



THE SPRINGFIELDER

December 1971
Volume 35, Number 3

Wilhelm Lohe — 100 Years Later

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WHEN WILHELM LOHE died on 2nd January 1872 in Neuendettelsau, he was a churchman recognized for his missionary and diakonal undertakings; as a theologian he had had far less success. In America his doctrine of the ministry had led to considerable synodical differences. In his own Bavarian Church there were hardly more than at the most two dozen pastors who in the stricter sense would have called themselves his followers. These theological friends still fought small rearguard actions against the church administration and the general convention after 1872. But the acceptance of Löhe's heritage by the Bavarian Church came about only with some hesitation. Löhe's successor, the Hessian theologian Meyer, attempted to preserve Löhe's work as an island in the ecclesiastical stream of the territorial church. If not isolation, then at least a noticeable distance was maintained over against all church practices that did not conform to the strict ecclesiastical-sacramental principles of Löhe. While Hermann Bezzel served as rektor, Neuendettelsau slowly merged into the life of the territorial church. From there Bezzel exchanged offices and took up that of the highest church leader in Bavaria. In his own person, he illustrates the change Löhe's work underwent beginning with the last decade of the 19th century.

As theological author, pastoral theologian, shepherd of souls, as one of the great fathers of the deaconess movement, and co-creator of the inner and foreign mission in the 19th century, Löhe gained many friends during his lifetime. His name, together with that of Ludwig Harms and Johann Hinrich Wichern, is mentioned most frequently in the biographies of those influenced toward Lutheranism between 1845 and 1870. Recognition of Löhe's accomplishments, unlimited admiration for his homiletical gift, emphasis of his pastoral charisma far outweigh any criticism of any of his individual theological claims and his sometimes pointed ecclesiastical decisions. Certain contradictions, or at least tensions, in the make-up of his personality were correctly noted by many of Löhe's visitors—and the stream of his admirers hardly ever abated.

Professor Friedrich Wilhelm Kantzenbach, Th.D., holds the chair of historical theology at the Augustana School of Theology, an institution of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Bavaria, in Neuendettelsau, the "home" of Concordia Theological Seminary, Springfield, Illinois. In this essay commemorating the 125th anniversary of founding of Concordia Theological Seminary and the 100th anniversary commemorating the death of the seminary's founder, Wilhelm Lohe, Dr. Kantzenbach depicts the churchman's personality and influence on the church. Unlike other seminaries, Concordia Theological Seminary's founder was always a pastor and not professor or professional theologian. His prime interest was providing for the worship needs of God's people. He was ahead of his time in providing for the needs of people in distress. Professor Kantzenbach is a prolific writer of both books and articles and The Springfielder is pleased to receive his hand of greeting on the seminary's anniversary. The theological school where he is now active was established in this century but all the religious institutions centering in Neuendettelsau can be traced to Lohe's influence. Concordia Theological Seminary is also proud to be part of this tradition. dps

On the one hand he had the personality of a domineering leader, a fighter and organizer; on the other hand he was a pastor who had been led himself and was leading his parishioners and deaconesses into peace, sacrifice and discipline. This variety of talents and functions, so diversified, yet combined into an impressive unity, was puzzling to many.

II.

In the chronicles of theology Löhe has not been treated as a theological expert but as an outsider, sometimes with greatest appreciation for his successes as father of the deaconess movement, but more frequently with critical and even disparaging judgments on his attitude towards the church. Martin Kähler, who generally judges him negatively, even calls him a "separatist." A few Lutherans, even a few Catholics, are aware that criticism of Löhe's supposedly "high church" understanding of the pastoral office does not take seriously the wealth of his theological thought or even begin to deal with it fully. In reality, Löhe's understanding of the pastoral office, compared with that of the Reformation, shifts only toward the concept of ordained minister, not in a "high church" fashion toward the Roman-Catholic conception of Bishop in the Apostolic succession. Of course, a pious reproduction of Löhe's theological conception is no longer adequate for our day. Still less would it serve the critical acceptance of Löhe's church heritage, if we were unthinkingly to claim Löhe for ecclesiastical and theological group interests, or if we were to caricature him as a saint who cannot be taken from his pedestal. Löhe would not agree with such an overly pious and unduly admiring restoration: "We dare not rest on the laurels of our fathers; to continue building on the ancient foundation, to keep going on the right path, this is truly Lutheran devotion. He who acts otherwise is probably expending his efforts on fashioning a coffin or a monument to the past, but no living generation can take refuge there" (Löhe in his preface to "Agenda for Christian Congregations of the Lutheran Confession," 2nd ed., pt. II).

III.

Löhe, born 21st February 1808, grew up in lower middle class circumstances. Except for a few months of fruitful activity in Nürnberg, where even the upper middle class, including the mayor and principal of the Gymnasium, flocked to his worship services and Bible study sessions, Löhe served only as Vicar and vacancy pastor in rural areas. His only pastorate was Neuendettelsau, where he served from 1837 to his death thirty-five years later. The lower middle class, rural situation of his charge prevented the full development of his ideas of Lutheran catholicity and ecumenicity. The call for ecclesiastical consciousness issued from an unknown and at that time indigent village in central Franconia. But Löhe did learn to accept his life's circumstances, and in his immediate personal environment and in the various branches of his work, he was influen-

tial far beyond his own parsonage and village church. Characteristically he began with missionary efforts in the diaspora and not with the deaconess institution, the founding of which came ten years later in 1854. It was not his fault that he had to act within relatively narrow limits. He knew how to make something even of the most modest of situations. There is nothing more impressive than the independence with which he got his way. That was evident already in the young boy for whom there was nothing more beautiful than the worship service, above all the Eucharistic celebration. This was particularly noticeable while he was studying theology. In 1826, barely twenty-four years old, he wrote in his diary: "Dear Fellow, your entire life has been a constant preparation for the pastoral ministerial life and it still is."

Löhe became acquainted with biographies of great men. Goethe, Novalis and Jean Paul, which he did not know, were at times subject of his studies. He loved Novalis. Hegel he passed by entirely. Schleiermacher he had found disappointing as an exegete while studying at Berlin, though he appreciated him as a preacher. His teachers were the Reformed professor and pastor Christian Krafft (born in 1784 in Duisburg), and Gottlieb Philipp Christian Kaiser, who in 1813 published a book reviewed by F. Chr. Bauer and who after 1816 developed his theology along the lines of the Revival Movement. Löhe's teachers, then, included a Reformed theologian who as university instructor was generally respected for his serious conviction, and an odd theological individualist who was interested both in the Biblical sciences and in pastoral theology, but found little response as instructor. The letters from Löhe's student days at Erlangen, beginning in 1826, repeatedly mention Krafft. In addition Kaiser should no longer remain unmentioned (see the unpublished letter of 19th March 1828, where Löhe gives his reaction to Kaiser). In Berlin the preachers Goszner, Strausz and Lisco seemed to Löhe to have something to say; on his own he read Arndt, Scriver, Spener, Tinsendorf, Francke, Lavater, Hamann, Claudius, Jung-Stilling, especially the Lutheran dogmaticians Hollaz, Gerhard, Melancthon, Löscher, and certainly not the least, Luther. "I know of no one of whom Löhe's spiritual maturity and depth in his youthful years reminds me more than of Hamann," said Gerhard von Zeschwitz 1873 in a memorial oration. He let Karl von Raumer, a pious minerologist in Erlangen, point out to him his sins. The treasures of the prayers and the faith of the church fathers introduced Löhe to the breadth of the Church of Christ, to her catholicity. With that he took up the pastoral office in 1831.

IV.

Löhe recognized immediately that as pastor he dare not let society turn him into a government functionary, which the Enlightenment had expected its pastors to be. In the case of the young Löhe the pietistic leaven no doubt also played a role. His understanding of the church is not yet dissociated from that of regenerated

ecclesiola, so characteristic of Zinzendorf. Certainly this may have had as a consequence some aloofness from "the world," but we must guard against imposing upon history artificial constructs, such as one making the rounds among us, that the spirit of the Revival Movement and of Neoconfessionalism affected only the Enlightenment. Löhe chose to take the road into the public arena. There were conflicts with the civil and the ecclesiastical authorities: The minister is an educator. As an educator, he must involve himself decisively with society. Löhe's favorite themes are the family, marriage among the poor, the education of children, the care of the emigrants and of those dispersed. Of course, one can regard this involvement as insufficient, but in justice it must be admitted that Löhe lived not among industrial workers but among a rural population particularly affected by the problem of emigration. Löhe was the way of the village pastor whose interest lay in dealing with the concretely possible. Wichern's was the same, though his opportunities were more extensive, and he was given an ear even in the Prussian Ministry of the Interior. Both men were pragmatists in the grand style, but both attempted to justify their work theologically. Löhe clearly worked for the spiritual-diakonal revitalization of the parish. Wichern, more far-ranging in his plans, attempted to Christianize public life.

A reactionary political stance was not a part of the strictly *ecclesiastical* basis for Löhe's missionary-diaconal labors. Much can be said against the stance of many Neo-Lutherans with respect to the Revolution of 1848. No doubt there is a connection between the "political Christ" and the theological-political struggle against the Enlightenment which Trutz Rendtorff points out in *Christentum Zwischen Revolution und Restauration*. Löhe does not fit into this context. The year 1848 promised Löhe the hope for politically and socially improved times. He, who always considered himself politically "liberal," had hopes for the Church's freedom from the state. There may be reasons to rethink the still existing ties between state and church and to think back to the noteworthy discussions that took place in the National Assembly in 1848 or to make a new start there. The motives of those who desired the church's freedom from the state for *ecclesiastical* reasons were legitimate at the time. *Kulturstaat* as envisioned by Rothean idealism was still far off. Löhe did not shed one tear for the old police state that just had passed, but even the "Christian State" did not fascinate him. There is no mention of the name of Frederick William IV, and with gratifying sobriety he wanted to have nothing to do with the pretentious mission of the "Christian State." An optimism such as that of Wichern was not in him. Löhe did not desire breadth at the expense of depth. He desired ecclesiastical-diaconal breadth joined with spiritual depth.

This is the tragedy of Löhe—the breadth of his perspectives combined with the limitations of his concrete possibilities for action. He did not achieve what in much painful struggle he wanted to bring to realization at least in Bavaria: the Confessing Church instead of the confused church. Anyone who has ever taken a look

at his "Song of Songs" for the church, his "Drei-Bücher von der Kirche" of 1845, which presents a vision of Lutheran catholicity emanating from its own spirituality, cannot impute to Löhe narrow-minded confessionalism but must trust in the ecumenical intention of his struggle. It appears that Löhe did not win that struggle. Nor did Löhe's idea of a "Union of Lutheran Christians for Apostolic Life" (1848) meet with success in the face of ecclesiastical reality. He wrote: "Basically our union would be nothing less than a new beginning for meaningful life in the church." The founding of the Deaconess Institution would not have been necessary if Löhe's aspirations had materialized. But: "With our union we planned something too big for us." And as late as the founding of the Deaconess Motherhouse at Neuendettelsau he insisted: "It is only for the time being that we settle here . . ." Discipline, community, sacrifice: these are the guiding principles in Löhe's suggestion for a return to early Christian forms of life in the 19th century. This is a program that continues to provide direction even in our day.

VI.

These elements found concrete expression in deaconess work, to which Löhe applied the innermost and most personal impulses of his heart. At age 24, Löhe's wife Helene died. He kept her in remembrance as an image of "womanly simplicity." In the villages of Franconia Löhe saw the uselessness of much of the activities of women, and taking the initiative he combined the spiritual with the practical and with the sociologically obvious. That turned out to be successful. The Motherhouse grew with surprising rapidity. It made a good name for itself all over Germany as a center for many branches of diakonal work. The spirit of Neuendettelsau attracted Pastor Bodelschwingh, who attempted to transmit some of that spirit to the Bethel Institution. Löhe said in 1868: "What I desired then and still want to do today is to provide this proof: Because my home (*Heimat*) held to the Augsburg Confession and we poor Lutherans held up the banner of pure (*ungemischt*) communion fellowship, the Lord did not exclude us from the work of the Inner Mission nor from the holy work of diakonal service. Despite all opposition for and near, He could and did advance our labors."

Löhe's diakonal ideal found its resting place in sacramental Lutheranism. Löhe saw at the altar the origin of sacrificial service. At the altar the Christian community begins, the altar is the necessary source of discipline in the Christian congregation. For this reason Löhe took up the cause of private confession, spoke up for a life that had regular recourse to the sacrament and promoted the liturgy. That Löhe "anticipated for several generations the liturgical movement of German Catholicism," was the judgment of the Catholic theologian Henry-Evrard Jaeger. For Löhe's community-centered spirituality the sacraments and the liturgy are decisive. We may, indeed we must, examine his conception critically. He calls the

doctrine of justification, for instance, the "most precious gem" of Lutheranism, but nevertheless all revelation of God culminates in the Sacrament of the Altar. Löhe is an organic thinker. On the foundation of the ancient church and the Reformation *he wished to go on further to experience the grace of sacramental life* (comp. F. W. Kantzenbach. *Gestalten und Typen des Neuluthertums*, 1968, pp. 81 ff). It would not be difficult to note some discrepancies when we compare his doctrines of the sacraments and the pastoral office with those of the Reformation, discrepancies which already the theologians of the Erlangen School or even Hermann Bezzel found quite problematic dogmatically. The Catholic theologian H. E. Jaeger justly observes: "The disproportion in the relation of Lutheran church life and the Lutheran doctrine of justification is only too evident in Löhe's spirituality. This caused the problem of a dialectic between Luther and Lutheranism to break forth anew" (*Zeugnis für die Einheit*, Vol. I: *Lutheranism*, 1970, p. 60). But even those statements which were so theologically questionable reflected Löhe's passion for the concrete expression of the Christian congregation as a diakonal brotherhood. On the tombstone of this greatest ecumenical witness of Lutheran character we can read the guiding principle that held him captive: "I believe in the communion of saints, the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body and the life everlasting."

God's concrete action must have as consequence the concrete deeds of Christian witness in mission, diakonal service and pastoral ministry. Löhe worked for and in all these concrete expressions of the Gospel. His work even today proves to be impetus and impulse because it did not root itself in purely theoretical reflection but in the realities of the church and of pastoral practice. Löhe can offer the pastor today, 100 years after his death, an extensive heritage for his critical acceptance. Pastor Löhe was active in a far flung parish that included two preaching stations, served as head of the Deaconess Institution and was spiritual confidant for a group of pastors. In the ecclesiastical struggles of his time he accomplished surprisingly much, and by means of his writings (approximately 10 extensive volumes have been published of his works to date) he still inspires many today. We will look in vain for someone like him in the history of the Pastoral Office in Germany—he is a man without convincing equals.

Concordia Theological Seminary in Springfield is also a fruit of Wilhelm Löhe's ecumenical Lutheranism. The sister institution at Neuendettelsau, sends its sincere greetings and good wishes. May Löhe's passion for the church and for the task entrusted to her be our common challenge.