

Adolf Hoenecke and the *Quartalschrift*

By Martin O. Westerhaus

With the present issue the *Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly* enters the fourth quarter century of its existence. Its uninterrupted appearance through 300 issues and survival over 75 years, while not absolutely unique among denominational journals, surely make this an uncommon anniversary in this field. There is reason then to mark this major milestone by pausing to take a backward glance at the beginnings of our quarterly. While a history covering all of its 75 years has been suggested and would surely be welcome, circumstances dictated a much more modest and circumscribed scope for this study. Adolf Hoenecke, who looms large in the early history of the Wisconsin Synod, also played a key role in the history of our quarterly, serving as its first editor. His death on January 3, 1908, ended his editor role after only four years. It is this brief beginning period in the life of the *Quartalschrift* and Hoenecke's role in it which are to be examined here.

Adolf Hoenecke is no doubt remembered by most of those who are at all familiar with his name as the premier theologian and dogmatician of the Wisconsin Synod. His four volume *Ev. Luth. Dogmatik* published posthumously under the editorship of his sons Walter and Otto (Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, 1909–1917) alone would have earned that title for him. He served as the only theological professor at the synod's seminary in Watertown from the fall of 1866 to 1870. From 1870 to 1878 when Wisconsin merged its seminary with that of the Missouri Synod and sent its theological students to St. Louis for their training Hoenecke served as pastor of St. Matthew's congregation in Milwaukee. During those years Hoenecke presented doctrinal essays at seven of the nine synod conventions. Three of the four essays he presented were read during the course of two conventions. They were basic theological essays on the topics: "The Church," "Concerning the Holy Ministry," "Church Discipline," and "The Glory of the Church."

When the Wisconsin Synod reopened its Seminary in Milwaukee in 1878 Hoenecke was called to serve as its president and professor of dogmatics and homiletics. He also continued to serve a rapidly growing St. Matthew's congregation until 1890. In the convention of 1882 the Synod faced the question of what position it would take in the controversy over the doctrine of election which had erupted between the Ohio and Missouri synods. August Graebner presented an essay on Conversion. The discussion of this essay led naturally to a discussion of the doctrine of election and Dr. Hoenecke was called upon to present the biblical teachings concerning election. As a result of these presentations and the ensuing discussions both the Wisconsin Synod and the Minnesota Synod, which held its convention jointly with Wisconsin that year, became firmly united behind Hoenecke, Graebner, and Notz of the Milwaukee faculty in supporting the correctness of Walther's position. The controversy split the Synodical Conference, but Wisconsin, which might also have been split, suffered the loss of only a very few pastors and congregations, due in no small measure to the work and influence of Hoenecke. In the following years the Wisconsin Synod called on Hoenecke two more times to provide doctrinal instruction and leadership via convention essays. In 1887 he presented an essay on "The Last Times," in 1893 and 1894 on "Faithfulness in the Ministry," and in 1897 on "Devotions in the Home."

In view of the theological leadership Hoenecke had provided through the years it is not surprising that when the Wisconsin Synod through the faculty of its theological seminary ventured into the field of theological journalism, Hoenecke should take the lead and serve as editor. That venture, however, was rather slow in materializing. Already in 1892, in connection with the discussion of the proposed federation of Wisconsin, Minnesota, and Michigan in a joint synod, one of the arguments used was that the consolidation of the three seminaries would permit the publication of a theological journal. The federation became a reality. The seminaries were consolidated in the building newly erected by the Wisconsin Synod in Wauwatosa. But it was another ten years before the *Quartalschrift* became a reality. Hoenecke in the foreword to the first issue characterizes a theological journal as one of the "Lebensbedingungen," the necessities of life, for a synod or federation, so the publication of a journal of our own apparently had his full support. He also stated that the fact that it had not appeared earlier in spite of the very lively wishes for it had a variety of reasons, but he mentions none. One can surmise, however, that the addition to the faculty of J. P. Koehler in 1900 and August Pieper in

1902, both relatively young and highly talented and energetic men, were positive factors favoring the start of publication that finally materialized in 1904. Our heritage of theological literature from Hoenecke's pen might well have been considerably richer had Hoenecke been able to devote ten or twenty years to writing for the *Quartalschrift* instead of only four.

Hoenecke's contributions in written form during those four years fall into four categories: 1) the forewords to volumes 1, 2, and 4; 2) the theological articles, six in number; 3) his homiletical studies; and 4) one book review.

The Forewords

The forewords which Dr. Hoenecke wrote for volumes 1, 2, and 4 do not constitute a large contribution in terms of number of pages (eleven altogether) but, and this is especially true of the first to which we have already referred, they are quite significant in charting the theological orientation, the subject matter, and the goals of the new journal.

Concerning the theological position of the newly appearing periodical, Hoenecke states, he could only say what everyone would expect, "It is self-evident, that the position of the periodical is to be that of the Synodical Conference. We do not say thereby that this is a special Lutheran position, but that it is the position in agreement with the Scriptures and the Confession." He and his colleagues, he promised, would not present "theological hobbies and specialties, but the Scriptures themselves: the divine origin of the Scriptures by verbal inspiration, the divine authority of the Scriptures." They would allow their position to be determined by nothing but the clear word of Scripture. Their current position on the doctrine of election and their manner of permitting the Scriptures to be interpreted by the Scriptures alone were to be viewed as exemplifying their position.

Regarding the content of the *Quartalschrift* its editor promised that it would offer articles on points of doctrine in general, but that naturally, special attention would be given to articles of special interest for the Lutheran Church of our land or specifically for our synodical circles. Special mention is made of the fact that the *Quartalschrift* was also to be devoted to the field of homiletics. Homiletical questions would be dealt with and sermon studies and sermon outlines were to be presented, for the first on the standard pericopes of the Church, but later also on free texts. Questions of pastoral practice would also be dealt with.

As to goals set by the first editor, he mentions two. First, the new journal is intended to benefit the synodical circles by which it is published in a proper and lasting manner. Hoenecke calls this a difficult assignment, toward the fulfillment of which the gifts and assistance of God were earnestly petitioned. A second goal, he noted, was placed before the staff of the new publication by the manifest activity and working of God in the Lutheran Church of the land. "At the present," Hoenecke noted, "God is allowing a strong movement toward unity in doctrine to be felt in our synods; and it shall also be our goal to serve this movement in uprightness, honesty, and Christian love, but therefore also not in the slightest concession in matters where for conscience' sake, convinced by the clear testimony of the divine Word, we cannot yield. For nothing at all is accomplished by 'deals' (*Packtieren*) such as are worked out here and there nowadays in matters of doctrine. That does not bring about agreement in which Lutherans really can be of one heart and one soul. We can only have heartfelt unity when there is no sore spot which pains one or the other at every contact."

Hoenecke ended this foreword to the first issue with an expression of the hope that it would find friendly reception and helpful coworkers who would gladly contribute their efforts to make it prosper. Finally there followed these words: "Above all we hope for God's blessing. May this periodical be committed to Him. May He promote it according to His pleasure and to the glory of His name. Amen."

In his foreword to volume two Hoenecke noted that the experience gained in publishing the *Quartalschrift* for a year had not suggested any changes in the position or goals of the periodical. Its theological position, he stated, was the most essential matter. The *Quartalschrift* would continue to hold fast to every point of its assumed position and this for the best interests of the Lutheran Church. In spite of distortions and misrepresentations of its position by some, the *Quartalschrift* would continue to discuss the issues objectively and point out causes for and consequences of departure from the correct position. Nor was any change going to

be made with regard to content. Hoenecke adds the comment that it was the wish of the faculty from the beginning to discuss church news and the appearance of new theological literature, but that this had not been possible to any extent in the first volume.

Hoenecke wrote no foreword for volume 3, but did so again for volume 4. In it Hoenecke first noted that the *Quartalschrift* would continue on the path of full Lutheran orthodoxy on which it had originally set out. He then discusses some of the theological emphases of the day. One could find theological hues of the most varied and manifold kind, a result of the subjectivism which had held sway in German theology since Schleiermacher. The attitude toward biblical authority on the part of those who could still be counted as within the church varied from the quite positive Weiss to the radical Schwarz. He comments on some of the then recent trends in German theology, and notes that such proponents of the “modern positive” school as Th. Zahn, A. Hauck, and R. Seeberg are gaining followers in this country. These men speak derogatively of the repristination of the old orthodox theology by conservatives such as Philippi. Although this “modern positive” position bears the name Lutheran, its position is that of the Union. Finally Hoenecke reports the termination of the inter-synodical free conferences. In carrying on the theological debate in writing, the *Quartalschrift* would hold to a simple, positive presentation of the articles in dispute. In spite of the expressions of some to the effect that the differences at issue were so minute as to be insignificant, Hoenecke insisted they were of great significance: How to interpret Scriptures properly, the doctrines of repentance, conversion, free will, and election. Discussion of these issues would constitute a special field of labor for the *Quartalschrift*. Hoenecke closed this last of his forewords with the prayer: “May God grant strength for this work and help us carry it out in the manner indicated, simply to present the truth from the Scriptures and so to contribute to the defeat of error without unspiritual wrangling, without turning to biting sarcasm as the weapon with which best to crush an opponent.”

Theological Articles

The major contribution of Adolf Hoenecke to the first years of the *Quartalschrift* was the six theological articles he wrote for it. Four of them were major articles ranging in length from eighteen to thirty-three pages. Two are in the nature of shorter comments on contemporary events. Four appeared in volume one, and one each in volumes two and four. We will briefly examine the content of each.

“On the Nature and Definition of Theology”

This first article was Hoenecke’s most scholarly contribution. It was also the longest, appearing in two installments as the lead article in the first two issues of the *Quartalschrift*. Hoenecke began by noting that there is a long history of debate over the best way of defining Theology. The early Lutheran dogmaticians had emphasized that Theology was a *habitus practicus*, a practical aptitude or skill, which the Holy Ghost imparts through the Word. The later dogmaticians and most modern theologians emphasize that Theology is a science or academic discipline, requiring an advanced degree of learning. Theologians, Hoenecke notes, have displayed a growing tendency to view themselves with ever greater self-assurance as the saviors of the church. One hears with growing amazement, what great importance, talents, and accomplishments the theologians attribute to themselves. The efforts of the dogmaticians to furnish a scriptural proof of the necessity and importance of such a learned theology are unconvincing, however.

Hoenecke calls for a return to the old view and definition. He quotes Luther to the effect that he who is not made a theologian by God will never really become one. He will be a speculative theologian, a *theologus gloriae* who only seeks his own importance and honor with his theology. The person who is taught theology by God, however, is taught the *theologia crucis*, the theology of the cross. God demands of the systematic theologian two things: 1. That all articles of faith be presented according to the Scriptures, that nothing be added or omitted; 2. That every doctrinal article be drawn from the *sedes classici*, the passages which treat of that doctrine.

“Scriptural Proof in the Formula of Concord”

This article, printed in third issue of volume 1, apparently grew out of a debate or difference of opinion which arose in the previous Free Conference. Representatives of the Synodical Conference insisted that Scriptural evidence concerning an article of doctrine has to be taken from the *sedes doctrinae* concerning that doctrine to prove or establish a point concerning that doctrine. Apparently the opposition had challenged that with the argument that the Formula of Concord cited passages other than the *sedes* in defining a doctrine. Dr. Hoenecke investigates this question in regard to Articles I and XI and brings evidence that the Formula does draw from the *sedes* alone when defining those doctrines. Hoenecke also discusses the orthodox theologians’ manner of exegizing. They had apparently been charged with a dogmaticizing manner of exegesis by the opponents. It is granted that Quenstedt and Calov are guilty of letting dogmatic considerations color their exegesis. Chemnitz and the other early orthodox theologians and the Formula of Concord, however, do not do this.

*“Agreement on the Correct View of the Authority of
Scripture as the Source of Doctrine: the Way to Unity in the Church”*

The scholarly article with this long title was penned by Hoenecke for the fourth issue of volume 1 of the *Quartalschrift*. An English translation is printed in volume 73, numbers 1 and 2. It can therefore suffice here to mention that Hoenecke seeks to demonstrate that there is no Scriptural warrant for making an “analogy of faith,” a summary of Christian doctrine, the highest authority, above the individual passages (*sedes doctrinae*), in establishing and defining a doctrine.

“Inconsistencies”

For the second volume of the *Quartalschrift* Hoenecke contributed only this one theological article. He begins the article by pointing out there is no lack of inconsistencies in the history of the church. All of them, he notes, have their origin in a lack of simple obedience to the Word of God. By way of introduction he proceeds to point out such inconsistencies in the teachings of the Roman Catholic Church, the Reformed Church, and the Lutheran Church of the 16th and 17th century. In the main portion of the article he then proceeds to discuss what he calls an inconsistency of great consequence in the Lutheran Church of the day. It concerns the relation of the articles of faith to reason and its demands. He points out that Christians generally concede that articles of faith are beyond reason, even enlightened reason. There are articles of faith which contain apparent contradictions for our reason. Hoenecke cites several generally accepted examples: the presence of the fullness of the deity with us in one specific place at the same time that He is present everywhere; the Trinity: one personal God yet three persons; the two natures of Christ: true God, true man in one person. In these and other doctrines there are and remain for our reason contradictions, mysteries which we cannot grasp. Most Lutheran theologians would agree to this. The opponents in the current controversy over election, however, are not willing to accept the mystery inherent in the scriptural teaching that God’s grace in Christ is the sole cause for the salvation of the elect, but that unbelievers are lost because of their disbelief and disobedience. This (for human reason) contradictory statement is removed by the invention of the theory of a distinction between natural and willful resistance. Hoenecke demonstrates that this “explanation,” has no scriptural basis.

“On the Intersynodical Conference in Detroit”

In this brief article of 3 1/2 pages found in issue 2 of volume 1 Hoenecke reacts to press reports on the free conference held just a short time before in Detroit. Apparently there were numerous negative comments. Some thought parish pastors rather than theological professors should have been leading participants. Others complained that the debate on the analogy of faith sounded as though it came directly out of the 16th or 17th

century. Hoenecke defended the precise dogmatic methods of Lutheran orthodoxy as a useful tool seeking to settle the known doctrinal differences confronting the Lutheran Church in America. He still hoped that by continuing patiently with careful definitions and distinctions based on the Scriptures unity would be reached. Every frivolous, rough manner of speaking should be avoided, he urged. The matter under discussion was holy. Each side was encouraged to have the confidence that the other side was acting and speaking as before God.

“The Toledo Union Theses”

A rather short article of 6 1/2 pages under the above title appeared in volume 4 of the *Quartalschrift*. From February 13 to 15, 1907, representatives of the Ohio and Iowa synods met in Toledo, Ohio, to attempt to remove remaining obstacles to the achievement of full doctrinal agreement and ultimate union of the two church bodies. Six theses formed the basis for discussion and the proposed union. At the close of the meetings representatives of both bodies declared that remaining differences were not divisive of fellowship, that the synods of Ohio and Iowa were united in doctrine and confession.

The text of the theses is printed together with a brief analysis by Hoenecke. He considered them compromise theses, some bore an Ohio stamp, some an Iowa. And some doctrinal differences were passed over in silence. He called the theses “a unionistic patchwork” which would not produce a God-pleasing union.

The Homiletical Studies

Adolf Hoenecke was first and foremost a dogmatician, as our readers are aware. But this was not his only talent. He was also abundantly blessed in another area of theological endeavor, namely preaching. Already his instructors at the University of Halle testified that he possessed an inclination to the art of popular preaching. In a foreword to a translation of a series of Hoenecke’s Lenten sermons the late Prof. J. P. Meyer, then in his eighties, reported he could still recall vividly a funeral sermon he had heard as a boy, which Hoenecke preached for a boy his own age.

Hoenecke, we are told, loved to construct sermon outlines. After he no longer had the responsibility of preaching every Sunday, he would nevertheless work out one or more outlines on the Epistle and Gospel for every Sunday and festival.

The readers of the early volumes of the *Quartalschrift* benefitted from Hoenecke’s talent and love for preaching. The first three volumes offered no less than 33 outlines of standard Gospel texts and 31 on standard Epistles. They are simple, clear, and textual constructions, many of which, transposed into English, would lend themselves well to preaching today. Where his doctrinal writings were highly learned and full of theological terms and quotations from the orthodox dogmaticians, his sermons and sermon outlines were formulated in a language that spoke clearly, understandably, movingly to the man in the pew. Hoenecke did not let his great learning, his comprehensive knowledge of the orthodox theologians mislead him into a pulpit style that was beyond the grasp of the average listener, or so loaded down with scholarly trivia as to bore his hearers. It is regrettable that more of his sermons and text studies are not available in English.

Book Reviews

Hoenecke wrote only one book review for the *Quartalschrift*. It is made more memorable for us by the fact that it was the last thing he wrote. It was left unfinished at his death, breaking off in mid sentence. It is printed in volume 5, number 1, immediately after Hoenecke’s obituary. It evaluates a small work of 63 pages by Dr. Philipp Bachmann, a member of the Erlangen faculty entitled: “The Significance of Christ’s Atoning Death (*Suehnetod*) for the Christian’s Conscience.” Bachmann was one of the contributors to Zahn’s New Testament Commentary, a member of the so-called “positive” wing of German Lutheran theologians, and highly thought of by many conservative Lutherans. In this little book he sets forth the proposition that the most important significance of Christ’s death is an ethical one, to call forth repentance and sanctification in the Christian.

Hoenecke effectively demonstrates that Bachmann not only is confusing law and gospel with his main thesis, but, he points out, Bachmann never mentions the law, God's wrath over sin, or judgment and condemnation. Nor does he ever, in spite of using the term "atoning death" speak of Christ's death as truly redeeming us from sin, death, and hell. "Christ's atoning death signifies the disclosure of the full reality, radicality, opposition to God of sin and thereby incites the conscience to extend its accusation to the whole of human existence," Bachmann wrote. To which Hoenecke commented that this leading Lutheran theologian has Christ doing the work of Moses and the Gospel carrying out the assignments of the law. In this last writing as in so many others Hoenecke again demonstrated effectively his abiding concern for the preservation and defense of pure biblical doctrine, for the distinction and clear presentation of both law and gospel.

In conclusion, an attempt must be made to summarize the significance of Hoenecke's contribution to our quarterly. As to the materials he contributed, they are surprisingly few in number, especially after the first volume. For volume I Hoenecke contributed the foreword, three major articles, comments on the Detroit Free Conference, and 15 sermon studies, an impressive amount of work for a year. But after that his writing for his literary child dropped markedly: a foreword, one article, and 32 text studies for volume 2; 17 text studies for volume 3, and a foreword and the comments on the Toledo Theses for volume 4. Several possible explanations suggest themselves. His call for contributors from outside the faculty issued in the foreword to volume 1 brought a quick response. The first volume was entirely by Hoenecke, Koehler, and Pieper. Volume 2 offered three articles by Pastor J. Harders, the later missionary to the Apaches, and one by another pastor. Volume 3 contained seven, volume 4 no less than eleven articles by J. Schaller, J. P. Meyer, G. Harders, and others. There were other capable scholars in the wings.

Another possible explanation for the decline in Hoenecke's production is suggested by Koehler's remark in the Hoenecke obituary (vol. 5, p. 1) that Hoenecke's general health had been lowered somewhat by "special exertion in the study" recently. Whatever the precise cause, Hoenecke and his colleagues were aware that his vitality in the last months was not what it had been formerly. But, regardless of whether the declining productivity was voluntary or not, we have before us on the pages of these first four volumes of the *Quartalschrift* concrete evidence of a "changing of the guard." Hoenecke was laying down the role of theological leadership he had held so long. The second generation, trained in this country, was taking over. Hoenecke's *Quartalschrift* writings may be regarded as his swan song in the old role.

From the perspective of 75 years the articles that Hoenecke wrote for the *Quartalschrift* are not as significant as his role in setting the theological position, the scope, and the goals of the then new journal. The *Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly* of today continues on the course he charted in 1904. Its theological orientation is to what he called "the theology of the Synodical Conference," or the theology of "full Lutheran confessionalism" (vol. 4, p. 1).

In the course of these past 75 years the direction of the course of American Lutheranism has, to a large extent, veered toward the left and away from solid Lutheran confessionalism. In 1904 the Missouri Synod, with 450,000 communicants by far the largest of the Lutheran synods, stood on the right as the unmovable champion of strict orthodoxy. Wisconsin, with some 125,000 members roughly of the same size as the Pennsylvania Ministerium, the Augustana Synod, and the United Norwegian Lutheran Church in America, was one of the major synods in its own right, yet enjoyed the added sense of strength and assurance that fellowship with its larger, historically more conservative sister, Missouri, in the Synodical Conference afforded. In the center were the unaffiliated German synods, Ohio, Iowa, and Buffalo, and all the Scandinavian synods except Augustana, not as strict, but still within "talking distance" as the free conferences demonstrated. And even on the left the General Council still showed the influence of the confessional thrust given by Charles P. Krauth and others a generation earlier.

Today, as a result of the mergers of 1917, 1930, 1960, and 1962 and the theological shifts of the intervening years, Wisconsin finds herself among the "other five per cent" of small synods overshadowed by the three major Lutheran bodies all to her left. Due to the growing influences of the historical-critical method and the ecumenical movement in ALC and LCA the theological difference between Wisconsin and the center and left wings of American Lutheranism has widened drastically.

Theological debate such as filled the pages of the first issues of the *Quartalschrift*, which Hoenecke considered to be one of the chief functions of the journal, no longer is possible. The grandsons of Loy and Reu, of Krauth and Koren too, to a large extent no longer speak their noted ancestors' language. The present anniversary, then, suggests a twofold gratitude, both to Hoenecke, who firmly and surely set the course for the Wisconsin Synod and its quarterly, and to a gracious God who has preserved sons and grandsons on that course.

Hoenecke's most dramatic contributions to the history of the Wisconsin synod no doubt were his leadership, especially in the late 1860s and early 1880s, and his teaching on the convention floor and in the seminary classroom. After his death his *Dogmatik* let his teaching continue through the second generation, and, in the form of Prof. Meyer's *Dogmatics Class Notes*, the third.

If there is one note that characterizes Hoenecke's theological-dogmatic position as it is expressed in the forewords and articles of the *Quartalschrift*, it is the oft repeated emphasis that the ultimate source and authority in dogmatics is the *sedes doctrinae*, the individual Bible passages that convey the details of Scripture's teachings to us. Koehler, in his obituary of Hoenecke, aptly describes the latter's approach to theology thus: "*Dass man die Schrift nehme* simply, *wie sie lautet*," that one take the Scriptures simply, the way they read. Another generation would term this careful attention to the actual wording and import of the original Bible passages rather than to formulations of later systematians the "Wauwatosa Gospel." From another perspective one could call it the faithful application of Luther's *Sola Scriptura* principle in the context of the 19th and 20th century. In this anniversary year we who call the *Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly* "*our Quarterly*" have reason to treasure the heritage Adolf Hoenecke left us in and through his *Theologische Quartalschrift*. "*Dass man die Schrift nehme* simply, *wie sie lautet*." One could ask for no finer anniversary gift for the writers and readers of the WLQ than that they be enabled to do just that in their spiritual and theological labors.