

Herman Otten: The Man Behind Christian News Interview Response

By William Harley

Church History
Prof. John Brenner
Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary
Mequon, Wisconsin

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As I approached this interview, I was not sure of what to expect. I had heard many rumors about Reverend Otten. He is a man who makes his views known, and is not afraid to stand up and make his voice be heard. Knowing this, I hoped to get behind the everyday shoptalk with which Reverend Otten surrounds himself and get to know the man behind it all. I wanted to see what gives him joy, pain, and hope. I believe Reverend Otten did not let me down in that regard. I truly think he allowed himself to be unguarded for this interview and gave myself and all who view it a glimpse into his heart of hearts. The following is a review of that interview and the time spent with Pastor Otten. It is my hope that I am able to capsule our conversation, offering my measure of the man and reactions to his words.

First, Reverend Herman Otten is truly a kind and generous man. It was an honor to interview him and get the chance to know the man surrounded by so much controversy. He was gracious and inviting, I feel like he really wanted to spend time with me and it was not an act. His warm smile and friendly demeanor paint the best picture of the man who views himself as a servant in God's kingdom.

Growing Up

Herman Otten is an interesting man - there is no question about that - as the interview will attest. In my pursuit to get to know who Herman Otten is I felt the need to start literally from the beginning. I wanted to know about his childhood years, what influenced him and helped to mold the man who sat before me.

Growing up in Bronx, New York, he had the opportunity to experience multiple cultures right out his front door. This was a point that he wanted to make very clear. The reason for stressing this may have something to do with those who have expressed that Otten was a

Midwesterner. They claimed he did not really know diversity and the challenges that it brought. From his admonition, such statements are far from the truth.

Being a sports fan he illustrated the diversity he grew up with as he shared with me some of the times he would play touch football with the other Jewish, African American, and Roman Catholic kids. Two Synagogues with a Catholic Church across the street surrounded even his church, which he attended regularly as a child. Herman Otten embraced diversity as part of his culture.

Being born in 1933, he grew up during the time of WWII. When America joined WWII in 1941, the young Otten was 8 years old. He remembers hearing his father tell him as they listened to the radio about the start of the war, "This war will be the greatest war the world has ever seen." WWII touched the lives of people worldwide, but for the Otten family war had touched them before. Pastor Otten reflected back on the life of his grandfather who was pastor of one of the free churches in Germany. He describes how his grandfather was drafted into WWI as part of the medical wing, leaving his wife and children behind. He died in war. There is a picture of Herman Otten's grandfather in his medical garb that many use to try to convict Pastor Otten of Nazi leanings. Many issues speak against that accusation. First, Nazis did not exist in WWI. Second, I was given the opportunity to see the picture of his grandfather firsthand. It is clear that his grandfather wore the Red Cross upon his arm nothing more. The accusations placed against his grandfather are a real point of contention for him; he very much honors his grandfather and his service to his congregation and country.

Reverend Otten spoke at great length about his family and the time they spent in Germany. His mother had come from the state church and his father from the Free Church.

Most of his comments, though, revolved around his father, I believe his father had a great influence on him, which will be touched upon later. Otten shared with me some of the experiences of his childhood and some fond memories he felt shaped him. Many of those memories came out of the jobs he held starting at the age of eight. At that time, he worked for a farmer who raised chickens and young Otten would bring the dead chickens and eggs to the city to sell for the farmer. He remembers this time fondly especially because his father would meet him at the subway station to help him carry all the produce to sell. In his teen years, he started to work for some Lutheran farmers who had great work ethics and lived their faith. This helped to form and fashion Otten's love for hard work, farming, and living the Christian life. These examples left by the farmers in his childhood spurred Otten into wanting to become a missionary, something that even today remains a desire for him.

One cannot leave Reverend Otten's growing years without touching on the impact of his father. He was a man who in Otten's own words, "had an 8th grade education, but was well read and always up on current affairs." Otten's father was a painter, a person who would paint rooms and stain floors for people around Bronx and Harlem. He seemed to be very good at what he did and shocked many people in his knowledge. Otten calls his father a people person, definitely a trait that Otten shares. Even though his father did things that Herman Otten did not agree with (smoking and drinking), he did work hard to put his kids through school gaining a Christian education and encouraging his sons to go into the ministry, of which two did.

Otten has a very high regard for his father. He was a man who was raised in German when rationalism was taking it hold in the schools, yet he held fast to the truth of Scripture. His father's scriptural conviction is seen best then in his words to Herman Otten as he left for

seminary. He did not want his son to let anyone force any man made religion on him, even Walther or Pieper, but stick to Scripture.

Otten's Family

Reverend Otten enjoyed talking about his family and I must say you could see it. The first relationship that we talked about was with his wife, Grace. She is a wonderful woman who really is a helpmate to Otten. She is the woman behind the man, behind Christian News. She holds it all together running errands, paying bills, and the like. If you see the two together, you can tell that they are truly blessed by the companionship they share.

I had asked Otten to explain how he met Grace and he was more than excited to tell that story. Grace was a student at Valparaiso University studying in the deaceans program. Her roommate was a relation of Otten and that was the connection. At this time, Otten was in the full time ministry living in the parsonage near Trinity in New Haven, Missouri. Grace and her roommate wanted to go to some program in St. Louis but ran late and were not able to make it. They decided to make a detour and stop off to see Herman Otten in New Haven.

Otten was working on something in the house and was wearing short when the knock on the door came. His response to the knock was, "Hold on I have to get my pants on." Apparently, at that time in history it was inappropriate to be seen in public with shorts on. That must have made a wonderful first impression. As it turned out things really did work out and he began to court her. During this time, Reverend Otten got wind that Valparaiso University was teaching evolution in its classes. Since he had a girl to visit and now a reason theologically to head there, he set up a date to visit. His visit was not accepted with much joy by the staff who, by his testimony, tried to dodge the question if and why they were teaching evolution.

Eventually, after Grace graduated and spent her two years as a deaconess she married Herman Otten. It was a small wedding of about three hundred people. All whom were present were close friends. During the reception, a toast was offered and the comment was made, "See Herman does have love." It was a comment that Otten found very humorous because it was in connection with the what the President of the LC-MS seminary had said about him that all Herman Otten needed was love. To which Otten had responded, "I do have love, love for God, love for Scripture, love for my fellow students, and love for you professors and that is why I am telling you are wrong."

Grace and Herman Otten had seven children and two miscarriages. He really loves his children and is proud that they have grown into such fine adults who are avid churchgoers firm in Scripture. There is much that could be said about how Otten interacted with his children, but all of it is overshadowed by what one of his daughters wrote concerning her father. I would not do it justice even to sum it up and so I would encourage anyone to hear it from Otten himself on disc two of the interview. Otten said that his greatest regret was that he did not marry Grace two years earlier so they could have had two more kids.

Otten the Professional

It is hard to bring something new to the table when it comes to Herman Otten as the professional. His professional life is pretty much an open book, or newspaper to be precise. In the interview, he explains the reasons for starting Christian News, his goals of what he wanted it to accomplish, and his fear that his hard work will be for naught as he watches the Synod he loves slowly slip ever backwards, in what he would call its "conservatism."

Perhaps the most profound thing that can be said about Reverend Otten the editor of Christian News concerns the accusations that he has broken the 8th Commandment in the way he has presented his facts. It was a question I asked with trepidation since I am sure no one likes to be accused of such things in such a straightforward manner. However, Otten once again approached the question unguarded and perhaps with a little fire in his voice and eyes. It seemed to me that it was something he really wanted to comment on and I was anxious to hear his response.

Openly he confessed that he had sinned against the 8th Commandment as well as all the other commandments throughout his life to which he continually asked God's forgiveness. He also expressed that he had apologized for not following the process of appropriate admonition, to which the LC-MS had called him to count for. His apology was accepted. Later after they saw that Otten would continue to pursue the issue, his apology was rejected. He then expressed his conviction that the LC-MS also broke the 8th Commandment against him and others. He felt that they were just as guilty as he was in breaking of the Commandment. It is unfortunate that the circle of blame between both parties remains and it seems will never end. Mere weeks before I talked with Otten members of the LC-MS's higher ups had sat with him once again seeking his public confession of guilt and repentance for his sins.

Personal Thoughts/What did I Learn

Herman Otten, as a Christian parent, did what he thought best in the way he treated his children and interacted with them. His consistency in family devotions instilled in his children a love for the Word. As a parent, I know I can learn from him as I raise my children and have

family devotions. If my children can write about me the way his wrote about him I will view my parenting as a job well done and in line with what God desires of Christian parents.

When it comes to Herman Otten's newspaper I have many mixed thoughts. I feel I owe Otten a great amount of respect for "fighting the good fight." He has attempted to change a system that started to fall apart and bring it back to the truth of Scripture. For a time it seemed that, his battle was showing a sign of success, but even by his own admitting that time has slipped away. It is my opinion that Herman Otten is frozen in time. He fights a battle that has long since been lost and in many ways forgotten by those who continue to plow ahead to force their own agenda. He is caught in a circle of fighting and back biting that will never end until someone steps out of the circle. He mentioned in the interview that God is the only one who knows how Christian News has affected people. I would say to Herman Otten that it is time to refocus his energies and give his past battle into God's hands for him to handle.

Herman Otten has so much he can offer the Christian community. His resources and determination can be put to great use in the service of the Kingdom of Christ. There is a lot of things that are going wrong in Christendom. There are a lot of problems that people should be made aware of and light should be shed on such issues. However, the challenge is made against the issue not the heart of the person behind them. We do not judge hearts only confessions. If there is case where brotherly admonition is needed, proper biblical admonition (Matthew 18) should take place with great patience.

Meeting Reverend Otten was truly a pleasure and I will remember the experience fondly. He is a man who has a great mind and talent for what he does. He has ambition and charisma, a true people person. I feel his love for Scripture is genuine and he wishes only to serve his Lord

and Savior, Jesus Christ in any way he can. I will always remember his comment when I asked him what he would like the world to remember about him when he is gone, "A sinner saved by grace." That is the witness he truly wants to leave. It is unfortunate that he has so much controversy surrounding him that might obscure such thoughts.

In the end I am left with one question unasked and unanswered. It is a question that every man in a conflict must ask of himself. "Is it time for me to stop?" Reverend Otten, is it time to stop? Is it time to let God fight the battle waged for so long, focusing your attention on other matters to benefit the Kingdom?

[Note: These questions were meant as merely a guide to help jump-start discussion. Not all of the questions were used in the actual interview, but the majority were touched upon.]

Reverend Herman Otten: The Man Behind Christian News

A Biography Interview

Church History CH3031

Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary, Mequon WI

Professor John Brenner, Dean of Students

By William Harley

Questions

Background: Growing-Up an Otten

1. What was it like to grow up in Bronx, New York?
2. Describe your childhood.
3. Did you attend church or religious services? What were your earliest memories?
4. Describe your parents. What were they like? What did they do?
5. Where did your father work? What is your strongest image of your father?
6. What were some of your first jobs?
7. What did you like to do in your free time when you were growing up? What do you do now?
8. What were some of the crazy fads you or your friends went through?

Background: Herman Otten and Family

1. How did you and Grace meet and what drew you to her?
2. What are some of your fondest memories with Grace?
3. When it comes to your family, is there something you wish you could do over again?
4. Tell me about a memorable moment in your family life; a time you will never forget.
5. What were family finances like and how did it affect you?
6. Concerning your family, especially your children, what is something that you are really proud of and why?

Reverend Herman Otten: The Professional

1. Explain some of the motivating factors that inspired you to start Lutheran(Christian) News in the beginning?
2. What void do you feel Lutheran(Christian) News filled?
3. What benefits do you see your publication of Christian News brings to Christianity as a whole?
4. How do you feel your life's work has impacted and changed the lives of those around you and your readers? Either for better or worse?
5. What things do you find yourself doing that you said you'd "never" do.
6. What are the goals you have set for Christian News to accomplish?
7. When people look back at your life, how do you want to be remembered?
8. Were there any unexpected events that helped or hurt you in a way that you would like to share especially concerning your ministry or Christian News?
9. What inspires you to do what you do?
10. Could you comment on the accusations that are made that Christian News breaks the 8th commandment not in the facts it represents but in the methodology it is written?
11. If such 8th commandment violations are present was it your intent to do so? If so are you as the editor repentant of those violations?
12. Concerning Christian News and some of the things you have written: Is there anything in particular that you wish you could do over?
13. Concerning your work what is something your really proud of and why?
14. Once again, concerning your work what is something you are not proud of and why?
15. What are you frightened of when it comes to the future of the Church?
16. Ever regret the way your life and ministry turned out?