

The Doctrine of the Word of God According to the Wauwatosa Theology

Joel Pless¹

Between the years 1904-1929 in a suburb of Milwaukee, Wisconsin, a unique approach to both the study and the interpretation of the Holy Scriptures was developed. This hermeneutical method has been called the "Wauwatosa Theology" or the "Wauwatosa Gospel." Its originators were three men trained at Concordia Seminary, St. Louis. All were students of the American Luther, Dr. C. F. W. Walther. The Wauwatosa Theology received its name from the Milwaukee suburb where a Lutheran seminary was located which trained pastors for the parish ministry for what is today known as the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod. The three seminary professors who originated this approach to the study of Scripture were John P. Koehler, August Pieper, and John Schaller, the "Wauwatosa Triumvirate."

This article will examine the theological writings of these three prominent Wisconsin Synod theologians to analyze their views concerning the Word of God. We will consider the Wauwatosa theologians' view of the Word of God as the revelation of the will of God and the source and norm of all theology, as well as their views of the inspiration, inerrancy, clarity, and unity of the Word of God.

John Philipp Koehler, the son of a pioneer Wisconsin Synod pastor, unquestionably was the most original theologian the Wisconsin Synod has ever produced. He was called to teach at the Wauwatosa Lutheran seminary in 1900, in the fields of hermeneutics, New Testament exegesis, church history, and liturgy. He began the shift in emphasis in the seminary's curriculum from dogmatics to exegesis. Central to Koehler's approach to Scripture, later shared by both Pieper and Schaller, was the view that the Scriptures should be historically and grammatically interpreted on the basis of the original Hebrew and Greek texts, with no dogmatic or ecclesiastical presuppositions. This method proved to be the heart and core of the Wauwatosa Theology. Koehler's theological methodology started and ended with the Word of God as the source and norm of all theology and doctrine. In an essay entitled "Holy Scripture as the Basis of All Theology," printed in the 1915-16 seminary catalog, J. P. Koehler states that the "Bible is God's Word and is therefore the infallible basis of all theology."²

Koehler's schoolmate at St. Louis and colleague at Wauwatosa, John Schaller, in his dogmatic work, *Biblical Christology*, clearly affirmed in his introduction that all Christian doctrine has its source in the written Word of God:

This book discusses the doctrinal aspect of the very core of the Christian faith. It is an attempt to set forth, as briefly as may be compatible with clearness, precision, and comprehensiveness, what the Scriptures say concerning the redemption of Jesus Christ....As far as the writer can see, he has here discussed all that is really known to man on the subject of Christology. Following the fundamental principle of the Lutheran Church he has sought to assemble, in orderly and instructive array, whatever the Scriptures say concerning Christ and his propitiatory work. For Lutherans, nothing is theology but what is written in the Word of God.³

The Wauwatosa seminary's Old Testament exegete, August Pieper, declared in the foreword to the tenth volume of the *Theologische Quartalschrift*, the seminary's theological journal:

¹Pastor at St. John's, Rib Falls, WI, and Zion, Marathon, WI, June 4, 1996

²John P. Koehler, "Holy Scripture as the Basis of All Theology," trans. Philemon Hensel, *Faith-Life*, XLI, no. 5, p. 8.

³John Schaller, *Biblical Christology*, (Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, 1981), pp. 16,17.

The church of God stands and falls not by the word of men, but by the Word of God alone... Now this Word stands in authentic form in Holy Scripture alone. Therefore it is alone the true source and norm of theology.⁴

The reason why the Wauwatosa theologians viewed the Word of God as the source and norm of theology is that they regarded the Scriptures as the revelation of the will of God. In his *Book of Books*, a biblical introduction textbook prepared especially for future parochial school teachers, John Schaller writes: "Summarizing the witness of the Bible itself as to its content, we declare that it is the Word of God."⁵ In a *Quartalschrift* article first published in 1916 entitled "The Hidden God," Schaller writes at length on the scriptural truth that there is much that mere mortal man does not know about God. The fullest revelation of God appeared in the God-man, Jesus Christ, and yet Schaller notes, "This revealed God remains at the same time a hidden God."⁶ Yet Schaller begins his essay with the reminder that God has given his revelation and his will to us in the pages of the Bible:

In the holy Scripture we enjoy the possession of God's revelation The Bible also contains much information about God's nature, his will, and his dealings. We could never exhaust the riches of this revelation in our preaching, or even comprehend it in our own thoughts and ponder the magnitude of it all. In connection with this revelation, then, it becomes very clear that if the Scripture does not become an effective revelation leading to a correct understanding of God and his will for someone, the reason invariably lies in the fallen nature of man. In view of the grandeur of the revelation which God has given us in the Scriptures, we simply call the entire sacred book, "the revelation of God," and properly so.⁷

J. P. Koehler taught hermeneutics to an entire generation of pastors before his tragic departure as a result of the Protestant Controversy. In mimeographed seminary notes entitled "Biblical Hermeneutics," Koehler states that although the Bible is written in human language which flows from human thought processes, it is still God's revelation. The exegete must then approach the Word of God differently than other literature: "The fact that it is God's revelation makes us approach the thought processes of the sacred writers somewhat differently than we do those of other writers."⁸ August Pieper highlighted the Wauwatosa triumvirate's position that Scripture is the very revelation of the mind and will of God at the height of the church and ministry controversy with the Missouri Synod during the early decades of the twentieth century. He wrote in a *Quartalschrift* article:

Where God's word is concerned only one principle applies to us poor human beings: "Speak, Lord; your servant is listening." The highest and most difficult skill in theology is to set aside one's own thoughts and to deny one's own wisdom; to believe and obey every word of God, even in the face of deeply ingrained and beloved prejudices. And especially those who daily increase in knowledge must daily learn this skill anew.⁹

The Wauwatosa triumvirate had no use whatsoever for negative biblical criticism and its proponents. All three of them strenuously opposed it in their classroom teaching, through their *Quartalschrift* articles and publications, and in their various conference papers and convention essays. For the Wauwatosa men, the correct

⁴August Pieper, "Vorwort zum zehnten Jahrgang," *Theologische Quartalschrift*, 10, (1913), p. 1.

⁵John Schaller, *The Book of Books*, (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1918), p. 5.

⁶John Schaller, "The Hidden God," trans. John C. Jeske, *Our Great Heritage*, vol. I, ed. Lyle E. Lange, (Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, 1991), p. 440.

⁷Schaller, "The Hidden God," p. 439.

⁸John P. Koehler, "Biblical Hermeneutics," traps. E. E. Sauer, *Faith-Life*, XXVIII, no. 10, p. 10.

⁹August Pieper, "Concerning the Doctrine of the Church and of its Ministry, with Special Reference to the Synod and its Discipline," traps. Heinrich Vogel, *Our Great Heritage*, vol. III, ed. Lyle E. Lange, (Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, 1991), p. 337.

method of biblical hermeneutics was the historical-grammatical-exegetical method, a term which Koehler originated to describe the fresh approach to the Scriptures used at the Wauwatosa seminary beginning at the turn of the century.

Central to the Wauwatosa Theology was the belief that the Bible is the inspired and inerrant Word of God. In his "Holy Scripture as the Basis of All Theology," John P. Koehler gave an exegesis of the three classic passages concerning the doctrine of inspiration.¹⁰ Schaller gave an excellent summary of the Wauwatosa seminary's view of Scripture in the first chapter of his isagogical text, *The Book of Books*:

Though written by men and in the language of men, the Bible is of divine origin because it was written by the inspiration of God. According to the testimony of the holy writers, they were not only told what to write, but were given the very words which they were to record....The Church of God has never challenged, and cannot challenge, this claim of the holy men....This is termed verbal inspiration.¹¹

The Wauwatosa men maintained that since the Word of God was inspired, it followed that it was also inerrant or infallible. Schaller states:

Furthermore, verbal inspiration guarantees the inerrancy of the Scriptures. Because every word of the Bible is given by the inspiration of God, the Holy Book is altogether without error, even when it makes statements concerning minor facts of history or science¹²

Koehler uses the term infallibility in his writings:

The, infallibility of Scripture extends to every single expression, and this assessment is established as the only Scripturally valid one by the "self-evident" tone in Jesus' reference (John 10:35).¹³

August Pieper, in his commentary *Isaiah II*, aptly demonstrated that the Wauwatosa theologians not only were well versed in the theories of the negative biblical critics of their day, but they also were very able to refute their arguments in a scholarly and convincing way. In his introduction to *Isaiah II* Pieper cites no fewer than forty Old Testament scholars, all of whom espoused negative criticism. He finds only two exegetes who "maintained an independent position," Klostermann and Franz Delitzsch.¹⁴

In answer to negative criticism's claim that Isaiah was the work of a cut-and-paste redactor, Pieper confessed: "The testimony of the New Testament has wholly convinced me of the Isaianic authorship of the whole book of Isaiah, and particularly also of Part II"¹⁵ He further testified, as Koehler and Schaller did, to his belief in the inspiration and inerrancy of the Word of God when he rejected the view that later editors substantially changed the text of Isaiah in certain sections:

I am convinced that even if such should be the case, then it was done according to God's will by men who were called and inspired by the Holy Ghost, and that the Lord's assurance that "the Scriptures cannot be broken" applies to the entire book.¹⁶

¹⁰Koehler, "Holy Scripture as the Basis of All Theology," p. 9.

¹¹Schaller, *The Book of Books*, pp. 3-4.

¹²Schaller, *The Book of Books*, p. 4

¹³Koehler, "Holy Scripture as the Basis of All Theology," p. 9.

¹⁴August Pieper, *Isaiah II*, trans. Ervin E. Kowalke, (Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, 1979), p. 35.

¹⁵Pieper, *Isaiah II*, p. 38.

¹⁶Pieper, *Isaiah II*, p. 39.

Another attribute of the Word of God confessed by the originators of the Wauwatosa Gospel is the clarity of the Word of God. Koehler states that "we must pray for the interpretation" while doing exegesis.¹⁷ Yet in his class notes on hermeneutics, he writes that God the Holy Spirit works through the words of Holy Scripture to work an understanding of his words.¹⁸ Pieper in his foreword to the tenth volume of the *Theologische Quartalschrift* refers to the Scriptures as "the clear Scriptures, which are for all godly hearts the revealed Scriptures."¹⁹

It was Koehler and Pieper who institutionalized the practice of requiring every Wisconsin Synod seminary student to study particular books in their original language, a practice that is carried out to this day. Pieper conducted exegetical classes in Genesis, Psalms, and Isaiah II, while Koehler's exegetical courses were Galatians, Ephesians, and Romans. Koehler over his years in Wauwatosa developed an extensive exposition of the book of Galatians which the Protestant Conference published serially in *Faith-Life*. Eventually his work was published as a commentary by Northwestern Publishing House. In this commentary Koehler maintained that salvation history is clearly revealed, while at the same time maintaining that the doctrine of salvation was not meant to be a finely pinpointed dogmatical treatise:

The doctrine of salvation is not a subtle system of connections of thought which we can prove to another by explaining to him the connections. It is rather a wonderful revelation of the wonderful works of God, to which we testify with the power of the Holy Spirit, with immediate certainty even if we cannot comprehend everything with our poor puny reason. Yet the truth remains that there is a marvelously fine, close connection in the thoughts of God. It is right, too, that we meditate upon this. However, the main thing is not meditation, but faith.²⁰

John Schaller, the son of a Loehe man, was not only called as the dogmatician and president of the Wauwatosa seminary, but was also assigned to teach homiletics and pastoral theology. His classroom notes eventually developed into a textbook, *Pastorale Praxis*. Schaller could write from experience that a pastor could bring about spiritual results in his ministry "only through the preaching of the gospel."²¹ Schaller and his Wauwatosa colleagues firmly taught the efficacy of the Word of God, its power to produce an effect. Schaller was well on his way to producing an English dogmatics when he succumbed to the postwar influenza epidemic in 1920. An excerpt from this planned dogmatics text, entitled "The Nature, Origin, and Effects of Saving Faith," also clearly testifies that the Wauwatosa men taught the efficacy of the Word:

The very nature of faith, which is confidence in God's Gospel, would force the conclusion that faith is begotten only by the preaching of the Gospel. But this is also plainly taught in the Scriptures. Christ asserts that his words, i.e., the words which He spoke as Savior, are Spirit and life, i.e., they are filled with the Holy Spirit who creates new life in the heart. Peter testifies to the same truth by declaring that the disciples believed because of these "words of eternal life" (John 8, 63, 68f). In his sacerdotal prayer Christ again mentions this instrumental efficacy of his Word which caused his disciples to receive, to know, to believe the Word. He also states that the Word of Truth is the means of sanctification, i.e., of all spiritual effects produced in man; and He is sure that this word will prove just as efficient to produce faith when preached by his disciples (John 17, 8. 17. 20).²²

¹⁷Koehler, "Biblical Hermeneutics," p. 10.

¹⁸Koehler, "Biblical Hermeneutics," p. 10.

¹⁹Pieper, "Vorwort zum zehnten Jahrgang," p. 6.

²⁰John P. Koehler, *The Epistle of Paul to the Galatians*, trans. E. E. Sauer, (Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, 1957), p. 80.

²¹John Schaller, *Pastorale Praxis in der Eu. Luth. Freikirche Amerikas*, (Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, 1913), p. 25.

²²John Schaller, "The Nature, Origin, and Effects of Saving Faith," *Biblical Christology*, (Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, 1981), pp. 274,275.

John P. Koehler is remembered as the Wisconsin Synod's foremost church historian. In his *Lehrbuch der Kirchengeschichte*, Koehler credits the beginnings of the early Christian congregations to the power and efficacy of the gospel: "Congregations became founded in all the world through the preaching of the apostles, and were held together only through the power of the gospel."²³ In his introduction to this text, Koehler eloquently proclaims that the power of the gospel is fundamental to understanding church history: "The chief article for the concept of ecclesiastical history is the rule of the gospel."²⁴ Koehler saw the efficacy of the Word in both his exegetical and historical disciplines. Finally, the three men who are regarded as the founding fathers of the Wauwatosa Theology saw throughout the pages of the Word of God a unity that could come only from each of the biblical books having only one divine author. John Schaller summed up the unity of the Word of God well at the beginning of his biblical introduction textbook when he wrote:

Though so many different men in so many ages of the world became authors of biblical books, the contents of the Bible are, nevertheless, so homogeneous throughout that every attentive reader finds its teachings to be altogether uniform from first to last. This feature, among others, makes the Bible a unique book, and points to its supernatural origin.²⁵

J. P. Koehler's outline on hermeneutics has this quotation which is central to truly Lutheran and biblical hermeneutics: "Christ is the center of Scripture."²⁶ He also writes that the unity of the Word of God is demonstrated by the dependence of the Old and New Testament on each other:

Although the fulfillment of the New Testament obtains light from the understanding of the Old Testament prophecy, yet it is described quite clearly and completely in the New Testament. On the other hand, the statements of the Old Testament frequently get their complete interpretation only through the explanations of the New Testament

August Pieper, as has been already noted, resolutely defended the authenticity and integrity of Isaiah. One prophet Isaiah authored the "Gospel of the Old Testament," with no help from a "Deutero-Isaiah." Pieper saw in Isaiah a unity that was also shared by the rest of the Holy Scriptures. He agreed with Franz Delitzsch's assessment of the prophet by confessing in regard to Isaiah 53: "It is clear that here the prophet is standing at the foot of the cross."²⁷ He further writes: "Our faith lets us see Christ everywhere in the Old Testament, even as He saw Himself there."²⁸ August Pieper, like J. P. Koehler and John Schaller, saw the red cord of redemption woven masterfully through every book of both the Old and New Testament by the divine author, God the Holy Spirit. For the Wauwatosa triumvirate, the Word of God had an inherent unity, for it was the wisdom of God written in human language to describe the mighty acts of God in his salvation history.

The Lord of the church gave August Pieper 39 years on the Wisconsin Synod seminary faculty, more than three times the length of Schaller's tenure and longer than J. P. Koehler's teaching career shortened by the Protestant Controversy. Commenting on Isaiah 55:11, Pieper testifies:

It is impossible that the Word should not fulfill its mission, for it is His creative, commanding Word, alive with His power. It is the Almighty God Himself in action, even as he performs His will in the rain and the snow.²⁹

²³John P. Koehler, *Lehrbuch der Kirchengeschichte*, (Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, 1917), p. 9.

²⁴Koehler, *Lehrbuch der Kirchengeschichte*, p. 2.

²⁵Schaller, *The Book of Books*, p. 3.

²⁶Koehler, "Biblical Hermeneutics," p. 7.

²⁷Pieper, *Isaiah II*, p. 47.

²⁸Pieper, *Isaiah II*, p. 51.

²⁹Pieper, *Isaiah II*, p. 489.

The Wauwatosa triumvirate of Koehler, Pieper, and Schaller left their mark on the Wisconsin Synod and on American Lutheranism in general through their strenuous emphasis on the proper exegesis of the Word of God over and above all other theological disciplines. The Word of God empowered them to perceive that the Scriptures themselves had a mission, that the Word was alive with power, and that the Holy Scriptures themselves were not only a record but also a reality of the Almighty God in action. For this reason, through their teaching, preaching, and writings, the Wauwatosa theologians confessed that the Holy Scriptures are the inspired, inerrant, and Christ-centered Word of God, having the power to bring about the salvation of all who believe that Word.

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