

Wanderer's Rest

a biography of August Pieper

geography

Who was August Pieper? His people came from the northern rim of Europe, out of a small village named Karwitz, seven miles from the sea. The kingdom of Prussia is long gone, but you can get an idea from a map by finding the long border between Germany and Poland. Can you locate the Baltic Sea? Karwitz is 85 miles west of Gdansk (Danzig). August was born right there, about midway through the nineteenth century (1857).

ancestry

Who was August Pieper? He was given his father's name. More than a few soldiers and officers in the famous and feared Prussian Army carried that same name.

Korporal August Pieper grew tired of the militaristic mindset and life; he resigned his commission. He met a girl. Berta Lohff and her sister had been orphaned and raised with cousins in the home of an uncle. These young ladies received in that home the gift of a beautiful and strong faith in the Lord Jesus. Berta brought it into a marriage with August Bernhard Pieper. In time, her "greatly exacting, conscientious and respected" husband became mayor of his village. This ex-soldier desired peace and order so much, and opposed quarrels - - even private ones - - so much that he could not commit to "the old sturdy but infinitely tender" Lutheranism of the Reformation. He wanted his children to be highly educated citizens, but he was content to let his wife be the spiritual leader of their home.

And what a busy home it was! God gave these parents two daughters and six sons. Little August came in the second wave of boys. Many years later he spoke glowingly of a big sister Wilhelmine; after "Mina" came all those sons: Julius, Reinhold, Franz ... Carl, August, and Anton.

tragedy

Who was August Pieper? Picture a row of children. They are sitting in church. At the front of the church is a pastor. Between the pastor and the family lies the still body of the children's father. He has been killed. What an irony: this man who left a career in the army, now struck down somehow by a troublemaker in the village. To die doing one's duty? What a powerful, painful picture for an 11-year-old boy to carry in his mind, heart and will. "My father!"

"And what is to become of our family of 10 now?" Somewhere around this time the two oldest sons disappear from Karwitz and reappear in the New World. Wilhelmine, like her mother, married an ex-

soldier and left the house. Back in the village, Mrs. Pieper is 50 years old, her strong and noble Prussian man is in the ground - - a new widow with a fragmenting family.

odyssey

Who was August Pieper? Mother had made a decision. Berta and four sons sailed from Schweinemunde on a paddle-wheeled steamboat. They stopped in Copenhagen to take on passengers. Racially-sparked fights forced the crew to patrol the decks with loaded revolvers and drawn swords. The *Ocean Queen* moved up the inside passage to dock one last time at Kristiansand, on the bottom edge of Norway. Then land fell away. Violence on board was nothing compared to the violence of the north Atlantic in late winter. Far from port the craft, loaded with 800 passengers, repeatedly lifted her bow and slammed down. One of her great sidewheels broke on its shaft. The stricken vessel lumbered through the heavy seas; it moved in circles, like a wounded animal. Four boys and their mother had to wonder - - surely God had not brought them into the dark ocean to abandon them there? Or was it that Satan could see what lay ahead for his kingdom at the hand of this little family?

The *Ocean Queen* limped into New York harbor in early spring of 1870; she had been on the high seas for a month. No Statue of Liberty yet stood on Ellis Island. There was a Missouri Synod mission near the docks that welcomed and helped people like wrung-out mother Pieper and her boys Franz, 18 years old, Carl, 15, August, 12, and Anton, 10.

literacy

A boy looks out of a train window. The Pennsylvania Railroad would have taken them west to Chicago; the Milwaukee & St. Paul, north. Widow Pieper had a relative, a Lutheran teacher, in Jefferson County, Wisconsin. She wanted her sons to continue their educations to the highest levels. Franz had already won spectacular honors in Germany. Berta's boys entered Wisconsin Synod schools. Here August would be confirmed. Mrs. Pieper found employment as a sort of housekeeper for a fledgling school opened during the last year of the Civil War, called Northwestern University. The family lived near the Rock River bridge on the north side of Watertown.

A bit later, the Missouri and Wisconsin synods agreed to share a seminary program. August would follow big brother Franz down to St. Louis. In the bustling river-town they each saw the new campus of Concordia Seminary. Here they each studied under Dr. C.F.W. Walther himself! Here they would have heard him lecture on the proper distinction between Law & Gospel, on *Kirche und Amt* (Church & Ministry). The great man even asked August to proofread Latin, German, Hebrew and Greek for his dogmatics textbook. Early on, the head of the booming Missouri Synod had his eye on August's brother as a future faculty member ... and as much more.

deathly

August was an athlete. He loved to be out-of-doors. In Germany he had learned to fish, in a pond behind the mill where Julius was apprentice. But in America he had learned to play baseball, and August especially loved to pitch. One hot afternoon he and classmates played and they were thirsty. Next to a nearby building was a barrel that collected rainwater. They drank their fill and were refreshed.

Who was August Pieper? He was a young man who was cut down at the peak of his strength, for typhus struck the ballplayers. Symptoms of this rodent-and-flea-borne sickness include a high fever (about 105 F), headaches, nausea, vomiting, diarrhea, coughing, and pain in the abdomen, joints and back. A spreading rash may cover the entire body except the palms of the hands and the bottoms of the feet. Patients may develop additional symptoms: bleeding into the skin, delirium, stupor, hypotension, and shock, which can cause death.

August was in a coma for weeks. Once he heard a doctor in the room say that his chances of living were almost zero. He later recalled that the words fell on him like a death-sentence. Another time he was aware of a professor's voice praying Psalm 23; a man was embracing him with both arms. This boy who hung by a thread between life and death, whose own father was torn out of his life when he was only 11, now felt a man of God take his weak hand, stroke his tear-stained cheeks, and speak Psalm 118:17 over the miserable sickbed: "I will not die, but live ... and will proclaim what the LORD has done." August did live; he would proclaim.

ministry

What a chapter of life for Mrs. Pieper and her boys since leaving home! Julius, trained in Germany as a miller, settled in Clinton, Iowa, south of Dubuque on the big river. Reinhold, trained as a botanist, became a pastor in the Missouri Synod. Franz had been called into the public ministry of the Wisconsin Synod. It wasn't long before Concordia Seminary came knocking. Their first Call Franz declined. Shortly thereafter the Call came back, and Dr. Walther got his man.

Carl "didn't like book-learning." He too moved to Iowa. First he worked as a salesman and later homesteaded some land with 20 head of cattle. August, trained in Wisconsin Synod schools like his well-known brother six years his senior, also took a Call into the parish ministry. Little brother Anton too became a Wisconsin Synod pastor.

August served in northern Wisconsin. After some years near Lake Michigan, Pastor Pieper took a Call to far western Wisconsin; he describes these five years as "severe strain." Imagine the fear of a young pastor - - in a rich and rewarding life among a busy congregation - - who finds he is losing his voice. What good is a shepherd who can't speak? Finally, his voice completely gone, the man packed up and left for Texas and its different climate. August Pieper was a doubting young man asking the question, "Will I ever preach again?"

matrimony

Who was August Pieper? He was a husband and a father. He'd met a certain Emma Koenig in St. Louis. She was the sister of the wife of Concordia professor George Stoeckhardt. August and Emma were married in 1881. God would garland their home with children: Magdalene, Margaret, Gertrude, Gerhardt, Paul, Lydia and Ruth. The sons would one day follow their father into the pastoral ministry.

faculty

It was given to August to return to parish ministry; the growing Pieper family spent more than a decade in Milwaukee. A Call to the Seminary came in 1902. The school was in a part of Milwaukee

named Wauwatosa. Here August would be reunited with Watertown and St. Louis classmate John Philip Koehler. John Schaller would join the faculty a few years later. This three-man team taught in the classroom from a position some named the *Wauwatosa Theology*. This point of view stressed what is called the *historical-grammatical* approach to Scripture. By way of contrast, Koehler and Pieper had been thoroughly drilled by Dr. Walther in a dogmatics-heavy curriculum (a “proof-passage” approach to the truths and struggles of the Christian faith). They thanked God for it. Yet the Wisconsin men had come to realize that the American Lutheran religious landscape had changed. They remembered from St. Louis an absence of Hebrew and Greek text study through any entire Bible book.

The talented Wisconsin teachers determined to bring the historical and original-language context of Bible books to a place of prominence. They wanted pastors to think: “How does this specific verse fit into its paragraph ... the paragraph into the chapter? How does the chapter fit into the author’s line of thought for the whole book? How does this book fit into the Old or the New Testament? How is the Holy Spirit pointing it all to Christ?”

scholarly

A torrent of articles came from the pens of Koehler, Pieper and Schaller. Differences in their temperaments and differences in their classroom approaches did not impede “a phenomenal number of essays in *Quartalschrift*, the theological journal of the Wisconsin Synod.”

Professor Pieper alone wrote more than 100 professional papers. He became a popular preacher for congregations’ festivals. Conferences and district conventions of his church body frequently asked for his intense, emotional, moving presentations on a Bible text or topic. A gift Pieper possessed was his ability to move easily between the Old Testament and the New without a drop-off in scholarship.

Professors Koehler and Pieper worked with others to open an area Lutheran high school in Milwaukee.

He wrote a commentary on the book of *Isaiah*, the prophet who had said about Jesus, “... surely he has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows.” A well-known modern Bible scholar writes on the dedication-page of his popular three-volume *Isaiah* commentary to the effect that August Pieper had a greater grasp on the line of thought of the book of Isaiah than any other source.

controversy

Professors Koehler and Pieper were gifted and even brilliant Christian men. Back in the Watertown days of the 1870’s, they had been schoolmates and teammates. Now they found it increasingly difficult to work together. To many looking on, these bigger-than-life personalities seemed to irritate, provoke, question and undermine one another.

This festering wound broke open under the pressures of church life. Painful separations took place, followed by protests from people, pastors and congregations.

While Franz Pieper’s Missouri Synod was the gold standard of Lutheranism, the Protestant Controversy rattled relationships throughout the small Wisconsin Synod.

presidency

The Wisconsin Synod's seminary moved north from Wauwatosa to semi-rural Thiensville. Picture a castle with green slate roofs on top of a hill. Prof. & Mrs. Pieper were to be the first residents of 11805 N Seminary Drive. A grandchild remembers the seminary family traveling to David's Star Lutheran Church in Kirchayn to dig trees out of the woods to plant on the former farm. The enormous Norway spruce that line the dormitory parking lot are among those trees.

Sadness. Fear. Strain. Never strangers to this man, they now seemed to shadow him. He had already stood at the grave of a child in the 1920's, but a heavy blow fell here when his Emma died.

After all the painful pruning and shaping, the Lord of the Church had one more role for August Pieper. The widower would serve as Seminary President from 1929-1937.

longevity

Who was August Pieper? What kind of a will does it require to serve 64 years - - read that again - - in the public ministry? He was one of an immigrant widow's three sons who would serve as Lutheran seminary presidents. These were siblings who might have been emotionally crippled after the killing of their father. They might have drowned in the raging north Atlantic. August could have been smothered by the rainwater-induced coma in St. Louis. A young pastor's career might easily have been snipped off during the silent retreat to Texas. He might have lost his will for any more battle when Emma left him for her new country in 1930.

legacy

How fitting that August Otto Wilhelm Pieper was buried on a day of inclement weather. The 89-year-old's funeral took place during Christmas week, 1946. Over 500 students had come through the seminary while he was a teacher. One obituary mentions, "... in spite of treacherous roads a goodly number of his former students were present to do homage to the memory of their professor."

How fitting that there were two sermons, one from the Old Testament, "I look for your deliverance, O LORD" (Genesis 49:18), and one from the New Testament, "Sovereign Lord, as you have promised, you now dismiss your servant in peace" (Luke 2:29). One sermon was heard in German, one in English; one was spoken by a professor, one by a pastor.

Who was August Pieper? Should someone wish to get to know him through his own words, these are some writings from his own hand that will help to start that journey:

- *the Judgment of God on the Ungodly, according to Romans 1:18-32*
- *Luther's Teaching of the Christian Priesthood*
- *the Book of Job and its Significance for Preaching and the Care of Souls*
- *the Despising of Grace is the Death of the Church*

He awaits the resurrection from a cemetery named "Wanderer's Rest."

*Omaha, Nebraska
Pastor Tom Jeske
April, 2013*

