

Gottlieb Fachtmann: Unionistic Opportunist
or Overly Zealous Missionary?

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by

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The slightest insight into the work of Pastor Gottlieb Fachtmann makes one ask: "What could he have done in the age of the automobile?" But, of course, this is a moot question because the twentieth century apparently does not afford as rapid a founding of congregations, especially German Lutheran congregations, as did the nineteenth. Nevertheless, there can be no doubt that Gottlieb Fachtmann was the man for his time and one certainly used by the Lord of the church.

Gottlieb Fachtmann was a phenomenal missionary and founder of congregations. Koehler cites 1857 as "the beginning of the fruitful activity of Synod's first traveling missionary, Pastor G. Fachtmann."¹ Fachtmann had first set foot in Wisconsin in the summer of this same year. He had come to Milwaukee with a recommendation of Pastor Wall, president of the Kirchenverein im Westen.²

Assigned by President Muehlhaeuser to the congregations of Richfield and Town Polk (Washington Co.), he received permission from these congregations to make a missionary journey. And thus, Fachtmann started doing the work for which he should best be remembered. In this fall, 1857, journey we have record of him visiting Sheboygan, Plymouth, Calumet, Chilton, Fond du Lac, Menasha, Neenah, Berlin, Hortonville, New London, and Belle Plaine. In the early months of 1858, this tireless preacher was heard in Horicon, Beaver Dam, Columbus, and Hustisford.³

Well, what does a Synod do when a man is almost single-handedly

evangelizing the state after which the Synod is named?

The answer is simple: The Synod endorses his work. This the Wisconsin Synod did at its 1858 convention held in Milwaukee from May 30, to June 3.⁴

Since a pastor's ministry is usually an extension of his personality we do well to briefly look at the characteristics of Pastor Fachtmann that made him unique among the men in the early days of Synod with respect to missionary ability (Jim Witt's bias toward Moldehnke notwithstanding). Explaining Fachtmann's predilection for mission work, Koehler states:

Evidently his natural bent was in that direction: a love of nature and of travel, the ability to mix with strangers and to size up men and conditions, and in this special sphere the urge to spread the Gospel.⁵

Fachtmann continued his missionary travels in 1858. He seems to have been moving all the time. In fact, in his history of the Synod, Koehler often resumes his narrative on Fachtmann with a statement such as, "We left Fachtmann in...". Many members of our congregations have seen his name in their anniversary publications, not realizing that the name Fachtmann gives their church a kinship of origin with numerous other Wisconsin and Minnesota congregations.

We come now to the consideration of the question posed by the title of this paper, "Gottlieb Fachtmann: Unionistic Opportunist or Overly Zealous Missionary?" Someone might ask whether it is possible to be overly zealous when it comes to doing mission work. If doctrines are compromised or fellowship principles are ignored, then, of course, the answer is in the affirmative.

There can be no question as to Fachtmann's zeal for the gospel and its spread. Not only does the large number of preaching stations give credence to his zeal, but also the amount of work he did at each place. A few excerpts from a letter to Muehlhaeuser dated September 1, 1858, are in order:

From New London Hardenville is barely two German miles, and one German mile this side of Hardenville there is a congregation of more than 60 German Lutheran families, here I was busy last Sunday from 9 a.m. till 5 p.m., there were about 40 communicants, 120-130 hearers, who partly had to stand in front of the school and under the windows, after the service we celebrated the Lord's Supper, then I still had to baptize 11 children and administer a sick communion, after that, Sunday afternoon, I was fetched by vehicle to Menashee, 12 miles away, arriving at 3 p.m., preached and baptized two children at 10 o'clock...

Outside of baptismal and communion sermons, I have already preached 18 times in the month of August, have bantized 36 children, twice have administered the Lord's Supper to sick people.⁶

We have to marvel at the industry and dedication shown by this bachelor pastor. And he surely was not doing this gospel work for "filthy lucre." He also mentions finances in the above letter.

My pocketbook is like the oil cruse of the widow of Zarephath; soon empty but always enough to go on, the great number of baptisms, even though one-third are christened gratis, all the same always help the traveling missionary to get back on his feet again.⁷

Fachtmann had zeal. But, was it a zeal without discretion? Koehler seems to think so. He describes Fachtmann as being of "unionistic tendency."⁸ Yet, perhaps this was due more to the nature of his work, or what Fachtmann considered to be the nature of his work, than to a confessional indifference.

As Reiseprediger Fachtmann's function was to look for new fields and minister sporadically to these same fields until a man could be called. The very label "Reiseprediger" implies that this man's work is more extensive than intensive. That does not mean that a Reiseprediger could be excused for tolerating Reformed doctrine or practice, or other doctrinal errors. And the evidence appears to favor an acquittal of the charge that Fachtmann was generally indifferent toward confessionalism

Hustisford was one location where Fachtmann showed his concern for confessional Lutheranism. About one hundred families, who had separated themselves from another pastor, had united in order to build a church. It was Fachtmann who "urged them to found a purely Lutheran congregation, so the struggle against the Reformed or the Union would not be perpetuated."⁹

And it was at Calumet where a group of people with humanist tendencies expressed a desire to join the Synod. "But Fachtmann opposed their wish because with their stand they could no honestly accept the Augsburg Confession."¹⁰

It also was Fachtmann who in 1860 petitioned Loehe concerning the possibility of sending students to the Wartburg Seminary of the Iowa Synod and requesting that "the students he had in view would not be subjected to the teaching of the eschatological ideas that the seminary sponsored."¹¹ Now, perhaps the very thought of sending students to another seminary shows some flaw in Fachtmann's thinking, nevertheless he was

concerned that the students not be taught doctrines contrary to Scripture. If, as Koehler asserts, Fachtmann was unionistic during his days with the Wisconsin Synod it probably should be considered the result of an overly zealous mission emphasis.

Writes Koehler about the Synod in general:

The Wisconsin Synod from the start stood for Lutheranism. Where the practice in the body was at variance with that confession, it must be charged to the personal stand of individual members, to the lack of clear judgment in individual cases in a new field, to the personal and in many a way not clarified relations with the German societies, and to the missionary zeal that was blind to everything but the ingathering of souls (my emphasis).¹²

Putting the best construction on Fachtmann we'll conclude that the underlined phrase was the major cause of his unionistic practices whenever they manifested themselves, although his connection with the German mission societies (which connection he courted) also comes into play here.

Fachtmann did occasionally "settle down." In September of 1859, he took a call that meant full-time parish work for congregations in La Crosse and Burr Oak. Fachtmann even taught school so it was necessary for him to stay in one place for a while, at least until the bell rang to end the day's classes. But, even with full-time parish work Fachtmann ^{found} time to do mission work along the Mississippi.¹³

In 1863, Fachtmann became the successor at St. Paul, Minnesota, of Father Meyer, founder of the Minnesota Synod. Fachtmann himself joined the Synod; a move which ultimately resulted in the humiliation of this hardworking missionary.¹⁴

The story is somewhat blurred. Meyer moved to Pennsylvania,

but retained the presidency of the Minnesota Synod. Fachtmann was elected secretary of the Synod and, for all practical purposes, was its acting president.

In 1864 there was a vain attempt to oust Fachtmann from the St. Paul church. He was charged with unionistic practices and making less than reverent remarks about the Confessions; this latter charge seems to have been a fabrication. Anyway, the charges did not result in his removal.¹⁵

In 1867 Fachtmann resigned the pastorate of Trinity, St. Paul and began more travels as a missionary. Koehler attributes this to his "old wanderlust."¹⁶

The years until 1871 were fruitful ones for Fachtmann. In the book, Minnesota District Golden Jubilee History, Fachtmann (although he is listed as "George" Fachtmann) is named as one of the early pastors in articles written about four of the churches. He organized St. John's, Minneapolis, on October 13, 1867. He preached at Friedens, New Prague. The other two are Salem, Loretto, Minnesota, and, of course, Trinity, St. Paul.¹⁷

In 1871 Fachtmann was expelled from the Minnesota Synod. Although a novice in readings concerning church expulsions, this writer found it difficult to believe that such charges, in such extreme language could be made against a man with Fachtmann's record. Either between the years 1867 and 1871 Fachtmann had become the most reprehensible man in Christendom,

to be classed with some of the depraved popes, or the charges against Fachtmann were written in an hyperbole not becoming serious accusation. The latter seems to be the case. Perhaps some Synodical politics was afoot. The charges are recorded in Geschichte der Minnesota-Synode.

We cite some quotations along with this writer's translation:

In der Verhandlung darüber ist er als ein ganz verworrener Mann, was Lehre und Erkenntnis anbetrifft, erfunden worden. Seine Praxis ist, selbst vom allgemeinen christlichen Standpunkt aus, eine höchst verwerfliche.

In the discussion concerning this, with reference to learning and understanding, he had become a completely muddle-headed man. His practice is utterly reprehensible, against the universal Christian point of view.

Er versuchte allen Ernstes die Synode zu zerreißen und eine Oppositions-Synode zu gründen und wurde als ein ganz im Lugegeiste verkommener Mann offenbar.

He attempted with all earnestness to tear apart the Synod and to establish an opposition Synod and has become manifest as a man completely ruined by Satan.¹⁸

And they end up with a prayer for his repentance after they have "handed him over to the devil."

It is extremely difficult to comprehend what produced such vile charges against this man. Even Koehler states that he has found no historical data.

The 1871 Minnesota synodical report tells about Fachtmann's expulsion and denounces him as a unionist, a liar, and as one who misused his office as traveling missionary to attempt the founding of another Synod. Fachtmann's record as a unionist has become familiar to us, but it seems strange to a real student of history that the historical work, from which some of our data has been gained, omits to offer the proof for the other two charges, and offers no information as to the further history of the man who, after all, had done yeoman's service in the Wisconsin and Minnesota synods.¹⁹

It seems that if Fachtmann was desirous of starting his own Synod, there could have been no better days than his days as the Wisconsin Synod Reiseprediger. He was highly respected everywhere he went and was frequently extended calls by the people whom he served at the various towns. We will even grant that he had unionistic tendencies, but these probably were not the tendencies of an opportunist. Fachtmann was a zealous, hardworking missionary to whom our Synod owes many thanks.

Endnotes

- 1) John Philipp Koehler, The History of the Wisconsin Synod (St. Cloud, Minn.: Sentinel, 1970), p. 53
- 2) Ibid.
- 3) Ibid.
- 4) Ibid.
- 5) Ibid.
- 6) Ibid., p. 55
- 7) Ibid., p. 56
- 8) Ibid., p. 73
- 9) Ibid., p. 53
- 10) Ibid., p. 53
- 11) Ibid., p. 76
- 12) Ibid., p. 80
- 13) Ibid., p. 60
- 14) Ibid.
- 15) Ibid., 127-128
- 16) Ibid., p.127
- 17) Minnesota District Golden Jubilee History (Minneapolis: Ad Art Advertising Co., 1969), pp. 190, 215, 231, 304
- 18) Geschichte der Minnesota-Synode (St. Louis: Lange, 1909), pp. 8,9
- 19) Koehler, p. 128

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Koehler, John Philipp. The History of the Wisconsin Synod. St. Cloud: Sentinel, 1970.

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