

# Concordia Theological Monthly

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Volume 43

Article 49

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7-1-1972

## Johann Konrad Wilhelm Loehe

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### Recommended Citation

Meyer, Carl S. (1972) "Johann Konrad Wilhelm Loehe," *Concordia Theological Monthly*. Vol. 43, Article 49.  
Available at: <https://scholar.csl.edu/ctm/vol43/iss1/49>

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# Johann Konrad Wilhelm Loehe

—In memoriam

CARL S. MEYER

THE CHRISTIAN CHURCH THIS YEAR MARKS THE 100TH ANNIVERSARY OF THE DEATH of Wilhelm Loehe with gratitude to God for the manifold gifts He gave to the church in this man. As our part of this tribute we present the chapel address preached in his memory on Jan. 5, 1972, in the chapel of Concordia Seminary, St. Louis, by Dr. Carl S. Meyer.

We are met this morning to pay tribute to the memory of one of the outstanding Lutherans of the 19th century. Johann Konrad Wilhelm Loehe died 100 years ago on the second of January 1872. He was buried in the cemetery of the church he had served for 35 years in Neuendettelsau, Bavaria, on this day, the fifth of January, a century ago.

Loehe was one of the great preachers of the 19th century, an outstanding sermonizer and pulpit orator. He was known for his great pastoral heart, for his activities as a *Seelsorger*. He must be counted among the leaders of the liturgical movement of the 1840s. But he was also a theologian and a churchman. For all that few men played a greater role in meeting the social needs of the times, yet he struggled against the state domination of the church. To American church historians he is known as the "father" of two Lutheran synods in this country, the Missouri Synod and the Iowa Synod. In Australia he is held in grateful memory for supplying men to that continent. In New Guinea and in Africa the name of Wilhelm Loehe stands out as a promoter of missions. The story of his love for Helene Andreae, his role as her husband and as a father, and his devotion to his mother is another dimension for which he might be remembered today.

Loehe was a man of prayer. He died at the age of 63 — Luther, Melanchthon, and, according to legend, the Blessed Virgin Mary also died at the age of 63.

It is Loehe's life and activities that command our attention this morning. Where shall we begin? We cannot reproduce his spoken words, and his eloquence would be strange to us today. To say that he prepared his sermons carefully would not be singling out the distinctive features of his sermonizing. To say that he assiduously studied his texts must be to say that his sermons were Scripture-centered, textual almost in the extreme sense of that term. But he knew how to apply the text to the needs of his hearers, for he was their pastor. He knew when to apply the Law and above all the sweet voice of the Gospel.

This was true especially in his care of souls. He was the *Seelsorger* — I know of no English equivalent for that term. He was more than a counselor, more than a father confessor, more than a sympathetic listener. He knew his people and their needs, and he knew how to apply the Word of God to their needs, whether dealing with them as individuals or as a congregation. He introduced and cultivated the practice of private confession in his congregation. He so won the confidence of his people that they rejoiced because of

the blessings which were theirs because of private confession.

The word of absolution was for him a means of grace. And so it should rightly be regarded. The words of the Absolution were real to him: "Upon this your confession, I, by virtue of my office as a called and ordained servant of the Word, announce the grace of God unto all of you, and in the stead and by the command of my Lord Jesus Christ I forgive you all your sins in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost." The word of reconciliation had been entrusted to him, and that word he would make its very own for every believing heart.

The Sacrament of Holy Baptism was prized highly by him. Out of Luther's writings he gathered an anthology about the blessings of Baptism. By Baptism the individual was incorporated into the body of Christ. The Holy Eucharist meant for him not only a means by which God gives the forgiveness of sins and a pledge and assurance of His grace; the Holy Eucharist meant also that here was *communio*, a union with Christ and with each other.

Discipline, fellowship, and sacrifice were three key concepts in Loehe's program for the church. Discipline he understood as the mutual conversation and consolation of the brethren. Fellowship was demanded by their mutual relations within the church. Sacrifice was not only the sacrifice of praise and thanksgiving; it was also the sacrifice of prayer for others and with prayer the care for each other's welfare. Pastor and people alike would be aware of the need of discipline and fellowship and sacrifice in the life of a Christian congregation.

His pastoral concerns and his high re-

gard for the means of grace—the Word, Absolution, Baptism, the Holy Eucharist—made of Loehe a man who had a deep appreciation of the ordering of worship. In 1844 he produced a liturgy after studying some 200 of the liturgies of the church of bygone years. Ferdinand Walther had no great love for Loehe's liturgy; his brother-in-law, Friederich Lochner, outstanding as a liturgist among the first generation of Missouri Synod pastors, did. Liturgy for Loehe had to serve his functions as pastor to his people.

Loehe must also be reckoned among the important theologians of the Lutheran Church of the 19th century. His name has been associated with so many other endeavors that his importance as a theologian is sometimes overlooked. His *Three Books About the Church* of 1845 came partly as a result of the *Kniebeugungstreit*, a controversy regarding the bending of the knees in response to the command of the Bavarian court during certain rites of the Roman Church. The book was partly an outgrowth of his sorrow over his wife Helene's death. It came in the midst of some of his most important activities for the Lutherans in North America. Characteristically he began, "We are born into fellowship and into the church." He reminds us that "the fellowship of the church is one, both here and in eternity." He speaks of the unity, the ecumenicity, and the apostolicity of the church. The church has its glorious center, the authoritative and uncontradictory Word of God. He endorses what Philip Nicolai said about the expansion of the church in the 16th century. Loehe regrets the divisions among the various denominations, but takes their doctrinal differences seriously. "Therefore

the distinguishing mark of a church must be its confession." He writes: "Prayerfully to compare the human doctrine of a confessional article with the appropriate passages of Holy Scriptures is to question God in the light of the New Testament, and the Lord will not fail to provide the proper illumination and an answer." Among the denominations Loehe found the Lutheran Church preeminent. The Lutheran Church in its confessions, according to Loehe, retained the pure Word and the sacraments of the ancient church. However, Loehe insisted that the Reformation was not complete. The church dare not rest upon her laurels, he said. The church must learn to know itself, its doctrinal foundations, its place in the world and the meaning of its confessions, and its calling — so said Loehe.

Its calling? Yes, its calling was first of all to be the church—to proclaim the Gospel, administer the sacraments, pronounce absolution, hold fast to the truth. Loehe had his difficulties with the state government of Bavaria. He refused to be simply an ecclesiastical bureaucrat. His protest of 1860 was not altogether dissimilar from John Keble's sermon in 1833 which inaugurated the Oxford Movement. Throughout Loehe displayed his churchmanship and his pastoral concerns.

The church's calling was to him its obligation "to bear this cleansing, purifying witness in the midst of its confessions. This is the chief calling of the church of God which is called Lutheran. This does not mean, however, that it is not to carry the torch of the pure truth to all people, as far as it is possible to do so."

The church's calling compelled Loehe to heed the voice that came to him from

North America. Wyneken had returned to Germany and had described in a very graphic, emotional way the spiritual needs of the German Lutherans in North America. Loehe read that appeal and communicated with Wyneken. About the same time two men were available to go to North America. The first, Adam Ernst, he said should be a teacher; he was not gifted enough to be a pastor. He later became the first president of the Canada District. He sent other teachers and pastors, among them the first group that arrived in Fort Wayne for the pastors' training institute. One hundred and twenty-five years ago they arrived, and from their arrival stems the existence of Concordia Theological Seminary in Springfield, Ill. Loehe was ready to establish a teacher-training institution in the Saginaw Valley. He had helped to found the colonies of Frankenthum, Frankenthust, Frankenthilf, and Frankenthrost. His mission outreach extended to the natives of this country. Various circumstances frustrated these efforts. His missionary endeavors were in part at least the results of his pastoral concerns.

Among the pastors who organized the Missouri Synod in 1847 the majority were Loehe men. Loehe's greatest mistake in sending missionaries to North America to work among the German Lutherans was his intense love for the Germans. Wyneken's appeal had emphasized that the Germans in North America were being deprived of the Gospel. Loehe emphasized that there were *German* heathen in North America who had emigrated to that country. In the instructions he gave to Baumgart he pointed to the twin dangers which confronted the German Lutherans in America: that they would lose their Lu-

theranism and be alienated from their German ethnicity. Another Loehe man, Bürger, saw grave danger in the fact that the German language was being neglected by the children of the immigrants. There was danger in Loehe's eyes that the seminary in Columbus, Ohio, would become English and with that a Methodist climate would invade that school. When the school in Fort Wayne was transferred to the young Missouri Synod it was stipulated that German would remain the medium of instruction.

Loehe and Walther differed in their emphasis on the doctrine of the ministry. Loehe stressed that the office came from Christ; Walther that it was transferred by the congregation. Herman Sasse sees the difference between the two men as a slight one. Yet it was this difference that caused a break and caused Loehe to write a letter bordered in black. A lack of communion between St. Louis and Neuendetsau must be admitted. For us this day of commemoration can well be a day of penance.

One other aspect of Loehe's activities must be mentioned. He was the founder of a deaconess home, hospitals for men and women, a home for unwed mothers,

orphanages, and so on. Simply the product of the *Innere Mission*? No, at least part of the concerns of a pastor, a *Seelsorger*.

To sustain him in all of his various activities Loehe had to rely on a higher power. He found this in his prayer life. He also supplied devotional books for his parishioners and others. His prayers were often pastoral prayers, and the stimulation of the prayer life of his congregation was caused by his care of souls.

His "outreach" to other countries after his death — Australia, New Guinea, Africa — can only be referred to.

Loehe tells us, too, to serve with all the gifts God has given each of us in that place where God has placed us for His glory and with a genuine pastoral heart for God's people in that place.

Loehe does not belong to Neuendetsau or to the Missouri Synod or to the Iowa Synod or to New Guinea or to Australia. He belongs to all of Lutheranism, to the holy Christian church. His voice bids us still to heed the calling of the church — to discipline, fellowship, and sacrifice. Amen.

St. Louis, Mo.