good order to speak with the individual who has brought about the issue to have an opportunity to speak in his own defense.

Upon putting his signature first on the list of faculty members, the document was given to Meyer, who was the secretary of the faculty. Koehler writes that he regretted not taking the *Gutachten* with him personally, but at the time he felt that he had no cause for concern that the document would be withheld until he was able to meet with Beitz personally. Had he held the *Gutachten* himself copies would have never gone out as it did. On the way to meet with Beitz, Koehler learned that Beitz already had a copy of the *Gutachten*. Koehler calls it “calculated deception” that the document had been leaked prior to his meeting with Beitz.<sup>54</sup> Meyer and Henkel blamed the leaking of the *Gutachten* on Thurow. Since the original request came from him a copy was sent to him for his review. They claimed it was Thurow acting alone, possibly as a result of misunderstanding, which resulted in its public dissemination. Later Koehler learned from one of them [Meyer or Henkel, Koehler does not say which one specifically] that “the main author [Pieper] was also responsible for its publication.”<sup>55</sup>

Naturally, Koehler assumed that the fact that Beitz already had a copy of the *Gutachten* would stymie his meeting with Beitz. But he continued his journey to see him anyway. In meeting Beitz, Koehler found that Beitz was not upset as he assumed, but came to see that his perception of his reading was correct. “So then I gained from him a promise to go over the *Gutachten* together with me [at our next meeting] anyway, because in spite of its [the *Gutachen*’s] flaws, there were still some things in it worthy of consideration.”<sup>56</sup>

Even though he was able to still have a productive meeting with Beitz, Koehler was obviously upset by the seeming betrayal by his brothers on the faculty. Koehler wrote and intended to send a

---

<sup>54</sup> Ibid., 35.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid., 35.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid., 35.

letter to all the pastors in the synod after finding out that the *Gutachten* had been mailed without him being able to talk to Beitz first. But the letter was never sent at the insistence of his colleagues.

### **An Attempt to Quell the Storm: The *Ertrag***

Koehler met again with Beitz in July of 1927. Koehler's frustrations could only have intensified in the wake of the *Gutachten's* release. Since their last meeting Beitz had been suspended by the Western Wisconsin District and it had been announced in the *Gemeindeblatt* and the *Northwestern Lutheran*. "They have acted in an incredibly shallow, loveless, and evil manner and when they try to gloss it over with references from God's word, it just makes matters worse."<sup>57</sup> Koehler and Beitz met at the Beitz home for close to a week discussing his paper and the *Gutachten*. Koehler then wrote an analysis of these discussions, which he entitled the *Ertrag* ("Results"). This solo opinion of Koehler's would eventually be discussed at length among the seminary faculty and with the Joint Synodical Committee.

The *Ertrag* is really an official confirmation of Koehler's previous views about Beitz' paper, and yet another indication of the way in which Koehler intended to evangelically and lovingly deal with the debate. Consider the following excerpts from the *Ertrag* where Koehler is both critical of Beitz' presentation, but yet has come to a fuller understanding of his meaning because he did meet and talk with him.<sup>58</sup>

- "Beitz does not confuse justification and sanctification as the *Gutachten* claims, but "there are many rough spots in the essay, arising from a lack of precision in thought and presentation, and these do lead to misunderstandings."<sup>59</sup>
- "When Beitz compares the members of the Wisconsin Synod to the Galatians whose form-worship contained false doctrine, "explanation would have been in place here, in order to avoid confusion. Still, this deficiency provides no warrant for proceeding forthwith to sniff out false doctrine."<sup>60</sup>

---

<sup>57</sup> Koehler, "Retrospective," *Faith-Life* Vol. LXXVI, no. 5 (September/October 2003): 35.

<sup>58</sup> The excerpts are quite extensive, but I believe it is necessary to be to ascertain from Koehler's own words his evangelical tone and his overall goal of attaining "unity in the Spirit through the bond of peace."

<sup>59</sup> J. P. Koehler, "Ertrag," *Faith-Life* Vol. LXXIV, no. 6 (November/December 2001): 25.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, 26.

- Using Habakkuk 2:4 as sanctification rather than justification “gives further occasion for this confusion. This is, to be sure, a serious lack of proper exegesis, but falls short of false doctrine.”<sup>61</sup>
- In his critique of “institutionalism” (externalism), “it would have been good if, at every turn, the points which the critique intended to make has been spelled out more clearly, that actually happened in the paper, because many of the things designated in only a general way are understood in our circles in the good sense.” Koehler points out that Beitz himself has a day school, taught catechism, etc. So the point is to do ministry “grounded in the faith by intense searching of the Scriptures and the “exhortation that faith manifest itself in teaching and in everything – that is the essayist’s view of the matter.”<sup>62</sup>
- “There do occur sweeping generalizations . . . that do indeed go too far . . . The generalization are duly clarified when we remind ourselves that the author begins with himself, includes himself in the critique . . . Doubtless the meaning is that we all are, and remain, personally responsible for all that has developed over time due to our neglect, with the result that the evils pointed out have indeed taken over. One can well understand the critique to this extent, not that the majority among us or all of us should be considered non-Christian, etc., but that we might well initiate an earnest examination of all that we do, individually and when we come together in fellowship. Saying it openly, in that sense, is not to be rules out. But then the way it is spelled out must be restrained and moderate, avoiding that which is inflammatory.”<sup>63</sup>
- Beitz’ paper seems especially harsh on the faculties of the institutions of higher learning in the Wisconsin Synod, but in talking with him Koehler learned that he was not denying their Christianity, but critiquing particular instances in teaching which do not correspond to the standard he call witness-ship. “As willing as one is to let the author explain himself, and hence not raise the charge of intentional slander, still one can only assume that the writer got himself all worked up, as easily happens when beholding in spirit only the abstract picture of formalism; and thus he was carried away into exaggerations which, upon more sober consideration, he must regret.”<sup>64</sup>
- In Beitz’ comparison of the Wisconsin Synod to Ichabod and Christ’s lament over Chorazin and Bethsaida, “in oral presentation one may well speak that way, to give expression to the earnestness of the warning, without having to fear that this would give rise to a false understanding; but in writing, the outward grammatical precision, or even the opposite of that, often has a different effect. And especially under the pressures of the present, when general unrest prevails in men’s hearts and minds, the manner in which the points were made could only come across as inflammatory to many a reader.”<sup>65</sup>
- “It is unhealthy whenever critique (*die Klage*) [deploring, lament] is dominant, as it is with this paper. Holy Scripture takes a different approach. It extols the power of the Gospel on the hearts of Christians, recognizing what the Holy Spirit has wrought by way of faith and love in those who hear; it edifies those who hear and strengthens them in this good effect, so that, with this foundation in place, it may then bring this effect to perfection in the exhortation to sanctification. Then the critique (*die Klage*) will also take on a different tone, one which does not irritate but points in the direction of healing and then one can speak of sanctification as well, without falling into the danger of confusing Law and Gospel or of being

---

<sup>61</sup> Ibid., 26.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid., 26.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid., 26-27.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid., 27.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid., 27.

understood that way. It is ever a sign of weakness when a presentation must be carefully explained and justified, even when the weakness lies primarily on the other side.”<sup>66</sup>

- “The essayist must accept what has been pointed out, that here would have been an opportunity to demonstrate that actual point of his critique of dogmatism . . . instead he himself falls into a certain degree of dogmatism.”<sup>67</sup>
- “In general one would have to say that the paper, because of considerable unclarity and uncertainty in exegesis and dogmatic training apparent in the paper, leaves much to be desired that is essential in a doctrinal essay and in public testimony. . . The danger has not been avoided here, of falling into the same formalism in teaching which the paper criticizes, e.g., in the presentation and treatment of dogmatics.”<sup>68</sup>

Koehler’s final thoughts of the *Ertrag* most certainly reveal his evangelical heart: “So then the writer should simply acknowledge this critique of his paper, if he is conscious of the fact, and if he emphasizes that in many respects he has not been understood correctly. Likewise right-minded readers need to have called to their attention, especially in our times, that much is said that is earnest and worth heeding, and that one dare not cast to the winds.”<sup>69</sup>

But Koehler’s efforts to quell the storm were not well-received by either side of the controversy. Beitz agreed with Koehler’s observations but he refused to change his stance on his paper or to rephrase his words. Instead he stood by it word for word. Koehler had asked Beitz to make a statement to the Joint Synodical Committee that Koehler would stand before “in which he [Beitz] would confess his adherence to the true doctrine which was under debate here as he had expressed it to me and as I had related at the Synod to many men with short memories. Then no one could blame him if he added that his paper had been much misunderstood.”<sup>70</sup> Beitz refused to do so because of other actions that were being taken against him by the officials.

---

<sup>66</sup> Ibid., 27.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid., 28.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid., 28.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid., 28.

<sup>70</sup> Koehler, “Retrospective,” Faith-Life Vol. LXXVI, no. 5 (September/October 2003): 38.

And concerning the reception of his *Ertrag* by his brothers on the seminary faculty? It is obvious from the *Ertrag* that he did not support Beitz' paper as it was written. It was the manner that the whole issue had been handled that Koehler objected. But yet Koehler would write later, "I was accused of breaking trust with the authors of the *Gutachten*."<sup>71</sup>

In spite of their opposition to Koehler's personal involvement with Beitz, the faculty agreed to meet and discuss the *Ertrag*. Koehler desired to meet with and discuss it so as he writes "I could defend myself against their accusation and . . . to be able to convert the authors of the *Gutachten* from their error."<sup>72</sup> Koehler requested that two pastors were there whom he confided in and felt could support him since "as soon as it came to my word against theirs [the rest of the faculty], I was lost."<sup>73</sup>

The first meeting basically resulted in Koehler's colleagues accusing him of committing "a breach of faith and a serious sin" by writing the *Ertrag*.<sup>74</sup> In the second meeting they actually looked at the *Ertrag*, but in three hours they only got through fourteen lines of Koehler's paper because of interruptions and producing no new arguments from the *Gutachten*.<sup>75</sup> At their third and final meeting Koehler began to read from the *Ertrag* and Pieper proclaimed that he would no longer participate in these discussions.<sup>76</sup> This basically killed all hopes of reaching an amicable agreement, and the face-to-face discussions about the issue among the members of the faculty came to an end.

Since an impasse resulted from his meetings with his fellow seminary professors, Koehler then submitted his *Ertrag* to the seminary board. Before the seminary board Meyer reported that the faculty

---

<sup>71</sup> Ibid., 35.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid., 36.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid., 37.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid., 36.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid., 37.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid., 37.

had met five times (Koehler reports only three unproductive meetings)<sup>77</sup> to discuss the *Ertrag* and the conclusion they were forced to accept was that Koehler was guilty of a breach of faith. Koehler had the opportunity to read his *Ertrag* before the board, but nothing was really said in response. Some of the board members had not even read the Beitz paper and did not possess a copy of the *Ertrag*, they only had a copy of, and had read, the *Gutachten*. Koehler wrote in his *Retrospective*:

I knew that there could be no understanding of the Beitz Paper after the *Gutachten* had been published, but I believed that I could successfully counter the incorrect perceptions of it whenever I encountered them. That this was an error the next meeting of the Board revealed. The lay members declared that they had read the Beitz Paper and from this it was unmistakably clear to them that Beitz had sinned in the ways indicated by the *Gutachten* and that Professor Koehler was, therefore, to be condemned for the reasons his accuser had indicated.<sup>78</sup>

The same thing happened before the Joint Synodical Committee (the “Big Committee” in Koehler’s writings) on October 18-20, 1927. Koehler read his paper but it seems that most members of the committee already had their minds made up. There were though three presidents, Schlueter, Sauer and Albrecht, and one pastor, who made statements that there was nothing wrong with the *Ertrag*. Sauer recognized that the difference between Koehler’s paper and the *Gutachten* was that Koehler’s was written in a loving manner.<sup>79</sup>

Walter Hoenecke, the secretary of the board, declared that the problem was Koehler’s hermeneutical methodology which he had “developed himself over the course of his lengthy study of history and which he could not abandon as an old man, but that he did not teach false doctrine.”<sup>80</sup> Pieper quickly responded, “Professor Koehler is not guilty of any false doctrine. He has not expressed any false doctrine . . . But he has denied the great principle of the Reformation concerning the validity of

---

<sup>77</sup> Ibid., 36.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid., 38.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid., 38.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid., 38.

the literal wording.”<sup>81</sup> Finally, they had gotten to the heart of the issue: are Beitz’ words to be understood as he intended them to mean, or to be understood as they were actually written?

Koehler that said there needed to be a discussion of literal wording (*Wortlaut*), and that if there was a difference between him and the rest of the faculty he could not continue teaching, though he was sure to make it clear that it was not because his method was wrong. Koehler contended that the literal wording only applies to the interpretation of Scripture, not to a human document, such as Beitz’ paper. In his understanding of Beitz, Koehler was simply adhering to his principle of interpretation that he expounded in “The Analogy of Faith,” one of the hallmarks of the Wauwatosa Theology:

The first principle of all correct understanding is that one tries to project himself into the other’s manner of thinking in order to understand him . . . Every changing of his words into something different from what they say is a criticism of his words or their contents . . . 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. That provides the right basis for the same understanding of the terms, without which an agreement is impossible from the outset.<sup>82</sup>

Because of this stance he took, “the *Gutachten* people accused me in this discussion of neglecting the literal wording and implied that I was guilty of false doctrine.”<sup>83</sup> An even more direct attack on Koehler’s principle of interpretation would be forthcoming in Pieper’s *Antwort*. Fredrich notes well about the issue of interpretation:

It is easy to write the whole issue off as a tempest in a teapot, differing interpretations of a somewhat imprecise and overdrawn conference paper. That would be a mistake. These were men who were professionals in the interpretation business. Their differences counted. These were men interpreting documents that had become rallying points in a divided and dividing Synod.<sup>84</sup>

Unfortunately these actions of Koehler were misunderstood by the Protes’tants and they came to the conclusion that he agreed with them. Koehler began to realize that his speaking of the Beitz paper in an understandable way was forging their stance. Koehler decided he needed to retreat from

---

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.*, 38.

<sup>82</sup> Koehler, “Analogy,” 262-263.

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.*, 39.

<sup>84</sup> Fredrich, “Parting,” 4.



this position. The notes of the Synodical Committee on October 19 relay these words of Koehler: "That I have contributed my share to the confusion in the Synod, in that they hear that I no longer support the *Gutachten*, that most likely Beitz and his friends have been strengthened through me, but without my intention. I regret all of this."<sup>85</sup> Koehler would put these feelings in writing at a later date.

The refusal of Pastor Beitz to withdraw his Paper, when obviously in its wording it contributes to confusion among us, must cause me to recognize that my withdrawal too of my signature from the *Gutachten* of the faculty has also contributed to the confusion and has placed obstacles in the way of the negotiation of the Western District with the opponents.<sup>86</sup>

The report of Hoenecke, the secretary of the committee, stated that "The Reverend Prof. Koehler has altogether and entirely subscribed to the faculty *Gutachten*, to wit, that the Beitz Paper contains godless slander and false doctrine. The rest of the faculty members declared themselves altogether and entirely satisfied with this."<sup>87</sup>

The damage was done, but Koehler stood by his *Ertrag*, holding to his principles of interpretation. He was informed by the committee that his *Ertrag* would have to remain unpublished.

A number of letters between Koehler and friend and former student, Pastor Kurt Zorn, a missionary at the time in India, are extremely insightful into what was happening at this time from Koehler's point of view. The following excerpt is from a letter dated December 30, 1927, roughly two months after the end of this set of meetings about the *Ertrag*.

Since August it turned against me and I have put my resignation [which was not accepted] at the disposal of the Board of Directors and the Big Committee of Synod, because the charge has been brought against me that I have deserted the principle of the Reformation, that the *Wortlaut* must be decisive. That was because my judgment of the Beitz Paper was more lenient, and because, in a certain sense (*in gewisser Hinsicht*) I have retracted my signature from the *Gutachten*. But there were several sensible people there who thought that my conception of the *Wortlaut* and my differentiation between a human writing and the Word of God were correct. And so the storm passed. But the peace in the Faculty has not yet matured to a heartfelt confidence. It is hard to say what will yet develop in the controversy. It is still quite probable that I shall have to step aside if the work here at the Seminary is to prosper in peace. The

---

<sup>85</sup> August Pieper, "The Antwort," *Faith-Life* Vol. LXXV, no. 2 (March/April 2002): 16.

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid.*, 16.

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid.*, 16.

controversy is a crisis in the life of our synod which I have long anticipated, but I had not expected that it would come so soon and would zero in on us here . . . all things are solely dependent on God's grace.<sup>88</sup>

### Yet another Effort to Calm the Storm: Koehler's Beleuchtung

We need fast-forward about 20 months, to August of 1929. Koehler retreated, not desiring to be involved any more. Considering what he had already experienced for doing what he believed was the God pleasing thing, he cannot be blamed. But the events of the controversy continued to compound. In February of 1928, a number of called workers were suspended by a convention of the Western Wisconsin Convention for their sympathy for the Protes'tants. During these times, Protes'tants were writing and disseminating pieces on the injustices they had incurred, telling their side of the story, but they would get much more organized. In April of 1928, the first issue of *Faith-Life* was published, which started a monthly firestorm of printed words. For a brief time in May of 1928, Koehler spoke up to "prove the whole meeting [with the Joint Synodical Committee of October, 1927] had misunderstood his so-called 'penitential confession.' He claimed that he had confessed nothing in this meeting other than what he had explained in signing the *Gutachten*."<sup>89</sup> In October 1928, Professor E.E. Sauer of Northwestern College was suspended for sympathizing with the Protes'tants, to which Koehler wrote to Zorn, "I expect the same in the near future."<sup>90</sup>

With the culminating of all these events and Koehler's premonition that the handwriting on the wall would soon become reality, he composed his *Beleuchtung* ("Elucidation"). The *Beleuchtung*, published on August 1, 1929, was really just the *Ertrag* enlarged, but then sent to all the pastors and teachers of the synod at his own expense. An in-depth look at the document reveals that not only had Koehler not changed his position that the Beitz paper could be understood properly and the *Gutachten*

---

<sup>88</sup> John Phillip Koehler, letter to Kurt Zorn (December 30, 1927), *Faith-Life* Vol. LIV, no. 5 (September/October 1981): 16.

<sup>89</sup> Pieper, "Antwort," 17.

<sup>90</sup> Koehler, letter to Zorn (December 1928), *Faith-Life* Vol. LIV, no. 5 (September/October 1981): 20.

was wrong in its assessment, but he also did not change his constant evangelical tone. Koehler begins by explaining his purpose for writing another evaluation:

Beitz's paper means to warn against an ever-spreading externalization of our Christian life, but he botches it through all sorts of confusion and through the tone of his presentation. The *Gutachten* means to preserve the purity and clarity of our doctrinal presentation in every direction. However, it didn't always keep in sight the warning mentioned above and therefore intensified the present conflicts. This paper of mine means to supply what has been lacking, and the useless discussions about it have occasioned the publication of this expanded treatment of my paper.<sup>91</sup>

Koehler recognizes, and thoroughly addresses, the matter of the principle of interpretation that is a bone of contention in this controversy:

The controversial principle of interpretation: In the interpretation of a speech or a paper, the sense is brought out when one considers not only the bare words and sentences, but also the manner of illustration, the method of presentation, the intention of the writer, the occasion of the writing, the circumstance, the present controversy, the greater context, the audience, and so forth. And, in the case of a human writing, one also takes into account errors occurring in presentation.<sup>92</sup>

As in the *Ertrag*, he is still very objectively critical of the paper when he writes, for example, "Beitz's paper lacks even the proper *inter-relation of facts*, the proper *exegetical, historical, expository method*, which he himself commends, and thus the paper cannot exist as a sound, doctrinal paper for the general public."<sup>93</sup> He comments throughout that there are too many generalizations and overstatements that too easily lend themselves to misinterpretation and confusion. But yet, he sees Beitz' purpose in writing it, and to him, the message is one that every Christian should take to heart. "Beitz has everywhere in his paper, this one interest: that the message of the love of God in Christ would be for us a living possession of the heart and the greatest treasure."<sup>94</sup>

Koehler doesn't hold back on the questionable contents of the *Gutachten* either. He writes extensively about the *Gutachten's* charges of false doctrine towards the Beitz paper instead of putting

---

<sup>91</sup> John Phillip Koehler, "Beitz's Paper and the *Gutachten*," (August 1, 1929), trans. Earle D. Treptow, (June 20, 2000): 1.

<sup>92</sup> *Ibid*, 1.

<sup>93</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.

<sup>94</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.

the best construction on it and taking his words in the kindest possible way. He agrees with the *Gutachten* that he often overstates things, but “Beitz doesn't confuse justification and sanctification, but rather properly bases sanctification on justification. And, in addition, he didn't need to present justification first to the conference.”<sup>95</sup> Beitz doesn't intend to slander, as the *Gutachten* claims, but rather calls for self-examination on the part of all, including himself.<sup>96</sup>

As usual, caught in the middle of the storm, Koehler once again resorts to good, sound, godly judgment: “Proper, measured judgment will say this: Beitz's speech is often careless, but one cannot make him out to be a judge of hearts from that, while, in this connection, the *Gutachten's* judgment has operated with entirely plain and repeated perversion of Beitz's clear words. One must also, on the other side, recognize the careless speech of the *Gutachten*.”<sup>97</sup>

In closing his *Beleuchtung* he simply concludes about the whole situation: “It's a mess.”<sup>98</sup> He sees no clarity that can be attained, no opportunity for unity to be regained. Again at the end Koehler describes why he wrote this evaluation. He is not taking sides. He desires the clarity and unity which at this time really seems simply unachievable. “The justification of the publication of this writing should be understood by itself as the free expression of a conviction of conscience, which wants to help clarify and cure.”<sup>99</sup>

### **The Final Front of the Storm for Koehler: The *Antwort***

Since the *Beleuchtung* was made public and had been read most likely by every pastor and teacher in the synod, the main author of the *Gutachten*, August Pieper, naturally felt it necessary to

---

<sup>95</sup> Ibid., 3.

<sup>96</sup> Ibid., 3.

<sup>97</sup> Ibid., 3.

<sup>98</sup> Ibid., 9.

<sup>99</sup> Ibid., 9.

respond.<sup>100</sup> As the *Beleuchtung* was basically a re-working of the *Ertrag*, so the *Antwort* (“Answer”) that was issued in response to the *Beleuchtung* was a re-working of the *Gutachten*.<sup>101</sup> But the *Antwort*, which was released just eight days following the release of the *Beleuchtung*, was also a personal attack on Koehler and on his historical principle of interpretation. The *Antwort* “seems to insinuate that Koehler, with his careful attempts to understand the matter from Beitz’s point of view was showing signs of theological relativism.”<sup>102</sup>

Pieper obviously as well addresses the crux of the debate, which principle of interpretation to use in understanding the contents of the Beitz paper. He writes:

Critiques cannot be concerned with ideas an essay might want to say when the meaning does not proceed of itself from clear words—this only God knows, who examines hearts and reins; and with this quotation running through this whole essay, Prof. Koehler misleads himself and his readers . . . and Prof. Koehler’s characterization of the Beitz Paper is so incomplete and inexact, in fact downright wrong, that his judgment, accordingly, of its particularities and its entirety sets everything upside down.<sup>103</sup>

As opposed to Koehler’s approach of tactful language and the desire not to offend or inflame the situation even more so, Pieper is no holds barred in his description of what he thinks of the Beitz paper.

“[It is] a well-considered, carefully premeditated tendential [sic] tract, often premeditated by himself and a number of his adherents, a propaganda and agitational [sic] tract to promote the idea . . . that the Wisconsin Synod . . . is under the judgment of the hardening of hearts. This is so apparent . . . that one must blindfold one’s eyes deliberately not to see it.”<sup>104</sup>

---

<sup>100</sup> John P. Meyer also wrote a response which can be found right after Pieper’s *Antwort* in *Faith-Life* Vol. LXXV, no. 2, (March/April 2002): 18-21.

<sup>101</sup> A very interesting aside that is too in-depth to cover in this paper is a letter written to Pieper by Pastor Martin Zimmerman on October 8, 1929, two months after the *Antwort* was released. Zimmerman compares Beitz’ wording with the notes he had in his Bible “issuing word for word from your lips in Isagogics class (1918-1921) directly opposing your own words in the *Gutachten*.” This letter can be found in *Faith-Life* Vol. LXXV, no. 2 (March/April 2002): 7-9.

<sup>102</sup> Meyer, “Historical Background,” 7.

<sup>103</sup> Pieper, “*Antwort*,” 12.

<sup>104</sup> *Ibid.*, 12.

Pieper then retells the history of Koehler's supposed vacillation between supporting the *Gutachten* and disavowing it,<sup>105</sup> and then attacks his "historical point of view":

It [his historical point of view] has initiated contempt for the so-called dogmatic point of view . . . In a Christian and theologian, the historicist point of view leads on the one hand to irresolution, on the other to obstinacy . . . The historical point of view however is uncertain, and can make no heart secure, because it rides upon purely human abstractions . . . For the Christian the historicist point of view ought to be subordinate to the dogmatical as regards Holy Scripture, should always and without qualification submit to the clear words of Scripture, then it would be correct.<sup>106</sup>

This seems to be counter to what Koehler had written, and no doubt believed, concerning the historical-exegetical method of interpretation. But for Pieper's purpose, at the least it seems an easy target to pin on Koehler. One has to wonder if Pieper himself, one of the Wauwatosa theologians who is given proper due for the restoration of this method of interpretation, really believed the words above that he wrote in an obviously emotional time.

Pieper makes it obvious who he thinks is completely in the wrong in this controversy: "If unity is to be restored, the change of heart must take place on the side of the opponents. We can envision peace in the Synod solely in that the correctness of the *Gutachten* in its essential points is generally acknowledged."<sup>107</sup>

The release of the *Antwort* was dated August 9, 1929. On August 13, Professor Koehler was dismissed from his duties as professor and director of the seminary because the board was "unreservedly in agreement on all points with the reply written [the *Antwort*]."<sup>108</sup> Koehler had never even received a copy of the *Antwort*. Though this suspension would be overturned by a convention of

---

<sup>105</sup> See above the quotes of Koehler's regrets that were taken from the *Antwort*.

<sup>106</sup> Pieper, "Antwort," 17.

<sup>107</sup> *Ibid.*, 17.

<sup>108</sup> Letter of dismissal from W. Hoenecke, secretary of the seminary board, to J. P. Koehler (August 13, 1929), Faith-Life Vol. LXXV, no. 2 (March/April 2002): 27.

synod, Koehler would never again teach or preach in the Wisconsin Synod.<sup>109</sup> And like a kick to the stomach when your opponent is already down on the ground, five days after being suspended, the seminary in which Koehler was so instrumental in being constructed was dedicated, without Koehler in attendance.

### **The Calm *after* the Storm (at least in the Heart and Mind of Koehler)**

Following the final termination of his call in May 1930, Koehler wrote his “Witness, Analysis and Reply.” He composed it while living in the director’s residence in the new seminary, about one month before he left the seminary to live out the rest of his life in Neillsville, Wisconsin, with his son, Karl.

In the WAR (a fitting acronym, isn’t it?), Koehler maintains his view from the beginning and yet gives a more critical tone than before, directly calling out his former fellow professors, and especially Pieper.

The Gutachten was, and is, and must remain the sole issue. You sinned at the very outset when I pleaded with you to call in Beitz and you refused. Then, trusting in your won expressed infallibility, you cast my warning concerning your chief error to the wind before any signatures had been appended to the Gutachten. Then, without my knowledge and contrary to our agreement, you proceeded to publish the Gutachten, which in spite of my signature has been contested by me, and thereby disturbed my interview with Beitz. Then you spread the false report that I has apostatized from the Gutachten, when in fact I had challenged its validity from its inception and have continued to do so to the present.<sup>110</sup>

Koehler calls out those who opposed him and charges that they had one objective, “namely, to vanquish me and prove me wrong.”<sup>111</sup> He recalls that he has been subject to insults and defamatory attacks but that he “never responded with a counter-insult but in every case repudiated the *charges* with the Word of God.”<sup>112</sup>

---

<sup>109</sup> The following month, September 1929, Koehler was given a one year leave of absence because of reports that he had a nervous breakdown. Considering the circumstances he was in it would certainly not be surprising. But he and others close to him would vehemently respond that it was a lie. In May 1930 the seminary board would finally permanently rescind his call as professor.

<sup>110</sup> J.P. Koehler, “Witness, Analysis and Reply,” *Faith-Life* Vol. LXXV, no. 3 (May/June 2002): 24-25.

<sup>111</sup> *Ibid.*, 25.

<sup>112</sup> *Ibid.*, 25.

To the end, after all he endured, Koehler's tone remains one of love and forgiveness in the light of God's grace:

I have spoken my final word to you . . . If as one among all those who have fallen short of the glory of God I dare hope that his grace in respect of me and my labors was not in vain, I also, by the same token, dare hope to conquer my anger for the outrage perpetrated against me, conscious of the fact that through the blood of Christ every injustice is truly done away with. And it has been cast into the deep sea by God Himself, it can be no more remembered by those who through bitter strife on earth become reconciled to one another in the glory of God in heaven.<sup>113</sup>

This paper has used extensive quotes, especially from Koehler's writings. The purpose of this has been to let Koehler speak for himself, to prove from his own words that he wasn't in it for the power or the glory. He was in the middle of the storm, sometimes not by his choosing, to attempt to bring peace and to bring God glory through it all. In closing, it would be apropos, in light of the rest of the paper, to let Koehler himself speak. The following are excerpts from letters he wrote to Pastor Kurt Zorn. In these excerpts we see an evangelical man who looks back on the situation and still believes the main goal is to uphold God's Word and to reach a peaceful agreement if at all possible. We see a trusting man who leaves all things to God's direction, who knows that all things in this life do certainly work out for the good of those who love him.<sup>114</sup> We see a content man, who knows who his Lord is and what he has done for him.

It is self-evident that we consider it of prime importance to uphold doctrinal purity. But Paul says too that we should do so through the bond of peace. Here both contending parties do not want to acknowledge this . . . it seems to me, matters are of such a nature that we must emphasize peace toward those who carry on the controversy (letter dated September 24, 1982).<sup>115</sup>

Such matters have nothing to do with personal things, not even where we mix them in. In God's overall governance in all these controversies on earth the ultimate purpose is always that His old truth will ever and again be so furthered in the particular time and for that time so that it bring fruit. I have never yet seen anything other in history, and my own experience bears it out that every individual has done his part so that God's governance is

---

<sup>113</sup> Ibid., 28.

<sup>114</sup> Romans 8:28.

<sup>115</sup> Koehler, letter to Kurt Zorn (September 24, 1928), *Faith-Life* Vol. LIV, no. 5 (September/October 1981): 17.



overshadowed. When things begin to straighten out, that comes about only by God's grace, who moves all hearts. On this we must put our hope and learn to wait for it (letter dated December 1928).<sup>116</sup>

A feeling of freedom has come over me . . . Now don't get any worrisome thoughts because of us. Our dear Lord has done all things well. I am only sorry that the Synod cannot rectify itself (letter written July 12, 1930).<sup>117</sup>

Even during the Controversy, and from India nonetheless, Zorn was able to give Koehler appropriate and due encouragement and assess his contribution to the issues at hand: "From things I hear, it seems that you have had to suffer much in these last days . . . But it should be so, then you must know that your preaching of the Gospel at the Seminary has not been in vain. When I say that, I thereby give God all the glory, for I know that God has simply used you for His instrument" (letter dated November 8, 1928).<sup>118</sup>

Koehler died on September 30, 1951 at the age of ninety-two years old. Reportedly, the last words that Professor John Phillip Koehler spoke before he joined his Lord and Savior in eternal life were: "Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us."<sup>119</sup>

Koehler knew and readily admitted that he had made mistakes. The peace Koehler experienced in his heart that came only through knowing forgiveness through Christ is what spurred him on to desire peace and unity among brothers and sisters in the Church.

May we all "make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bonds of peace" as we work together as a church body to glorify God and to serve our fellow man.

---

<sup>116</sup> *Ibid.*, 20.

<sup>117</sup> Koehler, letter to Kurt Zorn (July 12, 1930), *Faith-Life* Vol. LV, no. 3 (May/June 1982): 29-30.

<sup>118</sup> Kurt Zorn, letter to Koehler (November 8, 1928), *Faith-Life* Vol. LIV, no. 5 (September/October 1981): 19.

<sup>119</sup> Hensel, "Brief History," 4.

## Bibliography

### *Primary Sources:*

Beitz, William F. "God's Message to us in Galatians: The Just Shall Live by Faith." Translated by Rev. Kevin Hastings; available from <http://www.wlsessays.net/files/BeitzGods.pdf>; Internet.

Hensel, Philemon. "A Brief History of the Protes'tant Controversy." *Faith-Life* Vol. LXXXIII, no. 5 (September/October 2000).

Koehler, John Phillip. "Analytical Account of the Ft. Atkinson Case as Occasioned by the Suspension of the Teachers Koch and Reuter by Praeses Thurow." *Faith-Life* Vol. LXXXIII, no. 6 (Nov/Dec 2000): 21-23.

\_\_\_\_\_. "Beitz's Paper and the *Gutachten*." Translated by Earle D. Treptow; available from <http://www.wlsessays.net/files/KoehlerBeitz.pdf>; Internet.

\_\_\_\_\_. "Ertrag." *Faith-Life* Vol. LXXIV, no. 6 (November/December 2001): 25-28.

\_\_\_\_\_. "Retrospective." *Faith-Life* Vol. LXXV, no. 4 (July/August 2002): 33-36.

\_\_\_\_\_. "Retrospective." *Faith-Life* Vol. LXXV, no. 6 (November/December 2002): 16-18, 23-24.

\_\_\_\_\_. "Retrospective." *Faith-Life* Vol. LXXVI, no. 5 (September/October 2003): 33-40.

\_\_\_\_\_. "The Analogy of Faith." In *The Wauwatosa Theology*, edited by Curtis Jahn, 221-286. Milwaukee: NPH, 1997. Originally published in *Theologische Quartalschrift* Vol. 1, no. 1-4 (1904), trans. by E. Sauer in *Faith-Life* Vol. 62, no. 6, (1989) and Vol. 63, no. 1 (1990).

\_\_\_\_\_. *The History of the Wisconsin Synod*. Edited by Leigh D. Jordahl. Sauk Rapids, MN: Sentinel Printing Company, 1981.

\_\_\_\_\_. "The Koehler-Zorn Correspondence." Letter to Kurt Zorn (December 30, 1927). *Faith-Life* Vol. LIV, no. 5 (September/October 1981): 15-16.

\_\_\_\_\_. "The Koehler-Zorn Correspondence." Letter to Kurt Zorn (September 24, 1928). *Faith-Life* Vol. LIV, no. 5 (September/October 1981): 16-17.

\_\_\_\_\_. "The Koehler-Zorn Correspondence." Letter to Kurt Zorn (December 1928). *Faith-Life* Vol. LIV, no. 5 (September/October 1981): 19-20.

\_\_\_\_\_. "The Koehler-Zorn Correspondence." Letter to Kurt Zorn (July 12, 1930). *Faith-Life* Vol. LV, no. 3 (May/June 1982): 29-30.

\_\_\_\_\_. "The Koehler-Zorn Correspondence." Letter to Kurt Zorn (September 1, 1930). *Faith-Life* Vol. LV, no. 4, (July/August 1982): 22.

\_\_\_\_\_. "The Proto-*Gutachten*." Letter to William Beitz (October 26, 1926), *Faith-Life* Vol. LXXIV, no. 3 (May/June 2001): 20-21.

\_\_\_\_\_. "Witness, Analysis and Reply." *Faith-Life* Vol. LXXV, no. 3 (May/June 2002): 14-28.

Pieper, August. "The *Antwort*." *Faith-Life* Vol. LXXV, no. 2 (March/April 2002): 11-18.

Theological Faculty of Wauwatosa. "The Opinion (*Gutachten*)." *Faith-Life* Vol. XXXIII, no. 7-8, (July/August 1960): 5-18.

Zorn, Kurt. "The Koehler-Zorn Correspondence." Letter to Koehler (November 8, 1928). *Faith-Life* Vol. LIV, no. 5 (September/October 1981): 19.

### ***Secondary Sources:***

Fredrich, Edward C. "The Parting of Professor J.P. Koehler and the Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary." Written for the WELS Historical Institute, April 20, 1983; available from <http://www.wlssays.net/files/FredrichKoehler.pdf>; Internet.

\_\_\_\_\_. "The Protest'ant Controversy." Paper presented at the Minnesota District Pastoral Conference, Rochester, MN, May 1, 1984; available from <http://www.wlssays.net/files/FredrichControversy.pdf>; Internet.

\_\_\_\_\_. *The Wisconsin Synod Lutherans*. Milwaukee: NPH, 1992.

Meyer, John P. "The Historical Background Which Led to the Formation of the Protes'tant Conference." Paper presented to the South Atlantic District Pastoral Conference, at Redeemer, Merritt Island, Florida, September 27-29, 1976; available from <http://www.wlssays.net/files/MeyerConference.pdf>; Internet.

Pless, Joel. "Prof. John Phillip Koehler's 1930 Reminiscences: A Synopsis, Analysis and Application." Paper presented to the WELS Historical Institute, Mequon, Wisconsin, 1996; available from <http://www.wlssays.net/files/PlessKoehler.pdf>; Internet.

Prange, Peter M. "Prize the Brotherhood." Paper presented at the Chicago Pastoral Conference, Louisville, KY, January 16-17, 2006; available from: <http://jerusalemlutheran.org/home/140003837/140003896/files/PrizeBrotherhood.pdf>; Internet.

***Other Helpful Sources for a More Complete History of the Entire Protes'tant Controversy:***

Degner, Charles F. "The parting of the ways: an evaluation of the official publications of the Seminary faculty during the Protest'tant Controversy in an effort to understand the difference between Koehler and Pieper and also Koehler's dismissal from the faculty." Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary Church History Paper, 1978.

Jeske, Mark A. "A half century of faith-life: an analysis of the circumstances surrounding the formation of the Protestant Conference." Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary Church History Paper, 1978.

Prange, Peter M. "Pastor E. Arnold Sitz and the Protes'tants: witnessing to the Wauwatosa gospel." Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary Church History Paper, 1998.