

Prof. John Philipp Koehler's 1930 Reminiscences: A Synopsis, Analysis and Application

by Joel Pless

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In the near 150 year history of the ministerium of the Wisconsin Ev. Lutheran Synod, it is the professed opinion of the essayist that the Wisconsin Synod has produced only two original theologians: John Philipp Koehler and Martin Franzmann. This paper will address the career and the contributions of Prof. J. P. Koehler. This will be done on the basis of Prof. Koehler's reminiscences, which he dictated to his youngest son, Kurt, "during his house arrest in Thiensville, in 1930." (p. 79) These reminiscences Prof. Koehler entitled: "Beginnings of the Opposition in the Wisconsin Synod underlying the Controversies in the Years from 1924 to 1930." To the best knowledge of the essayist, no member of the Wisconsin Synod had ever seen these reminiscences or even knew of their existence until July 1995. The whereabouts of all of Prof. Koehler's manuscripts, books, and artwork appeared to be somewhat of a mystery in the Wisconsin Synod for several decades. Leigh Jordahl reveals in his two introductions to Koehler's *The History of the Wisconsin Synod* that Prof. J. P. Koehler's papers were not located by the Protestants until 1970.¹ The papers were subsequently turned over to the Concordia Historical Institute, where the essayist located them on July 30, 1995. Since that time, the Protestant Conference has delivered many more of J. P. Koehler's papers to the Concordia Historical Institute, where they await eager researchers of Wisconsin Synod history.

This paper on Prof. J. P. Koehler, presented on consecutive days to the annual meeting of the WELS Historical Institute and to the fall meeting of the Joint Chippewa/Wisconsin River Valley Pastoral Conference, will give a summary of Prof. Koehler's reminiscences, which amount to 55 pages of typewritten material. This synopsis will then be followed by an analysis, which will seek to highlight what can be profitably learned from Prof. Koehler's recorded sentiments about his long career in the Wisconsin Synod and why it ended so tragically as a result of the Protestant Controversy.

Part One: A Synopsis of Prof. Koehler's "Reminiscences"

In his last year on the Thiensville seminary campus, J. P. Koehler sat down with his youngest son, Kurt, and reminisced about his career as a WELS pastor and professor. Kurt wrote down what his father related about a wide range of topics and then later composed them in typewritten form. The elder Koehler particularly spoke about his career as a professor at the Wauwatosa seminary and his relationship with a number of Wisconsin Synod principals during his lifetime, particularly Prof. August Pieper.

The relationship which existed between former St. Louis seminary schoolmates John Philipp Koehler and August Pieper, both of whom taught an entire generation of pastors at the Wauwatosa seminary, is intriguing to say the least. The relationship between the two began with a warm friendship and it ended tragically with personal, professional and even doctrinal differences. This paper seeks to shed some light on why such a tragic development took place between two colleagues and what lessons can be learned from this important but sad portion of Wisconsin Synod history.

Koehler himself seeks to elucidate exactly what his differences were with August Pieper which led up to the Protestant Controversy. He began his reminiscences by stating in his first paragraph:

¹ Leigh D. Jordahl, "Introduction," Koehler, John Ph. *The History of the Wisconsin Synod*, 2nd ed., (Sauk Rapids, MN: Sentinel Printing, 1981) pp. viii & xxvi.

It has been said repeatedly that personal differences are at the bottom of the present controversies. This opinion refers mainly to the differences between Professors August Pieper and John Ph. Koehler. There is some truth in this, but it is not the whole truth. To get at the beginnings, one must go back a whole generation. (p. 1)

For the next several paragraphs, we are going to go back in WELS history and listen to Koehler's side of the story about how his friendship with August Pieper slowly deteriorated. It does not appear to have happened from a single incident or occurrence, but a number of incidents laid end to end. Alexander the Great would often comment that whenever he heard a person talking about someone else, he always kept one ear closed, which he reserved for listening to the other person's side of the story. Let's remember to do this as we hear a synopsis of Koehler's sentiments about what led to his departure from the seminary.

J. P. Koehler and August Pieper attended Northwestern College in Watertown, followed by three years of seminary training under Dr. C. F. W. Walther at Concordia Seminary, St. Louis. Their seminary years partially coincided with the Missouri Synod's agreement with the Wisconsin Synod to train Wisconsin's seminary students. Both Pieper and Koehler must have thoroughly enjoyed studying under Walther at St. Louis, for when this synodical agreement ended in 1878, when the Wisconsin Synod reopened its own seminary in Milwaukee, both August Pieper and J. P. Koehler opted to complete their seminary training in St. Louis. The Watertown and St. Louis years made Pieper and Koehler schoolmates and friends.

The first pages of Koehler's reminiscences reveal how relations between him and August Pieper began to go south. Koehler had recommended Pieper to be Prof. Eugene Notz's successor at the Wauwatosa seminary. According to Koehler, August Pieper wanted his brother Reinhold to be his successor at St. Marcus in Milwaukee, but when he consulted Koehler about this, Koehler thought it was inappropriate for Pieper to take such a position. (p. 2) Friction between Koehler and Pieper seemed to increase as the two of them began to work together more and more on various projects. On pages 2-4, Koehler describes how he felt the friction between him and Pieper increased as the two worked toward the success of the old Milwaukee Lutheran High School, in regard to articles in the *Quartalschrift*, and when they attended intersynodical conferences together.

Koehler relates at length on the tensions and disagreements his exegetical conclusions caused with the St. Louis faculty and with Missouri men in general. Koehler drew the ire of Franz Pieper and other Missouri men for his interpretation of the "analogy of faith" passage of Romans 12:6. Koehler relates that after the inception of the *Quartalschrift*, eyebrows and sometimes tempers were raised at St. Louis over a number of Koehler's articles. As a result of a number of intersynodical discussions and sometimes disagreements, Koehler then tells the story of the origin of the Wauwatosa Theology:

It is not a fact, as Aug. Pieper had made it appear after his final break with Koehler in 1929, that a conflict had developed between the historical point of view and a justifiable dogmatical presentation, but rather it had become quite obvious, after the Predestination Controversy, that a pragmatic dogmatism had set in, which aimed principally at keeping the peace. An anti-dote against this dogmatism, Bible-study had been recommended, and so the historical disciplines came into their own, and the historical viewpoint (at least at Wauwatosa .K.K.) was brought to bear on every branch of learning, as it properly should. (p. 7)

The K.K. reference is an editorial comment by the editor of Prof. J. P. Koehler's reminiscences, his son Kurt Koehler. The younger Koehler's comments are marked off in parentheses. Sometimes they offer helpful explanations, but many times they are downright caustic. Koehler rightly credits himself with being the originator of the Wauwatosa Theology, but also relates that other Wauwatosa faculty members made significant contributions:

This clarifying and foundation-laying work naturally had devolved upon Koehler, who was the first to have uttered the most fundamental thoughts about all these things, and in all directions. Pieper, Schaller, the two Meyers and Henkel, then followed with elaborating the individual ideas. (p. 8)

Beginning on page nine of his reminiscences, Koehler describes his training as an artist. It was far more extensive than probably anyone in the Wisconsin Synod ever realized. Koehler describes how his father, Philipp Koehler gave him systematic drawing instructions, followed by further training in college and later from three professional artists in the Milwaukee area: Jakobs, Viansen, and Lorenz. He further tells about his interest in arts and music and his role in directing the Milwaukee A Capella Choir.

Beginning on page 13 and then running to page 25, Koehler speaks at length about some of the reasons why relations between himself and August Pieper were often acrimonious. Many of these involved personal relationships he and Pieper had with a wide variety of churchmen, on both the local and synodical scene. To really go into details in this section would extend this session long past its requested time slot. Suffice to say that since Pieper and Koehler were both heavily involved in synodical affairs, both obviously had plenty of stories to tell, and in this section Prof. J. P. Koehler relates plenty of his. One story is both illuminating and humorous. Koehler relates how after he had all four Pieper brothers as students, Dr. C. F. W. Walther is said to have remarked: “Franz is gifted and diligent; Reinhold is diligent, but not gifted; August is gifted, but lazy; Anton is neither gifted nor diligent.” (p. 14) Throughout this section of his reminiscences, Koehler makes mention of his frequent admonishing of various people for their wrongdoings, and he makes mention of what he perceived as August Pieper’s frequent grandstanding and electioneering in Wisconsin Synod politics.

Koehler’s reminiscences next include a fascinating fifteen page section entitled: “Beginnings of the Clarification of the Doctrine of Church and Ministry.” In this section, Koehler relates to the discussion and dissension between the Missouri and Wisconsin Synods concerning a number of church and ministry issues, especially concerning the divinity of the parochial school teacher’s call. Koehler recalls the point he made in regard to this question:

The divine aspect of the teacher’s office lies in the preaching of the Gospel of Salvation, which the schoolmaster practices, and belongs therefore to the sphere of the church’s call and duties. ... There is, as a matter of fact, only one office, but that is not that which today is the particularly so-called ‘Pastoramt’ (local ministry), but the *public* ministry of the Gospel. The distinct offices come into being from necessity, through the particular conditions existing at different times and in different localities. (p. 26)

Several outside of the fellowship of our Wisconsin Synod have accused Prof. J. P. Koehler and the other Wauwatosa theologians of changing the WELS doctrine of church and ministry after the death of Dr. Adolph Hoenecke. Koehler’s 1930 reminiscences reveal that in the years that he and Dr. Hoenecke knew each other, Hoenecke once remarked after listening to one of Koehler’s explanations: “These ideas sound all right, but they must be discussed some time in greater detail.” (p. 30) Later of course, the church and ministry issues were discussed in greater detail, after the *Quartalschrift* began to be published.

In the church and ministry section of his reminiscences, Koehler relates how some pastors in the last half of the 1890’s felt that Koehler should be accused of teaching false doctrine, for his position that there was not enough information available about the offices of the Apostolic church in order to establish with any certainty that the pastor’s office was the only divinely ordained office. Prof. Koehler’s position on the book of Job, that Job was not necessarily written by Job himself, and that Job might not have been a historical person but that the narrative might be a great parable also raised some eyebrows in the 1890’s Wisconsin Synod. (p. 31) The rest of this section of Prof. Koehler’s reminiscences relate to various issues and controversies involving church and ministry questions which were then being discussed in the Synodical Conference.

The final sixteen pages of Prof. Koehler's reminiscences deal with a variety of issues. Much ink is spent on the Pieper-Wente affair, a controversy involving August Pieper's brother Anton, and another Wisconsin Synod pastor named Wente. Koehler and Pieper's involvement in this synod controversy further weakened their already strained relations. Koehler also writes about a post-federation movement in the new Joint Synod to change its organization, which was instigated by some Michigan men. Koehler relates that he was again charged with false doctrine because of his "elaborations in Michigan about Christ's vicarious sufferings and its eternal implications." (p. 41) George Stoeckhardt, the St. Louis professor, this time interceded for Koehler at a meeting of the Synodical Conference. Another topic addressed in this section is the Wauwatosa faculty's reaction to World War I. J. P. Koehler's reminiscences close out with the venerable professor relating his experiences about how he responded to a number of educational issues that were confronting the Wisconsin synod at the time.

Professor John Philipp Koehler's reminiscences end on page 55 of the manuscript. Kurt Koehler's "ADDENDA" goes on for twenty-five more pages. The younger Koehler speaks about his father's dealings with several educators in Germany, the now almost forgotten "Mankato Affair" which involved Karl Koehler before his tumultuous teaching career at Northwestern, and a lengthy description of what all went on in selecting a site for the Wisconsin Synod's new theological seminary.

Part Two: An Analysis of Prof. Koehler's "Reminiscences"

Prof. Koehler spoke at length about a variety of incidents that occurred during his career in the Wisconsin Synod in his 55 page manuscript. The manuscript's editor (and further contributor), Kurt Koehler, admits on the second to the last page of the manuscript that "they are spotty in places, lacking some pertinent dates and facts which might have shed some light on some sections." (p. 79) Kurt Koehler raises the question that perhaps his father had in mind to further enlarge on these reminiscences later on. Whatever Prof. Koehler intended to do, apparently this manuscript of his reminiscences is the only one extant. The younger Koehler does make mention of Prof. Koehler's notes "about the Seminary Board's unholy dealings with him in the course of the controversy of the years 1924-1930." (p. 79) When reading this manuscript, which was transposed by Kurt Koehler and contained a fair amount of his own personal editorial comments, it is important to remember the circumstances, the time period and the manner in which these personal reminiscences were developed. These reminiscences were dictated by the venerable professor to his son during the year in which he had been suspended from teaching at the new Thiensville seminary, 1929-1930. Prof. Koehler obviously was bitter and disappointed that he was not allowed to teach in the very seminary buildings which he worked hard to help design. Prof. Koehler recited his sentiments to his own son, Kurt, who himself was either about to be or had already been suspended from membership in the synod for his alignment with the Protestants. In Koehler's *History of the Wisconsin Synod*, he demonstrates what a master church historian he was. His desire to be an objective historian is balanced by his interest and his love for the synod he served so faithfully for half a century. In these reminiscences, Prof. Koehler is anything but objective. Clearly he told his side of the story as he understood it to be. No overt criticism is meant by the previous statement, but it is important to bear this in mind when reviewing this manuscript for historical contributions and insights for this period of WELS history.

What historical contributions and insights does the recently discovered Koehler manuscript provide for students of WELS church history? The most significant contribution of J. P. Koehler's reminiscences is that it assists in explaining why events went so terribly wrong when the Wauwatosa faculty was asked to write a *Gutachten* of the Beitz paper. This was a conference paper written by a Pastor William Beitz which he read at St. Peter, Schofield, in September 1926, to the Chippewa/Wisconsin River Valley Joint Pastoral Conference which generated a tremendous amount of controversy and dissension within the Western Wisconsin District. Professor J. P. Koehler was an agent in the production of the evaluation of the Beitz paper, the *Gutachten*. He carefully read it, suggested some changes which were made, and then signed the *Gutachten*, whose primary author was seminary colleague Prof. August Pieper. The *Gutachten* severely criticized Beitz and his paper on a number of theological points. Yet after Prof. Koehler met privately with Beitz and further discussed this paper,

he withdrew his signature from the *Gutachten*, claiming that the Beitz paper could be understood correctly. A careful reading of the newly discovered Koehler reminiscences helps explain Prof. Koehler's actions more fully. Koehler reveals that after he and August Pieper began teaching together at the Wauwatosa seminary, relations between the two became cool, then strained, then acrimonious, and finally downright hostile. The essayist has grown to love and admire both J. P. Koehler and August Pieper from their writings and articles. It pains him to reveal to this assembly that two of the greatest seminary professors this synod has ever had often had a very strained and difficult working relationship. Consider this pathetic account of an exchange between Pieper and Koehler upon Pieper's return from Germany in 1910:

When Pieper returned from Germany, his first word to Koehler was: 'It is really true, no sooner am I gone than the Devil is on the loose.' (sic) Koehler: 'Not so, Pieper! The welfare of the church and the power of the Devil are not entirely determined by your presence or absence.' Pieper: 'That isn't what I meant!' Koehler: 'Of course not! But your words display a tendency against which you must fight.' (p. 40)

"Your words display a tendency against which you must fight." This one sentence reveals the crux of the difficult relationship between Koehler and Pieper. Both Pieper and Koehler were very gifted pastors and teachers, but there was quite a contrast in personalities between the two men, which has not always been readily understood.

The Koehler-Pieper axis is not a new topic in WELS church history. Every pertinent synod history makes some mention of it, but each time the professional differences between Koehler and Pieper are highlighted and the personal differences are largely downplayed. Two examples would be Pastor Mark Jeske's "A Half Century of Faith-Life" and Prof. Edward Fredrich's "The Parting of Professor J. P. Koehler and the Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary." Mark Jeske writes:

Both men had strong personalities and had developed loyal followings in the student body. For 28 years the Koehler-Pieper axis strongly influenced the Seminary, and events and people inevitably just aligned themselves between the two poles. While we would hesitate to use the term 'factions' or 'partisans,' it is a fact that students were prone to take sides over the teaching methods of the two men.²

In referring to Prof. Koehler's subsequent opposition to the *Gutachten*, Prof. Fredrich asserted in his presentation in this seminary chapel thirteen years ago:

Not all will agree with Koehler's assessment of the key issue in the controversy. Many like to think and say that the real problem was a J. P. Koehler - August Pieper personality clash.. This is an easy way out but also in the essayist's view a cop-out. Sparks can fly when two outstanding men teach side by side. ...

This is not to deny that there can be deep-seated clashes between two theological teachers over methodology or personality or teaching discipline. This is not to deny that historical explanations can never rest entirely on a single-cause theory. Other factors can and do play subordinate roles.³

This essayist agrees in principle with the point that both Jeske and Fredrich make, that J. P. Koehler's opposition to the *Gutachten* is what led to his removal from his seminary post. One would think however, that if Jeske and Fredrich had access to Prof. Koehler's reminiscences, each would have spent a little more time and ink addressing the issue of the deep and longstanding personal differences between the two Wauwatosa titans.

² Mark A. Jeske, "A Half Century of Faith-Life," WLS senior church history paper, 1978, p. 5

³ Edward C. Fredrich, "The Parting of Professor J. P. Koehler and the Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary," *WELS Historical Institute Journal*, Vol. 1, no. 2, (Fall 1983), pp. 39-40.

These differences were indeed a factor, perhaps a significant factor, in explaining and understanding why things took such a tragic turn at the Wauwatosa seminary at the height of the Protes'tant Controversy.

Why did two colleagues, each an acknowledged success in the parish, pulpit, and classroom, schoolmates at both Watertown and St. Louis, often have such a hard time getting along with one another? The answer is in the personal make up and temperament of the two men. The Koehler manuscript reveals that many aspects of August Pieper's personality deeply irritated and angered J. P. Koehler.

One could write a least a master's thesis on the persona of August Pieper. There never was before anyone like him, and there never will be another one like him. Those who knew him best, including many of his former students, remember him as the consummate dramatic teacher in the classroom, whose lectures were seldom forgotten. One of his former students related to the essayist one time that August Pieper had such an imposing appearance, that whenever he walked into the classroom, one felt you almost had to bow to him! Another of his students made this insightful observation: "August Pieper was very proud of the fact that he was so humble." Pieper had a tremendous command of Holy Scripture and was a great communicator of theological truth, as his Isaiah II commentary and the *Quartalschrift* demonstrate. Koehler reveals that Pieper was a man who exerted his powerful personality in everything he did. (p. 17) Koehler reveals that outside of the classroom, Pieper deeply involved himself in Wisconsin Synod politics, to the great dismay of Koehler. After describing an incident involving Pieper and the old Lutheran High School in Milwaukee, Koehler pronounces this verdict on his colleague at the seminary: "Here you have an example of how an unscrupulous politician is able to enforce his will." (p. 14)

"...he always had to be in the midst of things in a noisy way." (p. 43) Koehler thus remembers his colleague August Pieper. August Pieper's aggressive personality was in sharp contrast in Koehler's more quiet and reserved nature. Yet it must be stated that while the two Wauwatosa professors often clashed, there is other evidence that they learned to accommodate one another. After the death of John Schaller in 1920, J. P. Koehler was chosen by the seminary board to be the new director. According to Kurt Koehler, the announcing of this decision prompted August Pieper to abruptly leave the room, to the dismay of the seminary board. J. P. Koehler then explained Pieper's conduct "in the light of his long acquaintanceship with Pieper's ways." (p. 65) Koehler also remembers an incident when he and Prof. Franz Pieper bitterly squared off over the analogy of faith issue. After their angry exchange of words, August Pieper came to the defense of his colleague Koehler:

August Pieper then remonstrated with his brother that one ought not to weigh the words of an opponent in such a manner. Koehler, he explained, had a what can easily provoke a person, especially when one did not know him well. (p. 35)

The reading of Prof. J. P. Koehler's reminiscences reveal that August Pieper and Koehler were at their very best in the classroom, teaching future WELS pastors the wonders of God. Both of these Wauwatosa titans also made immense contributions outside of their classrooms, but both of them deserve some criticism for involving themselves in synodical affairs which would have been best left to others.

August Pieper was regarded by one of his Synodical Conference contemporaries as a teacher who "impresses his students with the Gospel as an intensely practical force."⁴ In WELS synodical affairs, particularly in the Protes'tant Controversy, August Pieper came off at times sounding and acting like the "Bullyboy of the Wisconsin Synod." But a careful reading of the newly discovered Koehler manuscript reveals that to many, Prof. John Philipp Koehler was viewed as the "Dutch Uncle of the Wisconsin Synod."

Prof. Koehler, as his reminiscences indicate, had a very definite practice of admonishing colleagues, synod officials and pastors when he thought they needed it. While it is certainly Biblical and Christian to be your brother's keeper, there is a very fine line between admonishing others for alleged wrongs committed and the charge of meddling. On the manuscript's first page, Kurt Koehler, in an editorial note, describes how his father admonished August Pieper in a letter J. P. wrote from Arizona, concerning Pieper's threat to leave the

⁴ L. Fuerbringer, Th. Engelder, and P. E. Kretzmann, *Concordia Cyclopaedia*. (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1927), p. 587.

synod. (pp. 1-2) Already back in 1882, as newly ordained pastors, Koehler remembers how he pointed out to Pieper the “impropriety of electioneering.” (p. 14) During the discussions with the St. Louis men, Koehler again reprimanded his colleague August Pieper when Pieper became bellicose toward his brother Franz, an act which Pieper seemed to scornfully resent. Pieper: “Just look at that gesture. That is enough to drive me mad.” (p. 35) In regard to the dispute between Anton Pieper and a Pastor Wenthe, Koehler took it upon himself to admonish the president of the Wisconsin Synod on down: “In a prolonged explanation he (Koehler) admonished synodicals, pastors, lay delegates, Bergemann, and Wenthe, that they could not do as they pleased.” (p. 50)

Koehler’s admonishing, even of the president of the Wisconsin Synod on the floor of a synod convention, however seemingly justified, never made him very popular with the Wisconsin Synod hierarchy. In his synod history, Koehler has some sharp words for pastors who become synod officials. Several times in his reminiscences, he refers to the officialdom of synod officials, especially Bergemann and Soll.

Another conclusion that can be reached from reading Prof. Koehler’s reminiscences is that the venerable church history professor was a man who was frequently misunderstood. As one reads this lengthy manuscript, one honestly comes to the conclusion that the cause of the Wisconsin Synod would have been greatly served if August Pieper would have taken a Dale Carnegie course and if J. P. Koehler had taken or retaken a fundamentals of speech course. Time and time again, one gets the very distinct impression that Prof. Koehler often forgot this cardinal rule of communication: “Do not speak in a way that can be understood, speak in a way that you cannot possibly be misunderstood!” Again and again in this manuscript, one reads how Koehler comments about how others did not fully understand him. In Mark Jeske’s monograph on the Protes’tant Controversy, it is stated that Professor Koehler made the observation that of all the seminary students he had over the years, only three students ever really understood him, and two of those were his sons, Karl and Kurt.⁵ On p. 29 of the manuscript, Kurt Koehler makes the editorial comment that his father believed that neither August Pieper or John Schaller ever “really fully understood him.”

Professor Koehler seemed to have an affinity with people who had a hard time being understood. The most notable example is William Beitz, the author of the Protes’tant “Magna Charta,” the Beitz paper. When one reads and studies the 1930 reminiscences of Prof. Koehler, one begins to understand more and more of why Prof. Koehler took the position he did with the Beitz paper and the *Gutachten*. Since Prof. Koehler found himself frequently misunderstood by members of his own synod, the essayist theorizes that Koehler, at his private meeting with Beitz, began to see in the young Rice Lake pastor a younger version of himself. A younger version of himself who was now under attack by the faculty *Gutachten*, whose primary author happened to be August Pieper! The fact that he himself felt so misunderstood was very likely the contributing factor to Koehler’s peculiar position on polemics: “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.”⁶

The final point of this analysis of J. P.’s reminiscences is to stress what an immense gift the Lord gave the Wisconsin Synod in the person of Prof. John Philipp Koehler. His departure from the seminary and the synod was one of the most tragic and regrettable episodes in WELS history, but this did not take place until after he gave the Wisconsin Synod a half a century of signal service. Professor Koehler was a “Renaissance man” if ever there was one. He was immensely talented in the areas of exegesis, history, art, architecture, and music. His beautiful paintings and drawings deserve the admiration of all, and the Mequon seminary buildings which he labored so hard to plan and design have received continuous accolades from both within and outside of the synod for their layout and beauty. One does not have to agree with Prof. Koehler’s position on the Beitz paper to appreciate his immense contributions to the Wisconsin Synod which continue to be a blessing to the WELS to this day.

In examining the newly discovered Koehler papers at the Concordia Historical Institute, the essayist found a reference which states that Prof. Koehler and his dear wife, Amalia, buried *four infant children* during their long marriage. This is a fact that everyone in the Wisconsin Synod seems to have forgotten. Now we know that during his years of service to the WELS, Prof. Koehler often served his synod with a grieving heart over

⁵ Jeske, p. 6.

⁶ John Ph. Koehler, “Analogy of Faith,” *Faith-Life*, XXV, (May 1952), p. 11., quoted in Jordahl., pp. xxvii-xxviii.

some very intense personal losses. This fact is perhaps one of the qualities to be admired most in the life of the Wisconsin Synod's premier church historian.

Part Three: An Application of Prof. Koehler's "Reminiscences"

What can we learn as both called workers and lay people from the reminiscences of Prof. John Philipp Koehler? As one reviews this reminiscences, one Scripture verse in particular comes to mind, 2 Corinthians 4:7: "We have this treasure in jars of clay to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us." God has entrusted the jewel of the gospel of his one and only Son Jesus Christ to sinful men and women, jars of clay to be sure. John Philipp Koehler reveals through his reminiscences that he and August Pieper and all the other contemporaries that he mentions are indeed jars of clay. His reminiscences truly demonstrate that the all-surpassing power of God is not the product of men, but its origin is from God. St. Paul told of his own unworthiness and frailty as a gospel preacher by labeling himself a clay jar, a vessel whose use was functional rather than aesthetic. The life of St. Paul, J. P. Koehler, August Pieper, and all of us are a powerful demonstration of the grace of God, that a treasure like the gospel can be preserved and promulgated through redeemed and forgiven sinners.

The reminiscences of J. P. Koehler must also serve as a constant reminder to heed the words of John the Baptist, spoken first in a slightly different context: "Christ must increase but I must decrease." Egos rise with talents, and the life histories of both J. P. Koehler and August Pieper are a sober testimony to that fact. Both could with complete justification be labeled as "prima donnas." Both of these two Wauwatosa titans had strong and proud personalities, which sometimes got out in front of the pure gospel of Jesus Christ, which each loved and sought to proclaim. Both at times forgot that for the sake of the gospel, Christ had to increase, and they had to decrease.

Koehler and Pieper may not have always gotten along well together on this side of eternity, and yet now they are forever friends who are now both gathered around the throne of the Lamb. We do a disservice to our Lord if we ever act like prima donnas in either our public or private gospel ministry. Let's instead pray to the Spirit for empowerment to put the cross of Jesus Christ and him crucified before the eyes of our people and those to whom we witness. We owe this to the sacrifice of God's one and only Son Jesus Christ and we owe it the life and work of Prof. John Philipp Koehler.

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