

John Philipp Koehler and the Exegetical Task: The Science and Evangelical Art of Biblical Hermeneutics

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It is truly fitting that the 2006 Bethany Reformation Lectures should explore “the exegetical task” since the Lutheran Reformation was, above all, built on the foundation of proper biblical hermeneutics.

Consider, for instance, the first of Martin Luther’s Ninety-Five Theses: “When our Lord and Master Jesus Christ said, ‘Repent,’ he willed the entire life of believers to be one of repentance.” Luther was simply exercising proper biblical hermeneutics by asking himself and others the question: what did our Lord really *mean* when he said “repent”? For too long the church of Rome had not used proper hermeneutics to answer that question.

Luther’s struggle to discover what the Apostle Paul meant by “the righteousness of God” was a hermeneutical struggle. As long as the reformer used the faulty hermeneutic he had inherited from the church of Rome, he wrestled mightily with those words. Once he took a proper hermeneutical approach it was, Luther recalled, “as though I had been born again, and I believed that I had entered Paradise through widely opened doors.”¹

When Luther was later called to account at Worms for his evangelical preaching, he asserted the same hermeneutical approach: “Unless I am convinced by the testimonies of the Holy Scriptures or evident reason . . . I am bound by the Scriptures adduced by me, and my conscience has been taken captive by the Word of God.”²

His famous debate with the Dutch scholar Erasmus over “free will” was much more about hermeneutics than dogmatics. Erasmus argued that Scripture itself – its *content* – is obscure in some places, even beyond the reach of hermeneutics. Luther granted “that many *passages* in the Scriptures are obscure and hard to elucidate, but that is due, not to the exalted nature of their subject, but to our own linguistic and grammatical ignorance; and it does not in any way prevent our knowing all the *contents* of Scripture.”³ Luther insisted that proper, biblical hermeneutics was the answer to this apparent Gordian knot. The Wittenberg professor stressed: “Everywhere we should stick to just the simple, natural meaning of the words, as yielded by the rules of grammar and the habits of speech that God has created among men.”⁴ Indeed, “the usual and natural sense of terms must be retained, unless proof is given to the contrary.”⁵

As a final example, consider Luther’s battle with other would-be reformers over the meaning of four simple words spoken by our Savior, “This is my body.” It proved to be a pivotal battle revolving almost exclusively around biblical hermeneutics. Against these fanatics, Luther again plainly asserted:

In Scripture we should let the words retain their natural force, just as they read, and give no other interpretation unless a clear article of faith compels otherwise. . . . Since these words, ‘This is my body,’ according to the nature and style of all languages mean not bread nor sign of the body, but Christ’s body, they must be allowed to remain there and not be interpreted differently unless Scripture requires otherwise.⁶

¹ Quoted in Ernest Schweibert, *Luther and His Times* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1950), 268.

² Quoted in Schweibert, 504-505.

³ Martin Luther, *The Bondage of the Will* (Old Tappan, NJ: Fleming H. Revell Company, 1957), 72. Or see AE 33:25.

⁴ Luther, 192. Or see AE 33:162

⁵ Luther, 263. Or see AE 33:237.

⁶ AE 37:270.

On one side, Luther was fighting a false hermeneutic employed by the church of Rome for a thousand years, only to be forced on the other side to fend off the false hermeneutical approach employed by likes of Zwingli and Karlstadt. As confessional Lutherans it comes as no surprise to us that – at its essence – the Lutheran Reformation has navigated the narrow straits of proper biblical hermeneutics.

Like Luther before him, Professor John Philipp Koehler (1859-1951) fought false hermeneutic principles in his own day, though in his case they were being employed within conservative American Lutheranism. In the course of this essay we will consider some of the hermeneutical battles Koehler fought, primarily through the pages of his seminary's theological journal, the *Theologische Quartalschrift*. We will explore how he led his seminary colleagues in calling American Lutheran theologians to reinvigorate the science of biblical hermeneutics, while also encouraging them to pursue its evangelical art. This historical overview will allow us to discover Koehler's approach to the exegetical task.

A Call to Reinvigorate the Science of Biblical Hermeneutics

In 1900 J.P. Koehler accepted a call to serve as a professor at the Lutheran Theological Seminary in Wauwatosa, Wisconsin, having already served eight years as pastor at Two Rivers, Wisconsin, and twelve years as a professor at Northwestern College in Watertown, Wisconsin. The fact that his arrival at the Wauwatosa Seminary coincided with the advent of the free conference era within Midwestern Lutheranism is a deeply significant backdrop to all that follows. These conferences gave the new Wisconsin professor a first-hand opportunity to observe how American Lutherans, especially in the Midwest, were “doing theology” and to consider how the differences in theological perspective and approach had arisen. In 1904 he outlined his initial observations in the first volume of the *Theologische Quartalschrift* with an essay entitled “The Importance of the Historical Disciplines for the American Lutheran Church of the Present.”

In this signal essay Koehler offered his historical impressions of how most of American Lutheranism had arrived at its twentieth-century theological method. He noted that “from 1840 to 1880 dogmatics ruled supreme in the theological efforts of the Lutheran church in this country almost without opposition.”⁷ That dominance arose, in his opinion, “because opposing positions and polemics were involved.” For instance, “[Pastor Johannes] Grabau [of the Buffalo Synod] had come to his position and his method in his struggle against the Prussian Union. [Pastor C.F.W.] Walther [of the Missouri Synod] had been moved by his pietism to take a stand against Saxon rationalism.”⁸ In offering these observations, Koehler was not being unduly critical. He eagerly acknowledged that “circumstances brought this about and in one respect it was a blessing. Firmness and clarity in confession and the right attitude toward Scripture were maintained thereby.”⁹

It should be strongly noted at this juncture that Koehler is often unjustly accused of disparaging the study and use of dogmatic theology. Those charges are simply unfounded. Koehler never advocated an emphasis upon the historical studies (exegesis and history) to the exclusion or denigration of solid Lutheran dogmatics. He simply insisted that a balance be struck, as an overemphasis in either direction will lead to ruin. “Where there is no balanced combination of the two, [historical studies] will result in a skeptical uncertainty which cannot quickly come to firm opinions; [dogmatic studies] will result in always insisting that one is right and show a fanatical zeal which is not always able to understand the other party.”¹⁰

Koehler noted that in the history of the church this theological balance had been elusive.

⁷ Joh. Ph. Koehler, “The Importance of the Historical Disciplines for the American Lutheran Church of the Present,” *The Wauwatosa Theology: Vol. III* (Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, 1997), 434.

⁸ Koehler, “The Importance of the Historical Disciplines,” 432.

⁹ Koehler, “The Importance of the Historical Disciplines,” 434. When Koehler's essay was “understood as a derogatory criticism of the Missouri Synod” and “taken to imply that Walther and his coworkers practiced a dogmatics which produces mental inflexibility and death,” Koehler explained how he was not “wanting to describe any one person or group of persons” (439). In particular, Koehler “did not want to say that Walther did not draw his theology out of Scripture and did no exegesis,” instead asserting that Walther “and his coworkers are Bible theologians” (441).

¹⁰ Koehler, “The Importance of the Historical Disciplines,” 429-430.

I am under the impression that very rarely can one find the same person gifted with both aptitudes in an outstanding manner. I find them both in Luther and would like to consider him both the greatest exegete and the greatest dogmatician. Otherwise, however, it seems to me that either one or the other activity is always predominant, and in my opinion in the great period of our American Lutheran church it was dogmatics.¹¹

The seminal event within American Lutheranism that led Koehler to this conclusion was the Election Controversy of the late nineteenth-century. Without rehearsing all the details of the controversy,¹² let it simply be noted that the early combatants on both sides – chiefly Professors F.A. Schmidt of the Norwegian Synod and C.F.W. Walther of the Missouri Synod – wielded mostly the theological sword of dogmatics. Only as the controversy deepened did Professor Adolf Hoenecke of the Wisconsin Synod lead the way in calling “attention to the necessity of making sure that careful exegesis received due attention in doctrinal controversies. [Missouri’s George] Stöckhardt put this into practice as teacher of exegesis and author of exegetical treatises and books.”¹³ Sadly, the stubborn reluctance of some to use proper biblical hermeneutics led to an early and later disintegration of Synodical Conference fellowship.¹⁴ Leigh Jordahl, who had numerous opportunities to visit Koehler in his retirement, asserted that the Wauwatosa professor “was thoroughly convinced that the disastrous effects of that controversy as well as the subsequent inability to overcome these effects themselves constituted concrete proof that new beginnings were necessary.”¹⁵

In 1904 Koehler outlined the pitfalls of dogmatics dominating the American Lutheran theological scene.

A degree of **mental inflexibility** (*Geistesstarre*) has begun to assert itself, coupled with a **hyperconservative attitude** which is more concerned about rest than about conservation. This is always the case at the end of a period of mental development. The masses get into a rut which has been worn by what had long been customary. In our case it was dogmatics. This mental inflexibility is not healthy, for if it continues it will lead to death. Both in the mental activity of an individual and of a community, fresh, vibrant, productive activity is a sign of health.

The **inertia** of which I am speaking shows itself in a **lack of readiness** again and again **to treat theological-scholarly matters or practical matters theoretically and fundamentally without preconceived notions**. This is necessary if we are to watch and criticize ourselves. For in the course of time, circumstances change and our views also change. For example, words and expressions change their meaning. And if we do not again and again rethink in detail the most important theological matters and our way of presenting them, it can happen that **all of this can become mere empty form** without spirit or life. As we practice such self-criticism, we shall find that the divine truths which we draw out of Scripture indeed always remain the same, but that the manner in which we defend them, yes, even how we present them is not always totally correct. Here we can and must continue to learn.¹⁶

Koehler’s remedy for these theological pitfalls should come as no surprise. He believed that historical studies would create the necessary balance. “Our theological students dare not be satisfied with acquiring a knowledge of dogmatics ... Exegesis and history have their proper place in the course of study and deserve to

¹¹ Koehler, “The Importance of the Historical Disciplines,” 442.

¹² For those interested in the details, see Joh. Ph. Koehler, *The History of the Wisconsin Synod* (Sauk Rapids, MN: Sentinel Printing Company for the Protes’tant Conference, 1981), 157-161; S.C. Ylvisaker, ed., *Grace for Grace: Brief History of the Norwegian Synod* (Mankato, MN: Lutheran Synod Book Company, 1943), 61-62, 95-118, 166-199; and Armin Schuetze, *The Synodical Conference: Ecumenical Endeavor* (Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, 2000), 91-112. For the Ohio-Iowa perspective, see J.L. Neve, *History of the Lutheran Church in America* (Burlington, IA: The Lutheran Literary Board, 1934), 207-221. An extremely helpful, recent study that details the theological antecedents of the debate is David Liefeld’s “Saved on Purpose: Luther, Lutheranism, and Election,” *LOGIA* 15, no. 2 (Eastertide 2006): 5-16.

¹³ Koehler, “The Importance of the Historical Disciplines,” 433. See also especially Jonathan Schroeder, “The Contribution of Adolf Hoenecke to the Election Controversy of the Synodical Conference,” <http://www.wls theology.net/vol2no2/SchroederJHoenecke.pdf>

¹⁴ The Ohio Synod, a prime mover in the formation of the Synodical Conference in 1872, dissolved its relationship with the Conference in 1881. The Norwegians also continued to struggle with questions about the doctrine of election for the next forty years, finally resulting in the infamous *Oppgjør* or Madison Settlement of 1912, which was nothing more than a compromise document.

¹⁵ Leigh Jordahl, “John Philipp Koehler, the Wauwatosa Theology and the Wisconsin Synod,” Introduction to John Philipp Koehler’s *The History of the Wisconsin Synod* (Sauk Rapids, MN: Sentinel Printing Company for the Protes’tant Conference, 1981), xx.

¹⁶ Koehler, “The Importance of the Historical Disciplines,” 434-435. Emphasis added.

be pursued in a deeply imaginative and earnest manner.”¹⁷ Koehler pointed out that the benefits of the historical disciplines went beyond the theoretical; they were eminently practical, working hand-in-hand with dogmatics.

While dogmatics promotes sharp thinking and ... leads to a clear, unambiguous presentation, both historical branches train the mind to probe, to criticize, to be cautious in judgment. They promote modesty, gentleness, and patience in judgment and thus in the mental attitude supplement what dogmatical study has produced.¹⁸

That the science of biblical hermeneutics needed new life within American Lutheranism became most apparent to Koehler when he began attending the free conferences that cropped up in the Midwest from 1902-1906. The doctrine of election was again the chief sticking point, and many of the veteran combatants reengaged, including Professors F.A. Schmidt (now of the United Norwegian Lutheran Church), Adolf Hoenecke, George Stöckhardt and Missouri’s *Wunderkind* theologian, Franz Pieper.¹⁹

At the Watertown free conference (April 29-30, 1903) Pieper was the featured essayist, presenting a paper entitled “Fundamental Differences in the Doctrine of Conversion and Election.” His presentation was said to have “elicited a wide-ranging, ‘rather haphazard’ discussion during the two days of sessions.”²⁰ When an Ohio Synod pastor questioned the St. Louis professor, suggesting that his essay did not square with the so-called “analogy of faith,” the man did so, Koehler noted, “without saying what this analogy is.”²¹ This was the crucial moment of the entire debate, especially since the men of the Ohio and Iowa Synods were making use of the so-called “analogy of faith” to defend their “darling doctrine” in this controversy, that is, the opinion that God’s eternal election took place *intuitu fidei* (on the basis of a person’s future and divinely-foreseen faith). Armin Schuetze explains what was at stake.

The Ohio-Iowa spokesmen defined ‘the analogy of faith’ as the ‘aggregate of Scripture’ (*das Schriftganze*). This consisted of all the important doctrines clearly revealed in Scripture. These are in complete harmony with one another. The analogy of faith comes into use when we recognize a lack of harmony between a less clear doctrine and the ‘aggregate of Scripture.’ The theologian then has the responsibility to interpret the passages on which the less clear doctrine is based in such a manner that the latter is brought into harmony with the clearly revealed doctrines or ‘aggregate of Scripture.’²²

While the Ohio and Iowa men conceded that the *intuitu fidei* concept is nowhere expressly stated in Scripture or the Lutheran Confessions, they could “prove” the correctness of their doctrine of election by means of the entire Scripture.²³ Especially prominent was the argument that if election was not somehow based upon foreseen differences within human beings, God’s grace would become arbitrary and no longer universal. The difference must be in man, not in God!²⁴ This so-called “analogy of faith” was employed to solve the conundrum. “Dr. Schmidt even went so far as to say that God gave man the ability to reason so that he might harmonize contradictory statements in Scripture. In fact, rational man not only had the right to do so, but this was his responsibility.”²⁵

¹⁷ Koehler, “The Importance of the Historical Disciplines,” 437.

¹⁸ Koehler, “The Importance of the Historical Disciplines,” 438.

¹⁹ The fact is Franz Pieper was already nearing his fifties by the turn of the century, but he had already by this time served as a professor of systematic theology at Missouri’s St. Louis Seminary for twenty-five years.

²⁰ Schuetze, 180.

²¹ Koehler, *History*, 212.

²² Schuetze, 183. See also Abdel Ross Wentz, *A Basic History of Lutheranism in America* (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1955), 215.

²³ Dr. H.A. Allwardt of the Ohio Synod stated: “It may be admitted that the writers of the Formula of Concord purposely left out the *intuitu fidei*,” suggesting that “when the Formula of Concord was written that term was not yet needed” (Neve, 216).

²⁴ In this assertion these theologians were following in the footsteps of Philipp Melancthon who argued that “there must be ‘in us some reason for the difference [that explains] why Saul is rejected and David is accepted, that is, it is necessary that there be some dissimilar action in these two individuals” (Robert Kolb, *Bound Choice, Election, and the Wittenberg Theological Method* [Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2005], 94).

²⁵ Schuetze, 183.

When Franz Pieper responded to the pastor's objection, he asserted that "virtually 'the analogy of faith' is the doctrine of justification with which every teaching must be in harmony." J.P. Koehler, who attended the second day of the conference, recalled the upshot of the debate.

[Not everyone] agreed to this answer, even though no one questioned the significance of the doctrine of justification in Lutheran teaching. So then, when the time of adjournment approached and the subject of discussion at the proposed fall meeting was under consideration, Prof. Koehler suggested "The Analogy of Faith" as the topic. At the second meeting [held in Milwaukee on September 9-11, 1903] there were as many opinions on the subject as speakers.²⁶

Especially disconcerting was the notion that understanding the Scripture correctly is somehow only the prerogative of theologians. Dr. F.W. Stellhorn of the Ohio Synod would declare: "The Christian doctrines form for the Christian, especially for the theologian, a recognizable, harmonious whole or system which is composed of doctrines drawn from perfectly clear passages of Holy Scripture. This organic whole is the highest norm of Scriptural interpretation."²⁷ Dr. Schmidt "referred Rom. 12:6 to the objective consciousness of truth" and explained that "it is the business of theology to bring the individual doctrines of Scripture into agreement."²⁸

Koehler's chief complaint with the entire discussion was that "no one had thought of carefully examining Rom. 12:6, where the phrase is used by St. Paul, and presenting his findings." The Wauwatosa professor did not hesitate to offer his take on the impasse: "The indiscriminate use of this principle in the attempt to explain the mysteries of Bible truth had served to emasculate some of its most vital teachings, e.g. the doctrine of election. The proper interpretation of the misapplied Scripture text became imperative."²⁹ Simply put, many Lutheran theologians since the Reformation seemed to be under the impression that it was impossible for the Scriptures to contain any logical contradictions. Common sense seemed to dictate that all the doctrines of Scripture must conform to a logical rule, and they appealed to Paul's words in Romans 12:6 in an attempt to support their idea of this "analogy of faith" as a rule of interpretation.

Koehler heartily disagreed. And so it was that, in the inaugural issue of Wisconsin's new theological journal, the Wauwatosa professor offered both the Synodical Conference and American Lutheranism their first taste of what would later be dubbed "the Wauwatosa Gospel." He did this by means of an epic essay aptly entitled "The Analogy of Faith," which Jordahl has described as Koehler's "clearest statement of hermeneutical methodology."³⁰ Most readers, both outside and within the Synodical Conference, would find the article and the daring Wauwatosa approach hard to stomach because it ostensibly "declared war" on a 400 year-old Lutheran tradition of using the so-called "analogy of faith" as *the* hermeneutical rule.

Koehler began his ground-breaking article by setting down what he saw as the opposing views of Scriptural interpretation found at the free conferences of 1903.

The Synodical Conference maintains that in explaining the so-called ... *sedes doctrinae* one may not ... deviate from the grammatical-historical sense that is immediately and clearly contained in these passages. And if these passages contain terms that according to our human understanding even seem to contradict other doctrines of Holy Writ, one may not modify (*umgestalten*) these terms according to these other doctrines ... Now it may happen that according to *purely human* understanding a difficulty is present which consists in this: that this doctrine according to our reason cannot be brought into harmony with other doctrines. Then it is part of correct interpretation and presentation of doctrine to establish this difficulty and make it known.

The position of the opponents is as follows: Not all doctrines are revealed with the same measure of clarity. The doctrine of justification is central to all doctrines and is unconditionally clear. It is not the case with the doctrine of election by grace. Now, the doctrines of Scripture cannot contradict one another, but must be in harmony with one another. It is, therefore, the task of the theologian to discover this harmony, which must also be recognizable to our reason, and present the doctrines in this sense. ... the expressions that contradict the clear

²⁶ Koehler, *History*, 212.

²⁷ Neve, 219.

²⁸ Koehler, *History*, 243.

²⁹ Koehler, *History*, 212.

³⁰ Jordahl, xxi.

doctrines of Scripture will have to be stripped of their usual, immediate meaning and be weakened or modified according to the pattern of other clear doctrines of Scripture. ... It is the purpose of this investigation to discover which is the correct manner of interpretation.³¹

By means of an extended exegetical study of the passage in dispute, Koehler first of all demonstrated that Romans 12:6 “furnishes no rule of interpretation.”³² Instead Paul’s point is that every Christian should use their God-given gifts as a member of the Body of Christ for the building up of their fellow members. Christians “should confine themselves in their prophesying, its content, scope, and exercise, to the measure or degree of faith with which they were endowed, by virtue of which they could exercise such gift through the Spirit; they should not try to go into higher flights of their own (Ro 12:3).”³³

Next, Koehler asserted that the Synodical Conference was taking the proper approach to biblical hermeneutics, “hold[ing] fast to the *clear wording* in all doctrinal passages of Scripture, [while] the opponents place *above this wording the analogy of faith*. ... We say that the exegete simply has no other duty than to say: ‘Speak, Lord; for your servant is listening.’” With regret Koehler added, “I cannot but charge our opponents with reading something into the text (*konstruieren*) although they deny this charge.”³⁴

Finally, as to the use by Luther and other church fathers of the phrase “the analogy of faith,” Koehler concluded that “what our fathers call *analogy of faith* frequently amounts to an explanation of Scripture by Scripture. But what does that mean? Nothing else than that we are not to say anything that conflicts with a clear Word of God.”³⁵

Later, when he reflected on these exegetical findings, Koehler expressed the hope that his essay would “have a general influence on us, not so much in the interest of our position in this controversy about the analogy as in the interest of stimulating us to an impartial style of exegesis.” He would opine that “the traditional interpretation of Romans 12 is for me a characteristic example of the style of mechanical exegesis that has come down to us from most ancient times, which does not correspond to the linguistic resources and consequently not to the claims that one today must place on the hermeneutical art.”³⁶

Not surprisingly, Koehler’s conclusions were almost immediately questioned. What is perhaps surprising is that many of his own Synodical Conference brethren disagreed the loudest, apparently resenting what they considered to be Koehler’s dubious depiction of the “Synodical Conference position.”³⁷ Koehler recalled the comments of his chief challenger, Franz Pieper, who “told my father-in-law that he was afraid that I was venturing onto dangerous ground which might threaten the Lutheran doctrinal position.”³⁸ Jordahl also

³¹ Joh. Ph. Koehler, “The Analogy of Faith.” *The Wauwatosa Theology, Vol. I* (Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, 1997), 221-222.

³² Koehler, “The Analogy of Faith,” 237.

³³ Koehler, *History*, 212. Koehler would no doubt look with favor on the New International Version’s translation of this phrase: “If a man’s gift is prophesying, let him use it *in proportion to his faith*.”

³⁴ Koehler, “The Analogy of Faith,” 242. Koehler’s regret is exposed in the next sentence: “It is embarrassing for me to say this.”

³⁵ Koehler, “The Analogy of Faith,” 244-245.

³⁶ Joh. Ph. Koehler, “Addendum to ‘The Analogy of Faith,’” *The Wauwatosa Theology, Vol. I* (Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, 1997), 272.

³⁷ Many, if not most, in the Synodical Conference adamantly believed that Romans 12:6 *does* offer a Scriptural rule of biblical hermeneutics, contrary to Koehler’s findings. The Wauwatosa professor noted that “while all agree in principle of how one is to teach and interpret, namely ‘in conformity with faith,’ one group [within the Synodical Conference] finds this instruction in Romans 12, and the other does not. ... But whoever on the side of the Synodical Conference believes that this rule is in Romans 12 still does not explain the passage in the same way as the opponents of the Synodical Conference. ... But,” Koehler added, “it ought not to be said on our side that one can take Romans 12 either way. The passage obviously has only one meaning, and I am certain that it is the one that was established in my article” (“Addendum,” 272).

³⁸ Joh. Ph. Koehler, “Retrospective,” *Faith-Life* 75, no. 6 (November/December, 2002): 17. This comment is also found summarized in Koehler’s *History*, 212. According to Koehler’s “Retrospective” Franz Pieper would never surrender his understanding of the “Analogy of Faith” (see *Faith-Life* 76, no. 2 [March/April, 2003]: 20).

reports that “the article received sharp attack including a formal protest, later ambiguously withdrawn, from the Faculty of Concordia Seminary.”³⁹

Even Koehler’s own Wauwatosa colleagues expressed reservations. In his 1930 *Retrospective*, Koehler recalled how “Hoenecke disagreed with [his] views because they were new to him. [Koehler’s seminary colleague and Franz’ brother August] Pieper made no reply at all, but it did cost him some effort to overcome his reservations later.”⁴⁰

Outside the Synodical Conference, opposition was predictably rabid. Koehler recounts how at the April 1904 Detroit free conference “[August] Pieper again tried to bring the subject [of the analogy of faith] up for discussion, but did not succeed. [F.A.] Schmidt, [F.W.] Stellhorn, and even Hoenecke and Franz Pieper were leery of it.”⁴¹ When Koehler was introduced to Schmidt at the conference, he was asked if he had been the author of the controversial article. “The affirmative answer elicited no further comment but the cryptic: ‘Well – so you wrote that!’”⁴² Koehler also remembered how an exegete of later fame, R.C.H. Lenski, approached him “for a private talk on exegetical matters and particularly on the ‘analogy of faith.’” The Wauwatosa professor “recognized the Ohio man’s deep interest in the subject ... The *intuitu fidei*, however, and ‘the analogy of faith’ were never surrendered by Lenski.”⁴³

One encouraging reaction to Koehler’s presentation was registered by his old St. Louis professor Stöckhardt, who told the author privately: “It was a good thing that you set people straight on that question of the ‘analogy.’”⁴⁴ Few others apparently agreed, however, and the simple fact remained that a vast majority had not been “set straight.” Koehler himself recognized that “it was not very promising for the future that many closed their minds to new insights that might have promoted a more original and independent study of the Scriptures and thus invigorated the life of the church.”⁴⁵

So was Koehler asserting that the Scriptures offer no guidance in the matter of biblical hermeneutics? Certainly not! The Scriptures give all the necessary hermeneutical guidance we need, just not any special “hard-and-fast rules,” as those who would trumpet the idea of an “analogy of faith” would have us believe. In Koehler’s observation such rules naturally open the door for modifying “unclear” passages so that they jibe – at least in our minds – with clearer ones. Sadly, Koehler witnessed this type of hermeneutical mischief being employed by not a few Lutheran theologians of his day. Naturally, this mischief persists today, an ongoing result of the devil’s work among us from the days of Eden.⁴⁶

³⁹ Jordahl, xxiii. It could well be that the “protest” to which Jordahl here refers was actually a protest voiced by Stöckhardt to Koehler’s essay of that same year, “The Importance of the Historical Disciplines for the American Lutheran Church of the Present.” See footnote 9 and Koehler, *History*, 212.

⁴⁰ Koehler, “Retrospective,” 17. Koehler outlines the nature of Hoenecke’s concerns. The elder professor “called his colleague’s attention to the fact that the article was in conflict with the practically unanimous opinion of the dogmatists regarding the use of two vital concepts of the Scriptures: *pistis* (faith) and *charis* (grace),” though Koehler also suggests the “Hoenecke did not offer his comment in the way of objection” (*History*, 212). The exact nature of August Pieper’s “reservations” about Koehler’s presentation remains unclear since Pieper would have seemingly voiced strong agreement with Koehler’s main point already at the September 1903 Milwaukee free conference. Here Pieper stated: “If in any passage of Scripture there is anything taught that I cannot bring into harmony with the analogy of faith, then I must accept it nevertheless and say, ‘Speak, Lord, thy servant heareth.’ Therefore, accused be such a principle that I cannot accept the declarations of Scripture in regard to special election [unless] I, *with my reason*, can see their harmony with the ‘analogy of faith’” (Neve, 219). Along with others in the Synodical Conference, Pieper contention with Koehler’s findings may have been that the former believed Romans 12:6 offered an “interpretative rule” (see footnote 37).

⁴¹ Koehler, “Retrospective,” 17.

⁴² Koehler, *History*, 212.

⁴³ Koehler, *History*, 213.

⁴⁴ Koehler, *History*, 212. August Pieper, Stöckhardt’s brother-in-law, would also report to Koehler, “Stöckhardt takes the same view on the passage as you do” (Koehler, “Retrospective,” 17).

⁴⁵ Koehler, *History*, 212.

⁴⁶ Hermeneutical mischief saw its genesis in the serpent’s question to Eve: “Did God really say ...?” Is Eve’s response the first example of the ruinous fruits of an “analogy” approach to hermeneutics, which draws logical conclusions but then naturally goes beyond the clear Word of God? “God did say, ‘You must not eat fruit from the tree that is in the middle of the garden, *and you must not touch it*, or you will die’” (Genesis 3:3).

To uncover the proper approach to biblical hermeneutics Koehler pointed – in his “Analogy of Faith” – to the examples of Jesus and the Apostles. Based on his study of their exegesis of the Old Testament, Koehler observed these two simple principles employed: “(1) Scripture knows of no right to force the meaning of a passage (*Konstruieren*), (2) Theological hermeneutics must return to the simplicity of the method as it is found in the self-evident, unbiased, general art of interpretation that everyone applies when he hears or reads another’s words.” In Koehler’s opinion, many people make biblical hermeneutics out to be more difficult than they really are.

Biblical hermeneutics are nothing but the application of the natural art of interpretation to Holy Writ. The laws of understanding, which are nothing else than the laws of thinking and speaking, must be applied to the words of Scripture exactly as to all other words, and are practiced by the unbiased simple man just as by the scholar. It is only reserved for a later development of science to deviate from these self-evident thoughts, and to make of biblical hermeneutics an artificially mysterious edifice of rules that only the initiated can apply because it is a matter of God’s Word. ...

We must understand that in the interpretation of Scripture no other principles prevail than those which every intelligent person uses when hearing or reading any word of man. There is only one special consideration; namely, that Scripture is God’s infallible Word.⁴⁷

From a “scientific perspective,” Koehler argued that the science of biblical hermeneutics requires no special rules. Koehler insisted that it was “a matter of prime importance to bring the hermeneutical method back to its natural simplicity,”⁴⁸ commenting that a child uses the exact same method “even before he can speak.”⁴⁹ In other words, stop making this more complicated than it truly is.

That Professor Koehler practiced what he preached is evident from a casual perusing of his scholarly commentaries on Paul’s letters to the Galatians and Ephesians, now available from Northwestern Publishing House in one volume. An interesting study can be made by simply comparing even Stöckhardt’s classic commentary on Paul’s letter to the Ephesians to that of J.P. Koehler’s. The reader will instantly notice a marked difference. Stöckhardt has copious quotations from other exegetes; Koehler has practically none. Stöckhardt spends much more time on the fine points of grammar and syntax; Koehler deals much more with the interrelatedness of Paul’s thought and the application of its saving truths to our lives as Christians. Stöckhardt reads as if he’s delivering a lecture aimed principally at the mind; Koehler sounds like he’s delivering a sermon aimed principally at the heart.⁵⁰

In his 1925 opening address to the seminary student body, Koehler expounded on the subject of biblical hermeneutics.

[He assumed that his audience would] very likely expect a hermeneutical discussion in the usual fashion, in which one speaks of language and objects, or of biblical philology and biblical history writing and their mutual influence upon the understanding of Scripture. We omit that here, because there is, after all, only *one* hermeneutics, only *one* art of interpretation in the world. As far as these things are concerned, biblical exegesis is no different from the exegesis of any other writing.⁵¹

This was certainly not meant to disparage the science of biblical hermeneutics. Koehler absolutely insisted that grammar and syntax are essential to good, Scriptural exegesis, but even they can become a wooden science apart from an historical appreciation of Scripture in which the history of God’s plan of salvation in Christ is the main theme (John 5:39,40). One must not make more out of this or any other “science” than is actually there.

⁴⁷ Koehler, “The Analogy of Faith,” 259-260.

⁴⁸ Koehler, “The Analogy of Faith,” 260.

⁴⁹ Joh. Ph. Koehler, “Biblical Hermeneutics,” *The Wauwatosa Theology, Vol. I* (Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, 1997), 207.

⁵⁰ Martin Westerhaus has also observed that in Koehler’s own work as a “professional” exegete he strove for simplicity. See “The Wauwatosa Theology: The Men and Their Message,” *The Wauwatosa Theology, Vol. I* (Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, 1997), 36-38.

⁵¹ Joh. Ph. Koehler, “The Connected Study of Holy Scripture: The Heart of Theological Study (2 Timothy 3:15-17),” *The Wauwatosa Theology, Vol. I* (Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, 1997), 107.

That said, there was no dispute that the “professional” exegete “must be well versed in the languages of the original text,” though Koehler certainly did warn “against a specialization which easily strays from intensive knowledge of Scripture.”⁵²

It would be awful, of course, if those who did not know Greek and Hebrew would not be able to grasp the message of the Gospel, but the professional teachers of the Gospel should make it their business to proceed with teaching the Bible truth on the basis of exegetical examination of Scripture’s statements, lest they get into wrong mental processes and into conflict with the Bible. And that applies not only to the original languages of the Bible but to the translations as well and all teaching of the Scriptures.⁵³

Along with proficiency in the original languages, Koehler emphasized the necessity of understanding the history and context of the author and his words. “If we do not know the author’s point of view and manner of expression, we shall again make our own manner determinative to the detriment of correct understanding.”⁵⁴ In summary, “a correct biblical hermeneutics is simply the application of the generally accepted rules of exposition to the Holy Scriptures.”⁵⁵

So, if the science of biblical hermeneutics is so easy, then why is it so hard? Why can’t all who claim to be Christians agree on every single point of doctrine, much less all confessional Lutherans? After all, don’t we all use the same Bible?

Naturally, differences will result when the science of biblical hermeneutics is not properly applied, but often there is a more fundamental disconnect according to Koehler, a problem which has less to do with science and more to do with art.

An Encouragement to Pursue the Evangelical Art of Biblical Hermeneutics

Christ’s words cannot be appraised, judged, or measured by reason. They are not to be probed and scrutinized by you. ... They are past finding out, beyond comprehension and above judgment. You must believe; only faith conquers and appropriates these words. Without faith you will forfeit them forever. ... Faith seems to be a trivial matter. But just try to show how easy it is, and you will discover that faith is a power of God and not of man. Though many assume that it is easy to believe, a Christian will say: How difficult it is to master the art of believing these words!⁵⁶

In a May 1531 sermon on John 6:64 Martin Luther put his finger on the jugular of proper biblical hermeneutics, exposing its quintessential challenge: “How difficult it is to master the art of believing these words!” Hermeneutics is much more than a science; it is primarily an evangelical art, a gift inspired by the gospel.

As only he could, the Wittenberg professor and preacher pointed out how, for instance, the Christmas story offers wonderful models of proper biblical hermeneutics in action; no “scientists” need apply!

For example, the teenaged Mary “held fast to the word of the angel because she had become a new creature. Even so must we be transformed and renewed in heart from day to day. ... This is for us the hardest point, not so much to believe that [Jesus] is the son of the Virgin and God himself, as to believe that this Son of God is ours.”⁵⁷ “If anyone has faith and thinks he knows enough, let him take a lesson from this mother.”⁵⁸

Dirtied and unschooled shepherds also serve as tenured professors in the seminary of biblical hermeneutics. “This is a great miracle that the shepherds should have believed [the angel’s] message. ... I know I would have appealed to common sense and I would have said: ‘Who am I compared to God and angels and

⁵² Koehler, “Biblical Hermeneutics,” 203.

⁵³ Koehler, *History*, 242.

⁵⁴ Koehler, “Biblical Hermeneutics,” 196.

⁵⁵ Koehler, “Biblical Hermeneutics,” 208.

⁵⁶ AE 23:177,179.

⁵⁷ Roland Bainton, ed. *Martin Luther’s Christmas Book* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1997), 15-16.

⁵⁸ Bainton, 43.

kings? It is an apparition.’ But the Holy Spirit, who preached through these angels, caused the shepherds to believe.”⁵⁹

Finally, the whole scene of salvation left the “scientist” within Luther stupefied.

Why does [God] do such preposterous things? ... Our common sense revolts and says, “Could not God have saved the world some other way?” ... The Christian faith is foolishness. It says that God can do anything and yet [it] makes him so weak that either his Son had no power or wisdom or else the whole story is made up. ... [God] sends, as it were, an earthworm lying in weakness, helpless, without his mother, and he suffers him to be nailed to a cross. ... God is amazing. The Babe is in a manger, not worthy of a cradle or a diaper, and yet he is called Saviour and Lord. The angels sing about him, and the shepherds hear and come and honor him whom no maid serves as he lies with an ox and an ass. If I had come to Bethlehem and seen it, I would have said: “This does not make sense. Can this be the Messiah? This is sheer nonsense.” I would not have let myself be found inside the stable.⁶⁰

The point of Luther’s satire is clear: proper biblical hermeneutics finally comes down to the proper attitude toward the Scriptures. What *attitude* will I take toward the very words of the Almighty God? Will I scientifically dismiss them as illogical nonsense, as inapplicable to my existence both here and hereafter? Or will I believe in the spirit of Mary (Luke 1:38) and the shepherds (Luke 2:15) that God’s Word is unequivocally true – even in the face of paradox and apparent contradiction – simply because it is *God’s Word*? Christian faith is the God-given keystone of proper biblical hermeneutics that Luther here identifies for us.

Almost four hundred years later Professor John Philipp Koehler recognized the same challenge and virtually echoed the sentiments of Luther.

To believe is the greatest art on earth ... [With faith] one can understand what all legal terminology about the agreement of God’s righteousness with his holiness cannot explain, that God forgives the sins of the sinner who clings in faith to the beloved Son of God. With faith one understands the greatest things in heaven, one penetrates through the Holy Spirit into the depths of the Godhead, by it one will then also understand the divine things on earth.⁶¹

While the science of biblical hermeneutics certainly has its proper place, as do all the other theological sciences, above all the art of biblical hermeneutics – namely, Christian faith – must be diligently pursued and humbly prayed for: “I do believe; help me overcome my unbelief!” (Mark 9:24).

Koehler pointed out that it is, of course, the Holy Spirit who alone freely and graciously grants such faith and understanding according to his own divine economy.

Behind the words of Holy Scripture stands the Holy Spirit. In a miraculous way he works the understanding of his words. This is accomplished primarily, of course, by means of the human understanding of the human language in which Scripture is written. But even here there is present the direct influence of the [Spirit’s] personality ... Here too, as otherwise, the Holy Spirit works where and when he will. Just for this reason this influence is hidden from our observation and judgment. ... We must pray for the interpretation.⁶²

Along with Luther, J.P. Koehler frequently observed how challenging it is to have and maintain the proper attitude toward Scripture, that is, humble faith. So often we ourselves are guilty of approaching God’s Word too casually, as though this Word holds not much more weight than any other word! But God’s Word is not just one life-approach or worldview in the marketplace of ideas “that we may take it into consideration, ponder it, and finally, according to our knowledge, make up our minds about it; rather, Scripture deals with facts, which we are persuaded to acknowledge and embrace by the power of God, even by the power of God in these facts.”⁶³

⁵⁹ Bainton, 40.

⁶⁰ Bainton, 40-41.

⁶¹ Koehler, “The Connected Study of Holy Scripture,” 108.

⁶² Koehler, “Biblical Hermeneutics,” 208.

⁶³ Koehler, “The Connected Study of Holy Scripture,” 105-106. Luther pointed out a classic example of the difference between these two approaches when he discussed original sin in the *Smalcald Articles* (III,1,3): “This inherited sin has caused such a deep, evil

The fact that God speaks in Scripture so that his truth attests itself to the heart ought to fill us with great seriousness, lest we use his Word wantonly, and again it ought to fill us with comfort and confidence when we recognize his grace. Thus the man of God is trained ... always immediately from the life of the Holy Spirit, who is working in him.⁶⁴

Only in an evangelical manner, by continually bringing these thoughts [about the truthfulness and seriousness of God's Word] into connection with the assurance of the forgiveness of sins, can we understand and discuss these thoughts aright, hence, not with the intellect alone, and not with the purpose of achieving results through strict logical reasoning ... The sole essential for the acceptance of truth is faith worked by the Holy Spirit.⁶⁵

Professor Koehler would no doubt have heartily concurred with the sentiments of a Reformation hymn later written by one of his students, Pastor Werner Franzmann.

In trembling hands, Lord God, we hold our heritage, your gift of grace,
Your gospel, bringing wealth untold: All blessings here, in heav'n a place.

"In trembling hands" – for how could we retain your gift by our own power?
The pearl of priceless worth would be soon lost – attend us ev'ry hour!

"In trembling hands" – with joyous awe, like Luther, we behold your Son:
For us he kept your holy law, in dying full salvation won.

"In trembling hands" – and yet we cling with grip of steel, which you must give,
To Christ, our all, our ev'rything, to Christ, the life in whom we live.⁶⁶

In direct contradistinction to this proper attitude of humble Christian faith is the attitude of dogmatic cocksureness that Koehler scorned both privately and publicly, especially as he saw occurrences of this attitude cropping up in his own life and in the lives of his Synodical Conference brethren.⁶⁷ How different this attitude is to the humility of faith! How vigorously we must fight against this legalistic inclination within our own hearts and in our own circles!

The attitude of cocksureness which, on its own, has everything figured out and thus in its back pocket, is not the same as certainty of faith, neither in manner of utterance nor in matters touching reliability. Cocksurenness on the one hand is selfish and loveless in its off-hand positivity, and on the other, lacks inner moral reserve, and in the face of surprise onslaught, it collapses internally. The certainty of faith, by contrast, is a rock-bound confidence which bases itself upon an alien message, and in fact, upon a message of alien grace, coupled with a modest recognition of its own deficiency, even in cognition and comprehension, and so, for all its confessionally faithful decisiveness, it remains open to discussion with other believing Christians. To a systematic temperament this conception appears to be paradoxical. And in a sense in fact it is paradoxical but so is human life in its entirety, also our Christian life down to its most intimate associations. Given the two-sidedness of our total being, comprising sin and grace, the divine and human, it could hardly be otherwise.

So far as I know, it is Luther alone who actually possessed this cast of mind sufficiently to live and speak and act from it as if dipping from a fresh well of life, and this is the measure of his greatness.⁶⁸

It is fascinating to note that Koehler's hermeneutical hero was still pondering this important matter on his deathbed. Here the great reformer summed up the only proper approach to God's Word and all faith-life: "Let no one think he has sufficiently grasped the Holy Scriptures, unless he has governed the churches for a

corruption of nature that reason does not comprehend it; rather, it must be believed on the basis of the revelation in the Scriptures" (*Kolb-Wengert*, 311).

⁶⁴ Koehler, "The Connected Study of Holy Scripture," 107.

⁶⁵ Koheler, "Biblical Hermeneutics," 197.

⁶⁶ *CW* 199:1-4.

⁶⁷ The most famous and insightful of Koehler's words on this important topic are found in his monumental "Legalism among Us," *The Wauwatosa Theology*, Vol. II (Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, 1997), 229-282.

⁶⁸ Joh. Ph. Koehler, "Church History Textbook," *Faith-Life* 66, no. 1 (January/February, 1993): II-III.

hundred years with prophets like Elijah and Elisha, John the Baptist, Christ, and the apostles. Don't venture on this divine *Aeneid*, but rather bend low in reverence before its footprints! We are beggars! That is true."⁶⁹

Conclusion

Luther's and Koehler's hermeneutical battles were not unique in the history of the Church, of course. Jesus himself was forever fighting the false hermeneutic principles employed not only by the "liberally-minded" Sadducees, but especially – and, perhaps for our purposes here today, more importantly⁷⁰ – by the "conservatively-minded" Pharisees.

To the Sadducees Jesus said: "You are in error because you do not know the Scriptures or the power of God" (Matthew 22:29). History suggests that these men were not particularly interested in either the science or the art of proper biblical hermeneutics.

The Pharisees Jesus also reproached on several occasions: "Go and learn what this means: 'I desire mercy, not sacrifice'" (Matthew 9:13); "You blind guides! You strain out a gnat but swallow a camel" (Matthew 23:24); "You have a fine way of setting aside the commands of God in order to observe your own traditions! ... You nullify the word of God by your tradition that you have handed down. And you do many things like that" (Mark 7:9,13). When our Savior was asked on one occasion, "What must I do to inherit eternal life?" he responded with the basic hermeneutical question: "What is written in the Law? How do you read it?" When Nicodemus failed to use proper hermeneutics, Jesus gently chided him: "You are Israel's teacher and do you not understand these things?" (John 3:10).

It was not that these religious leaders of Jesus' day were unscholarly or that they didn't know their Hebrew. In the Pharisees' case, they were even ultra-conservative scholars! It was not that these men had never pored over the Old Testament Scriptures with a fine-toothed comb. Jesus conceded that they "diligently study the Scriptures because you think that by them you possess eternal life" (John 5:39). Indeed, St. Paul would later observe how many "are zealous for God, but their zeal is not based on knowledge" (Romans 10:3), "having a form of godliness but denying its power" (2 Timothy 3:5).

So what was missing in their approach to the Scriptures? Proper biblical hermeneutic principles, which involve not only an understanding of the original words and grammar of the Scriptures within their proper historical context, but also require this key ingredient: humble, Christian faith worked by the Holy Spirit; yes, the attitude of young Samuel, "Speak, for your servant is listening" (1 Samuel 3:10). Jesus summarized his concern about the Pharisaical approach to the Scriptures this way: "These are the Scriptures that testify about me, yet you refuse to come to me to have life" (John 5:39,40). Later on, to some of his own wavering disciples, Jesus said, "The words I have spoken to you are spirit and they are life. Yet there are some of you who do not believe. ... This is why I told you that no one can come to me unless the Father has enabled them" (John 6:63-65). Paul would later explain how his message – yes, the message of the entire Scriptures – is "not in words taught us by human wisdom but in words taught by the Spirit, expressing spiritual truths in spiritual words. The man without the Spirit does not accept the things that come from the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him, and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually discerned" (1 Corinthians 2:13,14).

Simply put, proper biblical hermeneutics is not merely a *science*, requiring a keen understanding of language and history, an understanding that can be gained by any "biblical scholar." No, proper biblical hermeneutics is primarily an *evangelical art*, a gift of the Holy Spirit, a gift that, ironically, the Father often chooses – according to his "good pleasure" – *not* to give to the "wise and learned" but instead "to little children" (Matthew 11:25). A true understanding of God's Word does not come with a scientific pursuit by "the brightest and the best," instead it comes "with a demonstration of the Spirit's power" since God's "message of

⁶⁹ Quoted in Martin Marty, *Martin Luther* (New York: Viking Penguin, 2004), 185.

⁷⁰ I write "more importantly," because, in my opinion, our greatest temptation as conservative, confessional Lutherans is always to say more than the Scriptures themselves say, just as did the Pharisees of old. That John Philipp Koehler was of a similar opinion, see his "Legalism Among Us."

wisdom” is a hidden message, a mystery to the “wisest” of any age. “None of the rulers of this age understood it,” Paul comments, “but God has revealed it to us by his Spirit” (1 Corinthians 2).

My dear friends, along with Professor John Philipp Koehler and others, we must humbly recognize that our own proper understanding of the Scriptures is not primarily an understanding that has been gained by our great learning, ingenious thought and hard labor. Instead, it is an undeserved gift of God’s amazing grace, an evangelical art generously bestowed by God our Father (Matthew 16:17) through his Holy Spirit.⁷¹ “For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith – and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God – not by works, so that no one can boast” (Ephesians 2:8,9).

When this fundamental truth is forgotten – that proper biblical hermeneutics is not simply an academic science but primarily an evangelical art – the proper approach to and understanding of the Scriptures will soon be lost.

When this truth is remembered, then exegesis stops being a “task” and becomes our greatest and our only true delight (Psalm 1:1-3)!

⁷¹ That this has been the perspective of confessional Lutheran theologians and exegetes since the time of Luther see Robert Preus, *The Theology of Post-Reformation Lutheranism, Vol. I* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1970), 319-321.