

**The Legacy of the Norwegian Synod
Commemorating its 150th Anniversary
The Legacy of Jakob Aall Ottesen
and
The Enduring Legacy of Preus, Koren, and Ottesen**

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1. The Legacy of Jakob Aall Ottesen

Of the three fathers who have been shaped into a sort of holy trinity for the Norwegian Synod, the “forgotten” or less visible person of that trinity might be Jakob Aall Ottesen. Perhaps the metaphor is objectionable, and we might want rather to use the image of that Russian drawn carriage/sleigh, the troika. At least in the parochial boundaries of the Norwegian Synod, Preus and Koren both served as Synod president (the two holding forth from 1862 until 1910), while Ottesen was once elected a district president and declined to serve, and a year later was called to teach theology at Luther College, but declined that as well. Preus was front and center, along with Koren, in the election controversy which rocked Midwestern Lutheranism in the 1880s, while Ottesen primarily wrote articles and letters. In an even earlier time of controversy with other Norwegian Lutherans, Ottesen was co-editor with Preus of *Kirkelig Maanedstidende for den norsk-evangelisk-lutherske Kirke i Amerika*, the church paper for the Synod, and he wielded a great influence there.

J.A. Bergh¹ described some of the Norwegian church leaders in the course of a discussion of H. A. Preus: “Rev. H. A. Preus possibly does not possess the dialectic ability of his great co-laborer, Jacob Aall Ottesen, is not a diplomat like Rev. V. Koren, or an eloquent preacher like P.A. Rasmussen, or a persistent worker like Prof. Laur. Larsen, or a quick thinker like B.J. Muus, or as learned as Prof. F.A. Schmidt.” So, Bergh pegs Ottesen as the pre-eminent dialectician – the logician and debater – of the crowd. Dialecticians, those who get their arguments straight and present them forcefully, however, are also generally labeled as troublemakers or contentious, especially by those who cannot rise to their level. And so it was in Ottesen’s case.

Ottesen is only briefly memorialized in a biography, an article in *Kirketidende* by Halvor Halvorson, a close friend, which was later included in a little volume², *Life Sketches from the Lutheran Church in America*, We are going to try to get some insight into Ottesen and his contribution not through what others say about him, but through some specific literary contributions:

1. One of two assigned by the synod to visit some Lutheran Seminaries in the U.S. in order to find a place to train pastors, and author of the trip report.
2. As co-editor of *Kirkelig Maanedstidende for den norske-evangeliske-lutherske Kirke in Amerika*, and author of documents regarding lay ministry, slavery, and church discipline, and the election controversy.

¹ *Den Norsk lutherske Kirkes historie i Amerika*, Augsburg, 1914, p. 80, translation from Magnus Rohne, *Norwegian American Lutheranism, Up to 1871*, New York: Macmillan Col, 1926, 117. Bergh was a pastor of the Norwegian-Danish Conference which did theological battle with the Norwegian Synod.

² *Livsbilleder fra den Lutherske Kirke in Amerika*, Decorah: *Den norske Synodes forlag*, n.d., 259 ff. According to Rohne, Halvor Halvorson was the editor, but that is not noted in the edition.

Biography

Jacob Aall Ottesen, like Preus and Koren, came from an aristocratic family in Norway. His father, and grandfather had been pastors in Norway, though the family was originally Danish. Early 19th century Norway was in a time of turmoil and class struggle. The clergy belonged to the educated class, and were therefore considered aristocracy. Norway had been without its own university until 1811. Norway was under the Danish crown until 1814 when Denmark found itself on the wrong side in the Napoleonic wars, it lost Norway, which was then given to Sweden. The aristocracy was educated largely in Denmark, and consequently spoke and wrote in Danish, regarded as a more refined language than the often-uncharted dialects of the valleys and fjords. The two could understand each other, but their different languages marked them as being worlds apart. Like Preus, who had a German ancestor, thanks to the Hanseatic League, Ottesen as well had imported, Hanseatic, Danish blood.

The division was not only social and political, but extended to the church, where many of the laymen followed the spiritually egalitarian movement of Hans Nielsen Hauge, the famous lay preacher. In its more radical form the movement centralized the universal priesthood, but had little time for the trained, called ministry – often with good reason.

The immigrant church inherited that divide: the clergy were highly educated, and in some places the laypeople easily gravitated toward the lay preachers. Yet at the same time, the immigrant clergy, such as Preus, Koren, and Ottesen, were very easily and quickly adapted to the democratic ways of their adopted land. Ottesen like his confreres were born into that world. His father and grandfather were both pastors, both trained at the University of Copenhagen.

Otto Ottesen, grandfather of Jacob Aall Ottesen, graduated from the theological faculty at København (Copenhagen) and then was sent to Norway where he served as pastor in several places and married the daughter of a Norwegian merchant. The larger part of his ministry was as *sogneprest* (parish pastor) in Fet. His assistant, and then his successor there was Otto Christian Ottesen, J.A. Ottesen's father. Otto Christian, also trained at the university at Copenhagen served in several places and was married to Diderikke Aall, the daughter of a businessman, whose father was Jacob Aall.

Jacob Aall Ottesen was born at the *prestegaard* (parsonage) at Fet, Norway, June 1, 1825. Named after his maternal grandfather, in that christening was put together a string of names later to be joined to the Preus name, which has not been without reputation in the United States, being borne by a governor of Minnesota and founder of Lutheran Brotherhood Insurance, his son, of some fame in American Lutheran church politics, and, as I understand it, is now borne by a IVth.

Ottesen attended Latin School at Drammen, Norway, and from 1844, was a student at the young University of Christiania, where he first had the philosophy exam and then the theological exam. Among his classmates at the University were Ulrik Koren, O.J. Duus, and Nils Brandt, all important figures later in the Norwegian Synod. After being a candidate of theology, he taught for three years at Nissen's Latin School in Christiania, more on which later.

In April 1852, after he had been teaching at Nissen's for three years, Ottesen received the call to Manitowoc, Wisconsin, and was ordained on June 2 in Oslo by Bishop Arup, quickly followed by his marriage on June 11 to Catrine Tank Døderlein, daughter of a grammar school principal. Then came a ten-week trip to New York, on a ship with the foreboding name "*Incognito*," arriving in New York in September and in Manitowoc in October, where he served from 1852 to 1860. The majority of his service was from 1860 to 91 at Koshkonong, just west of Madison, Wisconsin, a far-flung parish, which was mother to many other congregations in the area, especially to the west. The twilight years of his service to the church were spent in Decorah, Iowa.

As a student, Ottesen seems already to have had a reputation as a keen mind. His graduation exams were all *laudabilis*, and Halvorson records the comment of a younger contemporary who "looked up with awe to the tall blond candidate, about whom they already were saying that he was a sharp dogmatician."³

³ *Livsbilleder*, 264.

Ottesen was one of the seven pastors who organized the Norwegian Synod in 1853 (C.L. Clausen, H.A. Stub, A.C. Preus, G.F. Dietrichsen, H.A. Preus, Nils O. Brandt, and Ottesen), having just arrived in 1852. Aside from his long service as a parish pastor, Ottesen's contributions are in the form of theological writing, particularly polemical articles in the church paper, first called *Kirkelig Maanedstidende*, but *Luthersk Kirketidende* after it became necessary to publish semi-monthly and weekly. He served several times in the early years as secretary of the synod, but a most momentous and far-reaching assignment for this young pastor came in 1857 when he was sent by the Synod (the resolution was passed at the 1855 convention) with Pastor Nils Brandt to visit some Lutheran seminaries in the U. S. The mission was to find a place to train pastors for the Norwegian immigrant church. From 1859-1868, he was co-editor with H.A. Preus of the church paper, *Maanedstidende*, which was the platform for a large part of his writing, much of it doctrinal and polemical. He wrote a brief history of the Norwegian Synod (to be distributed at the Chicago Exposition in 1893), as well as a series of articles entitled "A Look at the Missouri Synod."⁴ He translated Guenther's *Symbolik* from German to Norwegian, as well as Walther's *The Evangelical Lutheran Church: God's True Visible Church on Earth*.⁵

Ottesen had one son who entered the ministry, Otto Christian Ottesen, who did not outlive his father by many years, dying in 1917. Two grandsons, Hans Andrews Stub and Jacob Aall Ottesen Stub also became pastors, and had notable service in the merged Norwegian Lutheran Church in America after 1917. Their mother, Diderikke Aall Ottesen, was married to H.G. Stub, who led the Norwegian Synod into the 1917 merger. The young mother died in 1879, soon after the birth of her second son. The first daughter born to the Ottesens was named Hannah, but she died soon after birth, as did another girl. Including Diderikke, the young mother, the Ottesens left three children buried at Koshkonong. (Nils Brandt was married to a Diderikke Ottesen, who apparently was a sister of J. A. Ottesen.) One daughter lived to adulthood, also named Hannah, who lived with the Ottesens until the death of Mrs. Ottesen (Cathinka) in 1899, and Pastor Ottesen in 1904. Ottesen also had a foster son, Olaf Mandt, who lived with the family in Koshkonong for confirmation instruction, and then was sent by Ottesen to Luther College, and Concordia Seminary in St. Louis. After his ordination, he served in Baltimore, where he died after two years in the ministry.⁶

But that was not all the sorrow Ottesen left at Koshkonong. On August 10, 1891, the Ottesens were taken to the depot in Stoughton and took the train to Decorah, Iowa, where they would spend the rest of their lives. Ottesen's friend Halvor Halvorson notes that in the ensuing 13 years, Ottesen traveled some, coming as close to Koshkonong as Spring Prairie, (where he performed the wedding of his niece Cathinka Hjort to pastor J. Strand), but never visiting there. He was invited by the congregations often, and always sent a greeting for festival occasions, but never visited. It does not seem that this reluctance to return to the place where he had served as pastor for 31 years was rooted in a circumspect pastoral ethic to stay away from places one has previously served.⁷

While serving the three-point parish, West and East Koshkonong, and Liberty (near Deerfield), Ottesen confirmed about 3,000 young people. From that number, one can project an even larger number of baptisms, as well as a great number of marriages, and funerals. And there is a great deal of evidence that Ottesen was a dearly loved pastor among his people. In the late '70s, he was permitted to leave for several months to visit Norway, which included the final visit with his father.

But Ottesen had health problems. Early on, there is mention of his being sickly, and not always able to carry the full load of his ministerial duties. Certainly the East and West congregations on Koshkonong Prairie as well as Liberty congregation to the North grew rapidly, and one wonders how one man could keep up with that work.

⁴ "Blik i Missouri Synoden," [A Look at the Missouri Synod] *Maanedstidende* 1858 (1900 reprint), III, No. 5 & 11 (May & October, 1858) and IV, No. 1 & 2 (January/February 1859), written after attending the 1858 Free Conference in Pittsburgh. Sometime later, another "Blik" appeared, "Blik i General Synod," ("A Look at the General Synod") which was highly critical and noticed the total lack of confessional commitment found there.

⁵ *Den evangelisk-lutherske kirke, Guds sande synlige kirke paa jorden; et referat for Missourisynodens møde i St. Louis den 31te okt. 1860 og følgende dage. Overs. af J. A. Ottesen.*

⁶ *Livsbilleder*, 268ff.

⁷ *Livsbilleder*, 311 ff.

George Orvick reports what may be the recollection of Julia Reque:

Ottesen traveled a distance of 30-50 miles a day on horseback, in summer heat and winter storm. As a result of these strenuous journeys, Ottesen contracted chronic rheumatism which worked havoc with the nerves of his legs, so that it was difficult for him to talk or stand long. Because of this Ottesen was often forced to sit in the pulpit when delivering his sermons.⁸

This condition may have exacerbated another condition—there is some evidence that Ottesen suffered some depression, which might today be called depression and anxiety. In any case, even before the outbreak of full-scale doctrinal warfare, because of Ottesen’s illnesses, the congregations hired a “*kapellan*,” a curate or assistant pastor, which would have serious repercussions in the controversial years to follow.

The election controversy which began in 1877 took a toll on his condition. Ottesen wrote in 1885:

But I will add that in the last four to five years, I have been under a great deal pressure from sorrow and distress, both because of physical illness, namely, an often painful nervousness [*nervøsitet*], and also because of the emergency I saw in the congregation during the bitter controversy, which has gone on here in these years. No one will be surprised that during all this I have often been more despondent [*modløs*] and irresolute [*radløs*, indecisive] than I would have been otherwise.⁹

What he describes, mentioned also by others, appears to be an already existing condition exacerbated by unusually stressful circumstances.

The situation Ottesen describes is rooted in the election controversy, which has already been detailed in these lectures. The synod’s seminary had just been opened at Madison, Wisconsin. The first two professors were F.A. Schmidt and Ole Asperheim who had been the synod representatives at St. Louis and Springfield. Asperheim soon left and was replaced by Johannes Ylvisaker. Very shortly, Schmidt accused C.F.W. Walther of holding a Calvinistic teaching on election or predestination in a paper delivered in 1878 to the Western District of the Missouri Synod.

During the ensuing controversy, many congregations in the synod were split, but, it turns out, the closer one was to the hotbed and center point of the controversy, Madison, the more likely it was that a congregation would be split. Schmidt was a charismatic individual, and Ottesen and others describe a steady stream of seminary students visiting the congregations bringing Schmidt’s “anti-Walther,” and “anti-Missourian” (anti-Preus, Koren, Ottesen, Larsen, etc.) message.¹⁰

At congregation meetings in 1884, a resolution was introduced in which Ottesen was asked if he agreed with the position the majority in the congregations had taken supporting the teaching of Prof. Schmidt. If he did not, his services were to be terminated. The Curate, Pastor Ola M. Saevig, had taken a position opposite Ottesen, supporting Schmidt. The resolution said that “no other teaching about the doctrine of election shall be presented either from the pulpit or in confirmation instruction than what the congregation itself has taken and confessed as doctrine, which in our Lutheran Church is customarily called: election with regard to faith.”¹¹ The resolution then demanded that no one could serve as pastor of the congregation unless he accepted this. Ottesen, of course, explained that this was not Lutheran teaching and he could not teach it. When the vote was taken on the proposed resolution, it was a tie vote 66 to 66, and it was declared rejected. At a meeting in Liberty congregation, when another deadlock was apparent, two laymen produced a compromise resolution. Pastor Saevig had received a call to Wiota, and the compromise resolution urged him to take it. Then, since Pastor

⁸ George M. Orvick, *Our Great Heritage: A Popular History of the Evangelical Synod* (no date given, ca. 1968), 17.

⁹ *Kirketidende* 1885, (Vol. XII), 274, “*Fra Koshkonong og Liberty*,” Ottesen’s account of what led to a split in the three congregations.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, “*Kirkechrønike*,” 187.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, “*Fra Koshkonong...*,” 273.

Ottesen was in ill health, he would in the next year retire and the congregations would agree on calling a new pastor. Ottesen spelled out that he was prepared to resign when the congregations were able to agree on calling another pastor. And the resolution was then accepted. However, in the ensuing year, the congregations tried to agree on a call, and were unable to—everything hinged on the position one took on the doctrine of election. When at the next annual meeting, Ottesen had not resigned, those who opposed him took him to task, and he pointed out that the condition had not been fulfilled—the congregations had not agreed on a replacement. As a result, each of the three congregations split, with a close majority in each case rejecting the pastor who had served them for over 25 years. The groups that stayed with Ottesen then built anew: Liberty congregation built in nearby Deerfield while Ottesen was still there. West and East congregations' buildings were dedicated after Ottesen left, succeeded by M.F. Wiese, who served Western Koshkonong until 1917. At that time the East Church and Deerfield entered the Merger, and the Western congregation stayed out and became a founding congregation of the “Reorganized Norwegian Synod,” as it was called, which later took the name The Evangelical Lutheran Synod.

That was the consequence of Ottesen's refusal to go along with the majority. One of the distinguishing features of those who opposed the position taken by F.A. Schmidt, was that, although Schmidt and his compatriots were able to find expressions in the 17th century dogmaticians of Lutheran orthodoxy, and the various catechisms of the church, the “Missourians,” with Walther, went directly back to the Book of Concord and espoused the clear position set forth there, which they found to be in agreement with Scripture. The words Ottesen wrote years earlier were prescient: “May the Lord graciously revive this spirit throughout the entire Lutheran church, so that those who call themselves Lutherans may no longer wrangle over questions settled by the Lutheran Confessions.”¹² The doctrine of election was one of those matters settled by the Lutheran Confessions; and in Ottesen's mind, there was no reason why there should have been continued wrangling over it.

So, at age 66, Ottesen left the parish where he had devoted 31 years of service. He retained an affectionate relationship to those congregations—but he could not bring himself to go back even for an anniversary. And spent his waning days at Decorah, which by then was the new “nerve-center” of the synod. He wrote a few articles in *Kirketidende*, served on some boards, participated in the 1903 50th Anniversary Jubilee, and spent considerable time “up on the hill” at Luther College. In 1899 he buried his wife, and in 1904, he himself was taken to his heavenly rest. He was not a broken man, but his 52 years of service to the Norwegian Lutherans in America was filled with hard work, which contributed to ill health, turmoil and personal sadness. “There shall be no more death, nor sorrow, nor crying; and there shall be no more pain, for the former things have passed away” (Rev. 21:4).

J. A. Ottesen's Legacy to the Norwegian Synod

What is of chief interest to us in this essay is the theological legacy, especially the Reformation, confessional Lutheran legacy Ottesen left on the immigrant church he helped organize. One part of that legacy is fellowship with the Missouri Synod, which led to the formation of the Synodical Conference in 1872. We will see this in “*Indberetning*” or “Trip Report.” The other is doctrinal and polemical writings in *Kirkelig Maanedstidende*.

Fellowship with Missouri

Ottesen participated in the founding convention in 1853. At the time, he was a young, 28-year-old pastor, who spoke not only Norwegian, but German, and possibly some English. Of the pastors who had begun the organization of the Synod, C.L. Clausen and J.W.C. Dietrichsen were more or less Grundtvigian in their theological outlook. Grundtvigianism was the school following the Danish pastor, poet, theologian N.F.S. Grundtvig. In reaction to Enlightenment Rationalism Grundtvig called for a return not only to true Lutheranism,

¹² “*Indberetning fra Pastorerne Ottesen og Brandt om deres Reise til St. Louis, Missouri; Columbus, Ohio; og Buffalo, New York,*” *Kirketidende*, 1857, 476, For a translation, see *Pioneers Find Friends*, Carl S. Meyer, Decorah: Luther College Press, 1963, Appendix A, 63.

but to an earlier, better tradition in the church. A part of his theology elevated the Apostles' Creed to the status of being the Living Word of God, following the discredited tradition that Jesus and the disciples formulated the creed at the Ascension. Grundtvig's theology at its best could produce wonderful, orthodox hymn texts like "God's Word is our Great Heritage," "Built on a Rock," "The Happy Christmas Comes Once More," and others. But at its weakest it admitted theological ideas which could not stand the biblical test. Nevertheless, as a reaction against rationalism, ideas of tradition and Romantic nationalism were widely accepted not only in Denmark, but Norwegian pastors carried the idea home with them, so that the Grundtvigian Romanticism became widely popular in Norway, championed especially by W.A. Wexels, a highly respected pastor in Christiania, in numerous writings. The Grundtvigian movement was widely accepted as the salvation from Rationalism, until the anti-Grundtvigian party found champions in Gisle Johnson and Carl Paul Caspari of the University faculty. Dietrichsen, Clausen, and H.A. Stub were both under the influence of the more Grundtvigian party, and H.A. Stub was partial to Wexels' "neo-Grundtvigian" ideas. A.C. Preus, older cousin of H.A. Preus, was probably not so imbued with the Grundtvigian ideas, but may have been on the naïve side, and when the constitution—prepared by J.W.C. Dietrichsen, who before the 1851 meeting returned to Norway—was presented by Clausen in 1851, Preus didn't seem to have been troubled by it.

Others, perhaps some of the laymen were, and in any case, word quickly got back to Norway, so that H. A. Preus and G.F. Dietrichsen who came late in 1851 and 1852, were ready for battle when they arrived. They succeeded in 1852 in turning back that constitution. A.C. Preus, having been persuaded by his young relative, got the assembly to agree that the actions of the preceding year were merely preliminary, which in effect nullified that constitution and dissolved the organization in process. Ottesen was not on hand for that, though he had equally strong feelings about the matter. At a meeting at East Koshkonong February 5, 1853, Ottesen was present. This meeting revised the proposed constitution by removing the offending Grundtvigian clause, and established a procedure for adopting the constitution and holding a constituting convention. That happened October 3-7, 1853, at Luther Valley, Wisconsin. Hence, the Synod has celebrated its founding as having been in 1853, not 1851.

At the second regular (biennial) convention in 1855, a chief concern was how to provide pastors to serve the flood of Norwegian immigrants pouring into the upper Midwest. The pressure was on because of the decade-long loss of Norwegian Lutherans to the Mormons, Methodists, Baptists, and others, as well as the continued work of the lay preachers coming out of the Fox River, Illinois Norwegian immigrant settlement. By this time it was clear that there was not going to be a great deal of interest on the part of the Norwegian State Church—though the confessional revival was making itself felt there, the religious establishment was generally opposed to the migration to America, and frequently counseled people against emigrating.

In 1855, the Synod pastors, now numbering eight, proposed that they begin an institution of higher learning to train pastors. G.F. Dietrichson could even report that his parish had already collected \$1,600 dollars for the purpose. But the laymen were not quite so ready, and it was clear that they were not behind it. Instead, the synod resolved to send two pastors, the two young newcomers Ottesen and Nils Brandt, to visit some German Lutheran Seminaries. They knew enough about American Lutheranism so that Gettysburg Seminary of the General Synod was not a candidate. But they specifically designated Columbus University of the Ohio Synod, and Martin Luther College of the Buffalo Synod in New York. The trip report, published in *Maanedstidende*, is signed by J.A. Ottesen and Nils Brandt, but it appears that the chief penman was Ottesen.¹³

In 1851, there had been an overture from the Ohio Synod's school at Columbus offering use of their school for the training of Norwegian pastors. Partly because they were in the midst of organizing the Norwegian Synod, and partly because of things they heard about Capital University and the Ohio Synod—there were non-Lutherans on the Board of the school, and Ohio had at one point proposed union with the German Reformed Church. The invitation was therefore declined. Later, the Norwegians were in fellowship with the Ohio Synod when with Missouri, Illinois, Wisconsin, Minnesota, and Ohio, they joined in the Synodical Conference—though Ohio's membership ended in another decade because of the election controversy.

¹³ Meyer, 63.

In spite of the controversy over the Grundtvigian clause in the first Norwegian Synod constitution of 1851, the Synod already knew that it was staunchly Lutheran, which it expressed in article II of the constitution (both 1851 & 1853: “The doctrine of the church is that which is revealed through God’s holy Word in the canonical books of the Old and New Testaments, interpreted in agreement with the Symbolical Books or Confessional Writings....”¹⁴).

Several historical treatments¹⁵ have asserted that the Norwegian Synod first came under the spell of Walther and the Missourians, and then became hyper-confessionalists. The lie is quickly put to that by the statement found in the 1851 constitution. In 1858, C.F.W. Walther read his paper on Confessional Subscription where he outlined the strict, unconditional subscription to the Lutheran Confessions in similar words, four years before the Norwegians and Missourians had officially discovered each other. It turns out, of course, that the Missourians and the Norwegians had some common influences in Europe—much of which is traced back to Ernst Hengstenberg and Franz Delitzsch. The Norwegian professor Gisle Johnson met Hengstenberg in Berlin, who recommended Carl Paul Caspari, a brilliant Old Testament graduate from Leipzig, as a teacher at Christiania. Caspari was a very close friend of Franz Delitzsch at Leipzig, who had also been close friends with Walther. Hengstenberg edited *Evangelische Kirchenzeitung* as a vehicle for confessional theology, and it was quoted frequently in Walther’s *Lehre und Wehre*, and, it seems, was read by the Norwegians. It is certainly clear that Caspari and Gisle Johnson, who together translated the Book of Concord into Norwegian for the first time, would have known already in the late 1840s about the Missouri Synod in America and would have shared that information with their students, Herman Preus, Jacob Ottesen, Wilhelm Koren, Nils Brandt, Gustav Dietrichsen, all of whom became pastors of the Norwegian Synod.¹⁶

Thus, when, Ottesen and Brandt presented their trip report, they had much to say about the theology they met in Walther and the pastors at St. Louis, as well as those met at Ft. Wayne.

It is a real joy to be able to say, in gratitude to God, that we have invariably got the impression that they are all possessed of the same spirit that prevails in the university [Concordia College and Seminary]: a heartfelt trust in God, a sincere love for the symbols [the ecumenical creeds and the Lutheran Confessions] and the doctrines of the fathers, and a belief that in them His holy Word is rightly explained and interpreted, and therefore a sacrificial, burning zeal to apply these old-Lutheran principles of doctrine and order. May the Lord graciously revive this spirit throughout the entire Lutheran church, *so that those who call themselves Lutherans may no longer wrangle over questions settled by the Lutheran Confessions*. May they rather show their true Lutheranism by truly believing that God’s Word is taught rightly and without error in the Lutheran Confessions. Otherwise, the Lutheran name is but duplicity and hypocrisy.

The genuine, old-Lutheran spirit is upheld and disseminated with equal fidelity at the other institution of this church, the Fort Wayne Seminary....¹⁷

¹⁴ The constitution and by-laws can be found in translation in various places, including Rohne, 129 ff., and E. Clifford Nelson, Eugene L. Fevold, *The Lutheran Church among Norwegian-Americans: A History of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*, Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1960, I, 344.

¹⁵ Nelson & Fevold: Typical are statements like this: “The general position it [the Norwegian Synod] assumed and defended was supported and significantly colored by the Synod’s fateful alliance with the Missouri Synod” (I, 161).

¹⁶ Gisle Johnson: 1822-1894. Johnson was a student of Christian Thistedahl in Kristiansand, Norway, from whom he got his confessional orientation. He visited German in 1846/47 and spent time at Berlin, Leipzig, Erlangen, Tübingen, and Heidelberg. As a Candidate of Theology, he accepted an appointment to the University of Christiania in 1849, where he taught until his death. Johnson met Carl Paul Caspari at Leipzig in 1846. Caspari, born in 1814, was a German Jew, and had accepted Christianity at Leipzig at the age of 24. He already had a reputation as an orientalist when Johnson met him. Just previous to that meeting, Caspari had declined a call to Königsberg since the Prussian Church was a union church, and he accepted Johnson’s suggestion to apply for a position at Christiania. He began teaching at Christiania in 1847 and remained there until his death in 1892. Though Caspari and Walther probably never met (Caspari enrolled at Leipzig in 1834, and Walther graduated in 1833), they had many friends in common, especially Franz Delitzsch. See Meyer, 48 ff.

¹⁷ Meyer 69, emphasis added.

The report goes on to describe the worship life in the congregations, which was much like their own and not imitative of the Pietists, Moravians, Methodists, or Baptists:

The complete old-Lutheran ritual and altar books from the days of the Reformation are very faithfully followed. The lovely old Lutheran hymns, chanting from the altar, lighted candles at Holy Communion, intercessions for the sick, publishing of the bans, vestments, in short, their whole worship life is marked by a deep love for the fidelity to the traditions of the fathers. In this regard their worship life has much in common with our own.¹⁸

In further paragraphs, Ottesen details the church discipline practiced in Missouri, and also notes that to that end: “The practice of private confession is closely related. This has not yet been introduced everywhere, although it is becoming more and more widespread, even though in the Norwegian Synod, not everyone has quite become clear on these matters.” But he points out that “we too are trying to make our congregations aware of these things, how several of our own congregations have introduced private confession, and how we too were attempting to revive genuine church discipline.”

As the trip report concludes its section on the Missouri Synod, it emphasizes that it has not learned anything new at St. Louis. “We can truly say that we found the same faith in which we were raised, as well as the same idea of how a Lutheran free church ought to be ordered.” And there is a reiteration of that: “[W]ith regard to baptism, regeneration, the church, and the ministry, the Missouri Synod teaches exactly the same as Pontoppidan and our old dogmaticians and profoundly and strenuously opposes the new teachings on these subjects.” The theme of the report is that what they have found in Missouri “is the genuine old-Lutheran spirit,” which again is defined by the Lutheran Confessional writings, and the church fathers—“they have the symbols and the writings of the oldest and most famous Lutheran dogmaticians on their side.”¹⁹

That this expectation stuck with Ottesen is made clear by Halvorson: “But there was one thing which especially made a powerful impression on Ottesen, and that was that he found in their theology again his father’s theology, which was impressed on him at home from childhood.”²⁰ To what extent Ottesen’s father was actually “old Lutheran” is not clear, given the influences current at Copenhagen at the time. But there was certainly something in it that Ottesen recognized in Missouri Synod Lutheranism.

Those who organized the Norwegian Synod came to this country, already espousing a view of the Lutheran Confessions that was at odds with many in Norway, as well as the more biblicistic and egalitarian form of Lutheranism advanced by the Haugeans. It was also decidedly at odds with the longer-standing Lutheranism in the Eastern United States being expressed by S.S. Schmucker in the General Synod. The only exception in the established Eastern Lutheranism (which dated back to 1747 and the Pennsylvania Ministerium) was in the circle growing up around Charles Porterfield Krauth in the General Synod, in a few years to be in the General Council. But there was one place where these Norwegians felt at home—high church they have often been called because of their view of the ministry, the liturgy, and the confessional writings—and that was with the Missourians. It was not that the Norwegian Synod fathers learned their confessionalism from Walther *et al.* Rather they had common theological roots, and the Norwegians immediately recognized the faith of their teachers and the faith of their fathers in the theology they read in Missouri’s *Lehre und Wehre* and in their meetings with the St. Louis and Fort Wayne theologians.

Ottesen, Preus, and Koren carried on extensive, intimate correspondence with Walther, and others, such as Laur. Larsen, first Norwegian Synod teacher at St. Louis, and founding president of Luther College. Yet, Ottesen seems to have been particularly influential in locating and cultivating the warm connection the Norwegian Synod had in St. Louis, especially in the heat of conflict with others in controversies over the ministry and election.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 71.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 74 ff.

²⁰ *Livsbilleder*, 273.

Doctrinal Conflicts

A survey of the history of our Norwegian troika, Preus, Ottesen, and Koren, suggests to some that they were excessively contentious. And certainly their lives seem to have gone from one conflict to the next. From 1851 until 1891, there hardly was an issue of the church paper that did not chronicle one dispute or another about Lutheran theology or church political issues. There is something in the modern mind that holds theological disagreement, separation when necessary, and bold, unequivocal, uncompromising witness to be something that holds the church back from the more important work of evangelism and church extension, and therefore to be avoided. Doctrinal conflicts, especially of the sort seen in the election controversy are lamented as the worst things that happen to the church. That spirit proceeds to wonder how much more good would have been accomplished had these people been not so endlessly engaged in controversy. Of course, one might be prepared to counter: “Well, a lot of good would have been accomplished had Adam and Eve not sinned, as well.” A more sober response would point to Jesus’ commands and observations, including his condemnation of the lukewarm ones who could not stand up for their faith, and his blessing on those persecuted for his sake, etc. Ottesen *et al.*, though they suffered mightily in the election controversy, might wonder if the church would have been much worse off if there had not been an Arian controversy—for then there would be no Nicene Creed; Indulgence controversy—for then there would have been no Augsburg Confession, etc.; or election controversy—for then there would have been no...well, ELS. (Perhaps we might have stopped a clause before.) In any case, our subjects would surely have observed Satan’s hand in the false teachings that provoked the conflict, but they would also have observed how having to deal with various aspects of the heresies surely drove them to sharpen up their focus on or deepen their understanding of the gospel itself. As tragic as the election controversy was, it did greatly illuminate the pure gospel and the divine monergism by which God brings salvation to sinners.

Our Norwegian fathers certainly did not go looking for fights. Yet, when they were confronted with the need to confess, to denounce teachings not in accord with the Holy Scriptures and the confessions of the Lutheran Church, they did not turn tail and run, or compromise, or cover them over. Undoubtedly, Ottesen, Preus, Larsen, and even Koren on occasion were considered contentious. In fact, a cursory reading of Ottesen’s *Maanedstidende* writings cry out for that epithet. In his biography of Ottesen, Halvorson writes “In spiritual matters, he was a fighter, who was not afraid to use the sword of faith. He cut both sharply and keenly, and many times the cutting would have been sharper and deeper had it not been for his gentle and wise wife who laid her mild and calming influence over his zeal.”²¹ If “contentious” means that one picks a fight for the sake of the fight, then contentious they were not. But if “contentious” means that one will fight for truth, rather than evade it, then they were.

The controversies in which the Norwegian Synod found itself have already been detailed. To Ottesen, as secretary of the synod during some of the earliest years, and as co-editor of *Maanedstidende* with H. A. Preus—to Ottesen naturally fell the task of articulating the position of the synod to its membership, friends, and opponents. His natural abilities and the propensities of the educational system that formed his intellect and skills made him a particularly effective “swordsmen” in wielding the “sword of faith.”²²

The Slavery Controversy

Most of the controversies in which Preus, Ottesen, Koren, and their spiritual brothers found themselves orbited around the heart of the gospel. One, however, did not—the slavery controversy, though it did have important ramifications beyond the surface level.

Ottesen does not have any signed articles on the issue of slavery. The primary articles in which the issues are detailed are signed “Red.” For *Redaktørene*, the *Maanedstidende* editors. The writing bears strong

²¹ *Livsbilleder*, 272.

²² A long list of writings which exhibited these skills could be compiled; such a list would have to include *Det egentlige Stridspunkt* (“The Real Point of Controversy,” *Evangelisk Luthersk Kirketidende*, IX, 47, Nov. 1882) and *Svar fra Amerika til “Norsk Kirketidende” i Christiania* (“Answer from America to the Norwegian Church Times in Christiania,” *Maanedstidende*, III, No. 1, Jan. 1863).

marks of Ottesen's style of writing and argument, though undoubtedly the two editors, Preus and Ottesen, worked on the articles together. It also seems that some of the documents in the synodical proceedings may have come from Ottesen's hand. For the Norwegian Synod pastors, the issue had to do with the principles of biblical interpretation. Some of the argumentation they shared with, or even derived from the Missourians: Can one condemn something as inherently sinful if the Bible itself speaks approvingly of someone who is performing that action?

The controversy seems to have been seriously misunderstood, both then and now. It is difficult to evaluate it strictly in the framework of the 1860s, as opposed to the 20th/21st century. It never was the case that the Synod "approved of slavery," as uninformed opinion usually has it. The "Pastors' Declaration" said that they would fight for abolition of slavery in America wherever the opportunity presented itself. Furthermore, with one exception, the ministerium of the synod was united on the matter; and the laity stood, at least at the beginning, on the other side. However, in the course of the discussion most came over the position expressed by the pastors. The charge that that Synod approved of slavery came largely from the Norwegians in other synods and outside of the church. It may have been a festering sore that was fanned back to life again in the election controversy of the 1880s, leading many to rebel against the "Missourianism" or the "Wisconsinism" of Preus, Ottesen, Koren, Larsen *et al.*

One reason for the difficulty is that the pastors were intent on presenting the issues on the basis of Scripture, and arguing in systematic form. The laity took that as temporizing and theorizing, and insisted on knowing, "But what about THIS issue"—the slavery which seemed to be at the heart of the civil conflict destroying their new land. After all, Norwegian immigrant blood was being shed in the war against the South as well.

To this day, the issue is commonly construed as a matter of the Missourians and their Norwegian friends approving, or refusing to condemn slavery. But the clergy had been schooled in a theological system which practiced the art of making distinctions, and they inherited a philosophical outlook that was perfectly capable of distinguishing between absolute principles and periodic mores, or between things wrong in themselves and things wrong because of accompanying circumstances.

Since the Synod's ministerial students were studying at St. Louis, when they came home during the Civil War, questions were naturally put to them, the chief of which was, "What does Dr. Walther say about slavery?" The students probably were not the most precise in their depiction, but the indications that Walther might be somewhat less than absolute in his condemnation of slavery provoked considerable offense among the laity of the newcomers in Wisconsin.

Laur. Larsen, then the Norwegian Synod professor at St. Louis, wrote an account in which he simply cited the Bible passages in the Old and New Testaments which implicitly seem to approve slavery, or urge slaves and masters to do their duty to one another. Pastor Clausen, one of the synod founders, expressed disagreement. The issue made its way into *Emigranten*, a Norwegian-language newspaper, so that it became an issue not only inside the Synod, but in the general Norwegian-American community as well. A series of meetings and discussions among the ministerium ensued, with the matter ultimately being taken up at the 1861 synod meeting. A resolution by the pastors used strong language in asserting that slavery was not *per se* sinful, but nonetheless evil:

Although, according to God's Word, it is not in and by itself sin to own slaves, yet slavery in itself is an evil and a punishment from God, and we condemn all the abuses and the sins which are connected with it, just as we, when our official duties demand it, and when Christian love and wisdom require it, will work for its abolition.²³

Pastor Clausen had originally signed the "Pastors' Resolution," but when he returned home, he retracted his signature, and published his disagreement. In their response on the issue, the *Maanedstidende* editors, which

²³ *Maanedstidende*, 1861, 261, tr. Rohne, 206. *Grace for Grace*, ed. S. C. Ylvisaker, Mankato: Lutheran Synod Book Company, 1943, 149.

I take here primarily to be Ottesen, launched into a defense of the declaration that slavery is not in and of itself contrary to God's Word, but is still an evil, and all ought to work for its abolition. The editorial argues with an analogy to war—God certainly has permitted war and even commanded war, especially in the Old Testament. Yet, war is an evil, because it is always a consequence of man's sin.

The distinction caused considerable difficulty for the laymen, and for Clausen. President A.C. Preus, in a meeting, explained the distinction in this way: "Sin in itself is such an act as is absolutely sinful whenever, wherever, and however it is performed."²⁴ The debate continued for some time, but according to Rohne, "through it all, the other Synod pastors not only held their ground, but little by little the distinction between slavery as a sin and slavery as an evil gained ground among the people."²⁵

The editors argued that "we have God's word with us," and, with a few examples from St. Paul, would show how clear the matter was.

Our opponents argue that slavery is sin in itself in the same way as are adultery, murder, and theft, because the slaveholder steals a man, or in any case, steals from him his freedom, which is a far greater value than goods. So claim those who contend against us. But if this were true, then would the apostle Paul be agreed herein? He must have known that a slaveholder lay in an even more shameful, open sin than a general thief. And since he said that a thief could not inherit God's kingdom and never could be called a faithful Christian so long and he continued in such sin, he certainly would have thought that a slaveholder, who lay in an even greater sin, could not possibly be a believer so long as he did not stand in humble repentance. And likewise, it would be a shameful mockery against the truth if a Christian teacher called an open thief "beloved brother," "faithful and beloved"; then it would have been a shameful hypocrisy of Paul to call a slaveholder like Philemon a friend and co-laborer and praise his love and faithful, and say that "the hearts of the saints have been refreshed by you, brother" (Philemon 1:7).²⁶

The editorial then goes on to refer to other passages in Paul's writings.

On the basis of the fact that St. Paul is able to speak to slaveholders like Philemon, it is impossible to say that slavery is a categorically forbidden action. And so the distinction then is between sin *per se* and evil. He argues that "where slavery is practiced in a sinful way, then it is sin not because the matter is in itself sin, but only because the abuse of it makes it sinful in this particular case."²⁷ Modern ethical theory has argued that certain actions are *prima facie* (on the face of it) wrong, but in certain cases may be permitted. And in the same line of thinking, Immanuel Kant argues that only those things are categorical imperatives, or absolute moral rules, which will admit of no exceptions, or in which it is impossible that the action could under any circumstance be permitted.

Ottesen's arguments, while they would not necessarily be accepted by modern ethicists, employ distinctions that are still being made in ethical debate. In dealing with the so-called "problem of evil," the tradition in Christian theology as well has been to distinguish between moral evil (sin *per se*) and "natural evil," or the evil of the consequences of natural conditions. But the main issue in the argument, as it is enunciated by the editors, is that since the Apostle does not condemn the slavery in the case of Philemon, it is impossible to say that it is categorically wrong. They viewed it not as a socio-political issue, and did not examine the case so much anthropocentrically—as an ethical issue—but they examined it as an issue involving biblical hermeneutics. They could only permit themselves to approach the matter with the presupposition that Scripture is the divinely given, authoritative, and infallible Word of God, and that they could not stand in judgment over the Apostle, who addressed at least one slave-owner in a way that held the man to be a faithful Christian. So, even if they were very quick to judge slavery in general as evil, just as sickness and war are evil, they were not

²⁴ Rohne, 209.

²⁵ Rohne, 210.

²⁶ *Maanedstidende*, 1862, (Jan. VII, 2) 23-24.

²⁷ *Ibid.*

prepared to call it in and of itself sin, anymore than one who contracts cancer is guilty of sin for having cancer, or to say that the cancer is a result of a particular sin (Lk 13:1-5). And yet, they did not denounce the war against the South as evil or as sin, because the institution of slavery that was at issue was certainly carried on in such a way that it was sinful. But it did not follow that one who owned slaves could not in fact be a Christian.

If there was a failure on the part of Ottesen and the others, it may have been that they simply did not articulate the latter points as clearly as they needed to, or as a more popular perception would have demanded. The distinction might be difficult for the modern mind to grasp; their argumentation was sound when it is understood that their concern was not anthropocentric but theocentric, i.e. they were operating first and foremost in the realm of biblical theology, and not concrete, social or civil application.

The Lay-Ministry Controversy

Ottesen wrote extensively on the issue of lay-ministry. The immigrant church inherited this problem from Norway in the Haugean lay-preaching movement. Hans Nielsen Hauge (1771-1824) had come onto the scene in Norway when the clergy had been thoroughly riddled with Rationalism. There was little sin-and-grace preaching; the clergy, not totally of course, but to a great extent, were regarded as lazy, as aristocratic men of leisure, interested in just about everything except serving the people as ministers of comfort, and preaching the gospel and administering the sacraments. At the age of 13, Hauge had a personal awakening during an illness, and was disappointed by the clergy who had no comfort to give him. In 1796, he began walking the country, preaching sin and grace and denouncing the rationalistic clergy. In 1804, he was convicted of violating the Anti-Conventicle act of 1741, enacted in response to the earlier pietism of Phillip Jakob Spener. The anti-conventicle law forbade religious gatherings apart from the official church.

Hauge's Pietism was not really in the mold of either the more extreme forms of German pietism or the radical Moravian movement of Zinzendorf. Hauge regarded himself as being in an emergency situation in which there were no, or almost no, orthodox pastors and bishops. He was not completely correct in this, but in certain parts of Norway, not far from it. By 1820, there was only one orthodox bishop in Norway. Hauge was opposed mostly by the rationalistic bishops, but even the orthodox bishop, J.N. Brun, was critical of Hauge for preaching without a call according to the rubric of Augsburg Confession article XIV.²⁸ While the Haugean confrontation could have led to a much-needed reform in the church—to throw off the rationalism which had so deeply penetrated the clergy, it actually became a part of a class struggle. Norway had become deeply divided between the *Bønder* (farmer class) and the aristocracy, consisting of government officials (which included clergy and educators) and merchants. The clergy had become as much civil as ecclesiastical officials. Since the primary source of clergy was the University of Denmark, and because of Norway's position as a part of the Kingdom of Denmark (until 1814 when control passed to Sweden) the aristocratic and official government language was Danish. The *Bønder* and other less privileged classes spoke regional dialects of the Norwegian language. That led to a deep divide; the conflict between the classes found the government persecution of H.N. Hauge to be a convenient issue to take up.

The followers of Hauge established *Bedehuse*, prayer houses which were not, at first, substitutes for the church, but were places where the Christians gathered to receive the instruction that they were not getting from the state church, and in almost no cases were the instruction and prayers led by ordained clergymen. When Ottesen attacks "lay people's praying and speaking" it is this practice that he is after, but in the form in which it was transported to the immigrant communities.

The immigrants of the 1840s brought this conflict to the U.S. One of the first to serve the Norwegian immigrants was Elling Eielsen, a layman. Eielsen attracted a considerable following among many of the immigrants, especially in the Fox River Settlement in Illinois, and to a lesser degree at Muskego, near Milwaukee. It was the presence of this lay preacher and likeminded Norwegians in the Muskego settlement that prompted C.L. Clausen, the theologically trained Danish schoolteacher, to take ordination and begin serving

²⁸ Augsburg Confession XIV: "Of Ecclesiastical Order – They teach that no one should publicly teach in the Church or administer the Sacraments unless he be regularly called."

those people on the basis of an explicitly Lutheran confession. When the other theologically trained Norwegian pastors arrived, conflict inevitably arose with the anti-church, and often anti-sacrament laypreachers. Many of the Norwegians who had remained a part of the State Church had been influenced by the more confessional outlook that was growing in Norway, and which was reflected in the young pastors arriving—Preus, Koren, Ottesen, Brandt, G.F. Dietrichsen. As soon as orthodox pastors were available, as in the work of Pastors J.W.C. Dietrichsen, C.L. Clausen, H.A. Stub, and A.C. Preus, they turned away from their prayer houses back to orthodox worship. However, there were still a few hangers on, and so the synod pastors had to deal with it, both from a few within the synod, and some from outside of it.

Eielsen began as a lay preacher, but after the more churchly pastors like Clausen and Dietrichson began to work, felt the need to be ordained in order to “compete” on more equal footing. In 1846, Eielsen organized the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (Yes, that’s right, ELCA, which still exists!) and was ordained. That led to a real spat with the early Norwegian Synod men, who accused him of not even being legitimately ordained. But that was not a main thrust of the controversy.

Through a series of meetings, some including C.F.W. Walther and other Missouri pastors, the issue was discussed—what is the relationship between the universal priesthood and the ecclesiastical ministry? Under what circumstances is it improper for laymen to lead in worship and to preach? In 1859, both Preus and Ottesen wrote several articles in *Maanedstidende*, some of which were responses to articles from the other side.

In one article appearing in May and June 1859,²⁹ Ottesen first presented a series of theses on the ministry. In the first, he asserts the universal priesthood, which “is to proclaim the Lord in word and deed” and which has “the power and authority to teach and exhort, and comfort, and bind each other with God’s Word and sacrament.” But thesis 2 points out that if everyone exercised this power publicly, there would be confusion, and therefore God has established a ministry to do all of this on the public behalf. In thesis 3, this ministry is charged by God with preaching the word and administering the sacraments in the public gathering. In theses 5 & 6 “it is the Lord who calls and places the individual in this service,” and it is “ordinarily by this ministry that the Lord works faith and distributes spiritual gifts.” Thus, whoever despises this ministry despises the Lord. The people’s part in this ministry is that they are the means that the Lord uses in order to call. The last thesis, 9, then discusses the inner call, as being insufficient, and the emergency circumstances that might lead a congregation to call one of their number to serve as the public minister.

The theses are followed by a more detailed discussion of each one, offering support from Scripture and the Confessional writings, as well as Luther, Chemnitz, Gerhard, Walther, and others. At this point, it starts to become clear what sort of books Ottesen and Preus had in their libraries, and the kind of instruction they had gotten at Christiania. They were very familiar with Luther and the orthodox dogmaticians.

A continuation in the following month is entitled: “Laypeople’s praying and speaking in the public service of edification is contrary to God’s Word.”³⁰ A large part of this section is a debate with the writers in Hatlestad’s *Norsk Luthersk Kirketidende*. Ottesen notes that some have found Luther in 1523 (“On the Ministry”) referring to 1 Corinthians 14:30 as referring to “those sitting” as lay-people, and used this to prove one of their points. However Ottesen points out that Luther later re-examined this and demonstrates that the text is referring to called preachers. Ottesen comments also that of these two documents, Luther was battling in the earlier work (“The ministry”) against the papists and was concerned to show the power of the universal priesthood, while in the later work of 1530 (“The Keys”) “when he saw the false advantage the Enthusiasts made of this passage, he soon saw that this passage was not so much a testimony against the papistic perception, as much more against the separatistic perception.” And he then summarizes Luther’s view:

Luther teaches: the entire church, all believers, have originally and immediately the keys and ministry, but God has within the church made this order, that this public ministry only is to be administered by those specially called to it who are able to teach others and who in a distinctive

²⁹ *Maanedstidende*, 1859 (May, June, October, IV, Nos. 5, 6, 10), 67, 83 & 145.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 82.

understanding of the power of his ministry can act in Christ's name, according to his command, and in his place.³¹

But this does not mean that the individual Christians give up what they possess: "because the church possesses this ministry originally, each Christian can and shall exercise their right, where God's order is not annulled thereby—e.g. among the heathen, or where emergency abolishes the order...."³² Ottesen is convinced that this principle is operative all the way through Luther's writings, and he finds it to be the only way that one can understand Augsburg Confession Article XIV.

Ottesen then goes on to apply this against the arguments which have appeared in *Norsk Luthersk Kirketidende*. Among other things, they appeal to "Hans Hauge, and all our friends in Norway". "Why not in America also," he snidely asks. And he then demolishes the arguments by showing how completely different the situation was in Hauge's Norway (where the church was riddled with rationalism, and one could hardly find an orthodox pastor or bishop). He points out also that

[When *Kirketidende*] says that from our understanding that laypeople do not have the right to hold "free prayers" publicly, it follows that we hold that all laypeople who pray with their own words are heterodox Enthusiasts, the opponents have put forth such a desperate conclusion that I think any sound-minded person can see what a great untruth it is.³³

Though the article was finished at that point, in October Ottesen published "A little more about laymen's prayer and speaking etc." First he had a correction to make, a statement in thesis six which was not well-stated and caused some confusion and misunderstanding. The sixth thesis had read: "Ordinarily the Lord will work faith and bestow spiritual gifts through this ministry, and we should not expect to get them in any other way." In the new article, he wants to add the following "for clarity's sake": "and we should not expect to get them (spiritual gifts) in any other way when this ministry is neglected or despised where it can be had."³⁴ He simply wants to say what Luther has said: "It is God's will that we should seek to hear the gospel from those who preach it, where they shall be found, or else nowhere."³⁵

However, Ottesen's treatment of the laypeople was not all negative. He concludes this added portion with a discussion of the responsibilities of the laity. 1) The father or mother of the house should hold family devotions, where they freely, with their own or others' words in a book, teach and pray—and not only teach, but urge them to live according to the word. "There," he says, "you are truly called a house-pastor."³⁶ 2) As a private Christian in a congregation, one is to watch over and help to see to it that those who are called to the public ministry in the congregation rightly fulfill this ministry. 3) When your brother sins, you are to rebuke him – by the word – and otherwise carry out the spiritual priesthood. 4) In congregation meetings where doctrinal questions are often discussed, there you can in conversation, in mutual exchange confirm or correct what others say. And finally, Ottesen urges an evangelical spirit: "When you are either out and about or at home you shall testify about him, who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light, which is in truth nothing other than to preach God's word."

So, even in the midst of controversy, Ottesen brought a pastoral heart to the matter and had in mind as much the laymen who simply want to be good servants. So he goes far beyond scoring debating points against his adversaries.

³¹ *Ibid.*

³² *Ibid.*, 83.

³³ *Ibid.*, 87.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 145.

³⁵ *Ibid.*

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 146.

At the end of this final installment of Ottesen's article on the problem of the layman's public praying and teaching, we get a little glimpse of the small ministerium at work with each other. Added to the end of the article, in smaller type is a half-page note by H.A. Preus, co-editor, which is worth quoting in its entirety:

I am convinced that this addition and explanation to his earlier treatment of "Laypeople's Praying and Speaking in Public Gatherings" by our dear co-worker removes all hesitation and objection (grounded and ungrounded) against his earlier theses by those who are only concerned about the truth, and will gladly be convinced by it.

There is, however, a point which I should have wished Pastor Ottesen, for the sake of completeness, to have developed a little more, but which he only touched upon. I fear that Pastor Ottesen's theses have been misunderstood on just this point. I will therefore make the reader aware of the little parenthesis, which stands where it talks about the different form for a layman's and a pastor's teaching activity. The parenthesis reads thus: "Only among the heathen, or in case of emergency, or if the Lord is blasphemed, only then should you not be silent, even if others are silent." There is the situation in which the layman has the right, indeed is obligated, to teach publicly and also in the form and in the way which otherwise is unique to the rightly-called teacher himself. It is namely the situation where there is a need, where no regularly examined and called teacher is not available nor can be obtained; or where the rightly-called pastor is himself a false teacher, or where false prophets want to intrude themselves into the congregation, and there is no teacher who would or can defend the flock. For in both of these cases, God's name would be blasphemed if no one would testify against the liars and the false prophets.

In this connection, here will I also make note of the error in viewing a schoolteacher's public prayer and speech in his school as contrary to what is taught in the foregoing. When a school teacher in the circle of his children begins or ends instruction with a free prayer, gives an exhortation or explains a passage of Scripture for the children, he is by no means sinning against God's command, even if some others are present and are edified by it, because he is called precisely to do that, and he honors and obeys God when he carries out and testifies to his call, but also that he is preserved in humility and remains in his call, and in view of that, he ought always remember that it is really for the children, not for the congregation, that he is appointed as teacher.

H. A. Preus.³⁷

These colleagues, in a fledgling church body, with mutual respect and give-and-take, sought together to proclaim the Lutheran teaching, and to provide safety for their flocks by repudiating the false teachings that burned around them.

2. The Enduring Legacy of Preus, Koren, and Ottesen

Why Preus, Koren, and Ottesen?—or, if we arrange them according to their ages, it would be Ottesen, Preus, Koren, respectively June 1, 1825, June 16, 1825, and December 22, 1826. Two were presidents of the synod, but not the third. There are some other candidates, if one were to select three who contributed most to the confessional stature of the Norwegian Synod—Laur. Larsen. Peter Laurentius Larsen was his full name, but Laurentius seemed to him too extravagant, so he always signed and went by Laur. There was A.C. Preus, the first president, who didn't see the weakness of the first constitution, but when it was pointed out by his younger cousin, he was most instrumental in having it changed. But he returned to Norway, and was not present for the greatest struggles. There was G.F. Dietrichsen, who was a stalwart confessor—but he returned to Norway to stay in 1860. There was Nils Brandt, one of the founders, first full-time pastor in Decorah, who also taught for

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 154.

many years at the college, and had a wide influence on many young men. He was on the visitation to the German Lutherans with Ottesen, but remained a quiet force in the background. And he outlived all the rest. There would be also Johannes Ylvisaker, perhaps the greatest exegetical scholar among the early Norwegian Synod men—but he came later, and did not have the far-reaching influence of the early founders. In fact, he was a graduate of Concordia Seminary—St. Louis, and did receive an effective influence there.

So why these three? Limiting this little troika of fathers to them certainly slights some others. And yet, there is something about the three that stands strong and steady like the oak trees that have memorialized the Norwegian Synod. Preus and Ottesen were founders in the sense that they voted at the 1853 constituting convention. Koren was a little late for that, and even though his call was across the dividing Mississippi River, in northeast Iowa, he stood with the other two, sometimes as a moderating influence, and as the diplomat able to bring along others who moved a little slower than the quick and incisive Preus and Ottesen.

To many outsiders, Preus and Ottesen typified the objectionable dogmatic certainty of the fledgling synod, and so the theology of the synod was referred to as “Wisconsinism.” But that included Koren and Larsen, and later on Ylvisaker as well. From both within and without the synod, there was some objection to the strength of their leadership, and they were labeled “That Decorah Ring,”—but that included also the Wisconsinites.

There are a few superficial similarities among these three—they all graduated from the University of Christiania, and thus were deeply influenced by two of the architects of confessional orthodoxy in Norway, Gisle Johnson and Carl Paul Caspari. Those two presented a thoroughgoing confessional theology and together published the first Norwegian translation of the entire *Book of Concord* in 1868.

Another tantalizing similarity is that all three (plus a few others) spent the time between passing their theological exam (thus becoming candidates of theology) and, before emigrating, teaching at Nissen’s Latin School in Christiania (*Nissens Latin- og realskole*, roughly equivalent to our high school and junior college). I have tried to discover any specific significance in this, but without complete success. There were “Latin Schools” in the larger cities in Norway, sometimes connected to the cathedral. They were essentially University prep schools. Prior to the mid 19th century, there was a wave of educational reform in Norway, with some struggle (mostly of the peaceful Norwegian kind, without any dead bodies) in the department of education. Hartwig Nissen had founded the school in 1843, as a sort of a compromise between classical education and the newer educational philosophy that emphasized practical, life-based education. Nissen was a pupil of Frederick Bugge, president of the Trondhjem Cathedral school where some other theological graduates taught before coming to America.³⁸ The one hint I have gotten into the significance of Nissen’s is from an educator friend in Norway who believes that at that time, “some of the women in his [Nissen’s] nearest family were close friends of Gisle Johnson, or at least devout followers of him.”³⁹ Since the first pastors who received calls were teaching at Nissen’s, and they went into a situation in which the first decisive task was to repudiate the Grundtvigian idea which was already known to be in the constitution authored by J.W.C. Dietrichsen, it is not difficult to imagine that it was more than coincidence.

I would like to aim at just two of the characteristics that stood out in these three fathers—and they are characteristics not possessed by them alone among the Norwegian Synod pastors, but certainly epitomized by them.

1) Preus, Ottesen, and Koren were three immensely busy parish pastors, successful by any standard, who had long tenures in their calls, especially in terms of today’s “mobile ministerium.” There certainly was less administrative, CEO pressure on them than on the pastor today. But they served many congregations, and their congregations bore daughter congregations. They rode their horses, and drove their buggies across roadless prairies, seeking out the newcomers, pulling the sheep back into the flock before the heterodox wolves devoured

³⁸ Rune Slagstad, “Kunnskapens Hus I Det Norske System,” a paper posted on the internet at http://www.itk.ntnu.no/ansatte/Andresen_Trond/dwnld/slagstad-mjoes.

³⁹ Personal e-mail from Phillip Kasperon, October 7, 2003. He informed me that reading of the Rune Slagstad article was required in his teacher’s college education.

them. And yet, we never hear any complaint from them that they are too busy with their parish work to edit the synodical paper, to keep up on their theology, or to carry on the polemical struggles demanded by their situation. The time of their busiest theological and polemical activity was also the time of the greatest congregational work, gathering together the new comers flooding into the Midwest.

Pastor Preus commented about Herman Amberg Preus: “The theological task and the pastoral task were for him one and the same thing” (p. 4). That was true for Ottesen and Koren, as well. In fact, that principle permeated the ministerium of this fledgling, immigrant synod, and one of the reasons they fastened on the Missourians was because they recognized the same spirit there. The Lutheran Confessional writings and systematic theology, biblical theology, and pastoral ministry were a whole cloth, and the idea that one could be a pastor without the other two was unthinkable for them. When they did battle with the pietistic Lutherans regarding lay-ministry, gospel and absolution, when they took up the conflict over slavery, and especially, when in spite of having to suffer great indignity, they took on F. A. Schmidt in the struggle over conversion and election, they were doing nothing other than “guarding the flock over which the Holy Spirit had made them overseers.” That was their call. It is not Lutheran to say that their call was only to be a pastor, not to study, not to engage false teachers, not to plumb the depths of the Holy Scripture in systematic study of its teaching, doctrine. If this legacy has been lost, it needs to be regained.

As pastors, they were tireless. They served far-flung congregations, gathered groups of settlers together for Word and Sacrament. They did not shrug off the challenges of their fellow Norwegians who had a different theological orientation so they could go about their business of being pastors. They met those challenges head on for what they were—views which obscured the gospel, or created uncertainty for the faith of the flock. Maintaining the integrity of their church’s confession of faith was an integral part of their pastoral ministry. Each one of them in their writings always exhibits a clear view of the faith of their people, and their doctrinal struggles always have that in mind.

2) They shared a deep commitment to the Lutheran Confessional writings and they did not tire in their defense of it. As we have noted, the founding constitution of the Norwegian Synod, both in its 1851 and 1853 manifestations committed the preaching and teaching of its pastors to the understanding of God’s Word found in the Lutheran Confessional writings. And that was the measure, the standard, in all of their struggle. In the election controversy, that commitment was put to its most fiery test. As Ottesen had commented early on in the Trip Report: “[W]ith regard to baptism, regeneration, the church, and the ministry, the Missouri Synod teaches exactly the same as Pontoppidan and our old dogmaticians.”⁴⁰ But then came F.A. Schmidt’s accusations of Calvinism in Walther’s 1878 paper on Election. It may be that Walther had had to go through a similar process, not, early on, recognizing the problems with the expressions used by the orthodox Lutheran theologians like John Gerhard. But a deeper study of the biblical texts and Article XI of the Formula of Concord on election led to a sharper, more precise expression. For the Norwegians, that re-study led them to the point where they had to reject at least that in Pontoppidan’s *Catechism*⁴¹ on which they had relied for their orthodoxy. In that sense, they did not have “Father theology.” They were committed to the teaching of the Holy Scriptures as understood by the confessions of their church—the ecumenical creeds and the *Book of Concord*. And of course, Ottesen’s remark, commenting on the Old Lutheranism of the Confessions was probably a shot across the bows of some other ships sailing on those waters: “so that those who call themselves Lutherans may no longer wrangle over questions settled by the Lutheran Confessions.”⁴² By that time, the Norwegians were entirely aware of the brouhaha in the General Synod over “Augustana Revisited”—“The American Recension of the Augsburg Confession,” in which the most distinctive Lutheran doctrines were sacrificed for a general Protestant view. The Confessional writings stood for the Norwegians as enough, until the tragic compromise of the Madison agreement, *Opgjør*, in 1912, a mere two years after the death of the last of our troika.

⁴⁰ Meyer, 74. (See above f.n. 19).

⁴¹ “What is election? God has appointed all those to eternal life who He from eternity has foreseen would accept the offered grace, believe in Christ, and remain constant in this faith unto the end” (Cited in Nelson-Fevold I, 257).

⁴² See above f.n. 12.

We could certainly say more in praise of these three men. After all, the fact that their pictures grace the walls in a most prominent position in our school of the prophets and synodical headquarters indicates that they are models to be emulated. But even from some of their most devoted children come some criticisms. Fifty years ago, in 1953, as our Synod celebrated the 100th anniversary of the founding of the Old Norwegian Synod, Pastor Christian Anderson of the ELS wrote “Underlying Causes of the Deterioration and Breakdown of the Old Norwegian Synod.”⁴³

In his paper, Anderson, who had been one of the first to leave the Old Norwegian Synod because of the doctrinal compromise of the Madison Agreement, outlined four basic causes for that compromise and the merger of 1917:

- 1) In the first place there was from the very beginning a constantly expressed desire for uniting all Norwegian immigrants into one church body. In itself there surely was nothing wrong in the desire for such outward fellowship, provided that there was an inner spiritual unity. But here I think the mistake was made from the start, that too much stress was laid on the desirability of outward union without considering sufficiently what obstacles there might be to a true union....
- 2) I said that the opponents were generally the aggressive accusers while our synod patiently defended itself against false accusations without pointing out sufficiently the false doctrine of the opposition. This so easily led many to believe that there was no real difference between us, so that if the opponents would stop accusing us, all would be well. It is true that in the controversy of the eighties Dr. Koren exposed clearly the errors of the Anti-Missourians, and at that time the differences were taken seriously by most of the people on our side. But after the complete break in 1887 the majority of our people had tired of the controversy, so that they let it suffice to blame the opposition for the controversy, which they regarded as unnecessary, and neglected to continue to study the issues involved. Thus they became more and more ignorant of those issues, while the opposition by continuing their propaganda against our Synod kept the issues for which they had contended fresh in mind. When the opposition began to appear more friendly, many of our pastors who had stood firm seemed to feel that the matter was now just about solved.
I feel that there was something lacking in the instruction on the issues of the controversies at our seminary. This was the case at least while I was a student there. Too much was taken for granted as to our knowledge of these things when they occasionally were mentioned....
- 3) In the period following the withdrawal of the Anti-Missourians there arose a number of very able leaders within our Synod. For a long time they were thoroughly sound doctrinally, and they worked diligently for the true welfare of the church. While this no doubt was a blessing, it however tended to encourage a greater part, at least of the clergy, to be satisfied to follow the leaders without seeking diligently to inform themselves on the issues, so that they would be prepared to hold back in case those leaders should go wrong....
- 4) The custom of continuing the same men in office for a long time helped to centralize power and influence in a few. It is no doubt an advantage to let those who have proven their ability continue at the head of the organization, rather than have frequent changes. Experience surely counts for much in carrying out the duties of the office. But on the other hand there is the grave danger that the prestige connected with holding office a long time may be abused when a crisis arises....

Anderson certainly does not mean to lay the blame for the break-up of the old Norwegian Synod on our troika of three fathers. And yet, there were circumstances which developed which he thinks needs to be spoken

⁴³ “Clergy Bulletin,” September 1953, Vol. 13, a paper Delivered at the General Pastoral Conference of the Norwegian Synod held July 27th to July 31st [1953] at Bethany College, Mankato, Minnesota.

to the successive generations, and what makes more sense then to hear them 50 years after they were first presented?

A.C. Preus served as president of the synod until 1862 when he returned to Norway, and was succeeded by Herman Amberg Preus. He served for 32 years until his death in 1894, and was succeeded by the 68-year-old Koren, who served until his death in 1910, at the age of 84. Through the first three decades of the synod's existence, a certain amount of resentment built up against what appeared to some to be a "ruling elite," so that the label "Wisconsinism," hurled against Preus and Ottesen by outsiders, resonated among some within the Synod as well. The departure of C.L. Clausen, one of the founders, was over more than the slavery controversy—also rooted in resentment going back to the 1853 rejection of Grundtvigianism by the vocal newcomers, G.F. Dietrichsen, Preus, and Ottesen.

When the followers of F.A. Schmidt adopted the name "Anti-Missourians," the primary frame of reference was not over against Walther's Missouri Synod, but against the "Missourianism" of Preus, Ottesen, Koren, Larsen, Ylvisaker (trained at St. Louis) and others of that "Inner Ring."⁴⁴ Other times, the group perceived as the "ruling elite" was labeled "The Decorah Gang," but the focus was still on the same men, this time with Koren and Larsen at the center, but including Preus and Ottesen, as well.

The controversies which the Norwegian Synod faced in those years were doctrinal (from both sides), and the Norwegian Synod men were serious and focused in their defense of the Lutheran Confessional doctrine. And we don't want to suggest that the disputes were less than substantive. Nevertheless, it is tempting to wonder if the outcome might not have been a different if the inner ring had not been so pronounced, and leadership had not been so sharply concentrated as it was. (It should be noted, by the way, that F.A. Schmidt, a German, borrowed from the Missouri Synod, was, until 1878, of the "inner circle" of the Norwegian Synod. However, there may have been an Inner Ring in the Missouri Synod that he was eager to rejoin. It has long been thought that he was miffed against Walther because he did not receive a Missouri Synod call to St. Louis. His short time there was only as a representative of the Norwegians.)

The Norwegian Synod was blessed with pious, faithful, God-fearing leaders in these three, as well as the many names that could be added to them. These three were thoroughly aware of their own limitations, their own sinfulness and weakness. They could not have been such champions of the gospel of God's unconditional love in Christ without that awareness. Nor would they have sacrificed so much in the struggle—not just for the doctrine of election, but for the truth expressed in the catechism, "I believe that I cannot by my own reason or strength believe in Jesus Christ my Lord or come to him, but the Holy Ghost has called me by the gospel, enlightened me with his gifts, and sanctified and kept me in the one true faith."

We on this panel certainly want to believe that the Norwegian Synod, from 1853 to 1917, and in its reincarnation in the Reorganized Norwegian Synod of 1918 (ELS), has been a blessing in its proclamation of the gospel and defense of the confessional Lutheran faith. We know our brothers and sisters in our church believe that too.

But we cannot and must not become so full of ourselves that we forget that human frailties always take over, that human organizations always fail, and that the rain of God's grace always moves on to water other ground.

So what do we do with our fathers, especially these three? We thank God for what they taught us; rededicate ourselves to the commitment that they showed in their service as pastor/theologians; pray God that he will help us see their weaknesses and mistakes and not repeat them; and know that in spite of ourselves, and our weak human nature, God's will is nevertheless done, as it surely was in them.

Soli Deo Gloria

⁴⁴ The term is borrowed from C. S. Lewis' commencement address in which Lewis warns his hearers not so much never to be in the Inner Ring, but rather suggests that the cause of much evil is the great desire to be IN the Inner Ring – often at any cost: C. S. Lewis, "The Inner Ring," The Memorial Oration at King's College, University of London, 1944 printed in *The Weight of Glory and Other Addresses*, York: Macmillan, 1980.