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**In Search of the Orthodox Lutheran  
Conference**

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**April 2000**

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As far as numbers go, it barely registers. It was in existence for about ten years out of the 2000 year history of the Christian Church. It involved fewer than 20 congregations (the exact number depends on how you count them) and maybe 20 to 30 pastors (although not all at the same time). When it was finally dissolved, there were only four pastors and a few congregations involved, and they were absorbed into the comparatively larger Wisconsin Synod — itself often considered unworthy of much attention in comparison to the Missouri Synod or ELCA.

As far as numbers go, yes, there is not much to suggest that the Orthodox Lutheran Conference is worthy of much attention, but when Christian historians look at churches and church bodies, they understand that numbers never tell the whole story. Those who understand the work and ways of the Holy Spirit know that the measure of a pastor, a school, a congregation, a denomination, or a "movement" lies not only in the quantifiable numbers exhibited, but also, and more importantly, in the spiritual and theological effects — what happened in people's hearts, souls and minds.

Therefore a look at the legacy of the Orthodox Lutheran Church (OLC), without regard for numerical assessments, shows that it is indeed worthy of further study. Into (and eventually out of) the OLC went a number of influential men from the Lutheran Church - Missouri Synod, most notably Dr. Paul Edward Kretzmann, a prolific writer and champion of confessional Lutheran orthodoxy, whose Popular Commentary of the Bible<sup>1</sup> helped guide the faith and study of thousands (perhaps millions, if one includes those taught by those who used it). The OLC's small seminary produced pastors who have served Lutheran churches for decades — most significant of whom would be Dr. A.L. Barry, current president of the Missouri Synod. Although the OLC itself disbanded almost 40 years ago, from its splinters came other church bodies that are still in existence and influencing Lutheran affairs today (the Concordia Lutheran Conference, the Lutheran Churches of the Reformation, the Fellowship of Lutheran Congregations and others can all trace at least some of their history to the OLC; through various pastors and other individuals there are also connections to the Church of the Lutheran Confessions and to the Lutheran

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<sup>1</sup>Paul. E. Kretzmann, *Popular Commentary of the Bible — Old Testament* (2 volumes) & *New Testament* (2 volumes), (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1921-24).

Conference of Confessional Fellowship). The publications of the OLC — the *Orthodox Lutheran* magazine<sup>2</sup> and the *Orthodox Lutheran Theologian* journal<sup>3</sup> — also reached an audience wider than the conference itself, and included many valuable essays and articles promoting and defending the cause of orthodox and confessional Lutheranism, as well as translations of important essays by men like C.F.W. Walther and Franz Pieper.

A problem, however, presents itself. The OLC — a group so deserving of study, a group with a definite and important place in Lutheran history — came to an end in 1962, and the winds of time and doctrine have eroded and scattered what remains of the OLC's history. Certain elements and records seem to have been lost forever — others have been dispersed across both denominational and geographical boundaries — and some lie locked in the dissipating memories of a dying generation.

Other essays and papers have dealt with specific aspects of the OLC's history — generally those that have ample primary source material readily available — but no comprehensive history has ever been written. This paper, then, will outline the search for the complete history of the OLC, the problems involved in that search, what is available and what is to be searched for, and finally, to make an argument for continued and intensive study of the OLC and its members.

## I. The Problem of Documentation

The history of American Lutheran synods has, for the most part, been reasonably well preserved — at least the history of larger and existent synods. The Lutheran Church - Missouri Synod has for a long time had its Concordia Historical Institute to house its records and archives;

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<sup>2</sup> The "official organ of the Orthodox Lutheran Conference". Published November 1951 - March 1962 (OLC had dissolved by then) from various locations, beginning at Okabena, MN, but mostly from Minneapolis, MN.

<sup>3</sup> Published ~1953 - 1961 by the OLC Seminary faculty in Minneapolis. The exact dates aren't certain at this point, since the WLS Library only contains Vol. 1, No. 2 - Feb. 1953 (No. 1 is missing) through Vol. 9, Nos. 1-2,3-4 - Jan.-Feb. & March-April 1961. Also, it appears that there might not have actually been any students enrolled in the final years, so the idea of a "seminary faculty" publishing the *Orthodox Lutheran Theologian*, may have brought the journal to its end earlier than the OLC itself disbanded.

it employs men full-time to write and preserve the memories of its church body for posterity — for research and to maintain a link to its past. The Wisconsin Synod has not done quite so well, due somewhat to lack of resources but due more to insufficient resolve to preserve its past. Still, the WELS has its archives and Historical Society, and quite a few good historical books, papers and essays have been written, such that tracking its 150 year history is not problematic — there are just many places where a historian might wish certain documents or memories had not disappeared with the passing years.

The situation with the OLC's history is, however, much more perplexing and problematic. Although its founders had a great sense of history — in that they wished to preserve the Missouri Synod in the orthodoxy that characterized it under Walther and Pieper — they did not see much sense in creating a repository for their own history — there are no OLC archives or any other collections of official papers or correspondence.<sup>4</sup> Even the records of the OLC seminary have become either lost or inaccessible.<sup>5</sup> The official publications which normally allow the historian to study the past of a church body are even hard to track down — for example, the collections of the Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary Library and the WELS archives do not have complete sets of the *Orthodox Lutheran*, the *Orthodox Lutheran Theologian*, or even the yearly OLC convention proceedings.

With this relative paucity of primary sources, one would hope at least to find good written histories of the OLC, but, again, the researcher finds only bits and pieces here and there. The most valuable document is a four chapter essay by P.E. Kretzmann entitled *"A Short History of the*

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<sup>4</sup> As far as this author has been able to determine. If there are any such collections in existence, their existence has not been made widely known.

<sup>5</sup> In a phone interview 4/12/2000 with Rev. Arthur Schupmann, the first graduate of the OLC seminary, he explained how another graduate called him many years after the OLC dissolved trying to get a copy of his transcript so that he might begin graduate study at the University of Wisconsin. Rev. Schupmann was not sure if the other pastor ever got his paperwork — the registrar of the seminary (the only person likely to have kept the records) was the Rev. Albert M. Schupmann, who died in 1973. (The author of this paper is still waiting for information from Al Schupmann's widow, Millie, as to what papers he might have left behind.)

*Orthodox Lutheran Conference*".<sup>6</sup> This paper gives a valuable overview of the background, antecedents and beginnings of the OLC, but unfortunately is brief (as the title indicates) and limited, covering only through 1952, i.e. only about a year of the OLC's history.

Apparently no further attempt was made by anyone in the OLC to add to Kretzmann's "Short History"; it seems that the only subsequent historical papers have been written by men outside and long-removed from the OLC. The Concordia Lutheran Conference (a group which split from the OLC and which claims to be the "real" Orthodox Lutheran Conference, despite its name change) has provided a few historical references in its publications and essays, but these are of limited use to the historian, given that they left the OLC in 1956 and exhibit a marked partisan bias in their reporting.<sup>7</sup>

Student history papers actually make up most of the other writings on the OLC. Two Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary students (now WELS pastors) focused on the complex fellowship questions involved in the relationship between the WELS and the OLC<sup>8</sup> (both papers relied on the only OLC primary sources available to them, the *Orthodox Lutheran* and OLC convention proceedings). Further information is found in the papers of three other seminary students (also now WELS pastors) that discuss two "successor" church bodies to the OLC — the aforementioned Concordia Lutheran Conference and the Lutheran Churches of the Reformation.<sup>9</sup> There is also one WLS senior history paper dealing with the history of a congregation which was intimately

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<sup>6</sup> Published originally by the OLC (1953?); accessed online 4/3/2000 at the web site of the Concordia Lutheran Conference: <http://www.concordialutheranconf.com/pekhhistory.html>.

<sup>7</sup> Cf. For example, *"A Popular History of the Concordia Lutheran Conference (through 1980)"*, accessed online 4/3/2000 at: <http://www.concordialutheranconf.com/hdmhistory.html>.

<sup>8</sup> Mark Cares, "The Role that Wisconsin's State of Confession Played in the Break-Up of the Orthodox Lutheran Conference" (1977); and Peter Panitzke, "The Orthodox Lutheran Conference and Its Relationship with the Wisconsin Synod" (April 23, 1982) [both papers can be found in the WLS library essay files].

<sup>9</sup> Frederick Casmer, "The Trumpet with the Certain Sound — An Analysis of the Lutheran Churches of the Reformation (LCR) Viewed from its Historical and Doctrinal Roots" (April 29, 1980); Gary Kraklow, "A Presentation of the Lutheran Churches of the Reformation" (April 30, 1981); and Nathan Cordes, "What Ever Happened to the Men Who Joined the Concordia Lutheran Conference?" (May 15, 1989) — which discusses the cases of ten pastors [all three papers can be found in the WLS library essay files].

linked to the history of the OLC — Trinity Lutheran Church of Chesterfield, Missouri.<sup>10</sup> Special mention should also be made of a valuable thesis<sup>11</sup> from a Missouri Synod student, Todd A. Peperkorn (now an LCMS pastor), who was able to make use of primary source material from the files of LCMS President Behnken housed at the Concordia Historical Institute in St. Louis.

An interesting evaluation of the OLC and its successor church bodies is also found in a somewhat unexpected location: the *Newsletter* of the Lutheran Conference of Confessional Fellowship<sup>12</sup>. Rev. R.E. Wehrwein (the editor) wrote a series of 12 articles, "Surveying Small Lutheran Groups", which appeared in print between 1992 and 1997.<sup>13</sup> The series begins with reference to the OLC and pays considerable attention to its seminal, foundational, and influential role in the history not only of the Concordia Lutheran Conference and the Lutheran Churches of the Reformation, but also of the Fellowship of Lutheran Congregations, the Illinois Lutheran Conference, and even the Church of the Lutheran Confession (and by extension, Wehrwein's own Lutheran Conference of Confessional Fellowship<sup>14</sup>).

With the exception of brief mentions in other essays and books, this author has found no

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<sup>10</sup> Mark Rieke, "Fifteen Turbulent Years in St. Louis: The Events Leading to the Founding of Martin Luther Evangelical Lutheran Church" (1982) [this author wishes that the now Rev. Rieke had researched and interviewed a bit more widely in preparing his paper — there are some gaps and inaccuracies that other members of this author's extended family would have been able to correct.] [this paper can be found in the WLS library essay files].

<sup>11</sup> Todd A. Peperkorn, "The Events and People Which Led to the Formation of the Orthodox Lutheran Conference of 1951: A Thesis" (February 5, 1992) [available from Rev. Peperkorn — this author also has a copy available for reference].

<sup>12</sup> This is a small group which broke from the Church of the Lutheran Confession in 1983 over differences in dealing with members holding membership in or policies with the "unionistic" Aid Association for Lutherans or Lutheran Brotherhood. Their position can be characterized as more strict on fellowship than that of the CLC.

<sup>13</sup> R.E. Wehrwein, "Surveying Small Groups", *Lutheran Conference of Confessional Fellowship Newsletter*; Vol. 9, No. 1 (Jan.-Feb. 1992); Vol. 9, No. 2 (Mar.-Apr. 1992); Vol. 9, No. 3 (May-June 1992); Vol. 10, No. 2 (Mar.-Apr. 1993); Vol. 10, No. 3 (May-June 1993); Vol. 10, No. 6 (Nov.-Dec. 1993); Vol. 11, No. 3 (May-June 1994); Vol. 12, No. 2 (Mar.-Apr. 1995); Vol. 12, No. 3 (May-June 1995); Vol. 12, No. 5 (Sept.-Oct. 1995); Vol. 13, No. 2 (Mar.-Apr. 1996); Vol. 14, No. 3 (May-June 1997).

<sup>14</sup> Wehrwein has apparently since left the LCCF — his current affiliation, if any, is unknown — a curious development, given certain comments and judgments made in his articles about men who had difficulty remaining in fellowship with their brothers in ministry.

other significant historical treatments of the OLC — and certainly nothing like a comprehensive account of the OLC, covering its beginnings, its ten year existence and its (various) ends. This leaves the curious historian with only fragments and scattered pieces of information, some documented, some only hearsay; as though the OLC's history were a matriarch's favorite jigsaw puzzle, unevenly divided among her numerous heirs — few of whom actually understand the value or positions of the pieces they received, none of whom are prepared to gather all the heirs or pieces together to complete the picture.

The previously mentioned publications of the OLC — the *Orthodox Lutheran* magazine and the *Orthodox Lutheran Theologian* journal — as well as the convention proceedings and other published documents, where (if?) complete sets can be found, are the best place to start piecing the puzzle together. They might be considered the outer edge pieces that give the puzzle its outline — put together, they tell the historian what space the whole picture occupies and give a good idea of what is contained inside it — but not too much more. Some of the inner areas are filled in from these sources, but only partially.

The difficulty with these publications, as far as the curious historian is concerned, is that they lived up to their purpose too well. In the *Orthodox Lutheran*, for example, where one would like to see narratives and reports of what is going on month by month in the OLC, instead we find briefs on aberrations of doctrine and practice in the Missouri Synod, or the American Lutheran Church, or the Common Confession — in keeping with the fourth point of the magazine's "Statement of Purpose": "To *Uncover* the current false doctrines, to *Oppose* them, and to *Warn* against them, especially to unmask *False Lutherans* and their *Aberrations* from Scriptures and the pure Lutheran Confessions, including the Book of Concord of 1580, the Brief Statement of 1932, and our Confession of Faith."<sup>15</sup>

Similarly, where curiosity seeks to find petty partisanship and battles in print among former brothers in the faith (which would illuminate the controversies hinted at elsewhere), one

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<sup>15</sup> "Statement of Purpose" — included on inside cover of every issue of the *Orthodox Lutheran*.

instead finds an evangelical, patient, irenic and truthful tone.<sup>16</sup> Where one might expect polemics, one finds poetry; where one would look for diatribes, one finds devotions instead. This is in keeping with the third purpose: "To *Show* what *True* Lutherans *Must* believe, how they are to *Live* a Christian life, suffer in patience, and die in peace." The historian appreciates the evangelical character of the writers, but finds himself looking — perhaps even wishing — for more named names and accusatory source citations.

There is also little trace of invective in the *Orthodox Lutheran Theologian*. Billed as a professional journal, it remained that.<sup>17</sup> The convention proceedings that this author was able to peruse similarly showed a decided effort to avoid recording discord or conflict, concentrating instead on the positive events and accomplishments of their meetings.<sup>18</sup>

Other written sources (beyond the OLC publications) that fill in empty areas of the puzzle do exist, although many are not readily accessible (if at all), and it is often difficult to determine what documents really have survived the passage of time. As previously mentioned, the Missouri Synod's Concordia Historical Institute in St. Louis does have some primary source materials relating to the OLC from the perspective of "the other side".<sup>19</sup> What is harder to determine is what

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<sup>16</sup> For example, the February 1956 (Vol. 5, No.2) issue of the *Orthodox Lutheran* contains not a single reference to the men who had just the month before separated themselves from the OLC (i.e., the group that became the Concordia Lutheran Conference). In a report on a "special convention" of the OLC held on February 4, 1956, Albert Schupmann, the new president of the OLC, made only oblique reference to the controversies of the preceding months, named no names in the opposition, and took the opportunity to reaffirm the goals and purposes of the Conference. Earlier in the issue, W.H. McLaughlin offers four paragraphs explaining and reaffirming the OLC's position on whether the Wisconsin Synod can properly be considered "heterodox" — the splinter group claimed that they could, the remnant OLC group said not. Nowhere, however, does McLaughlin point fingers, call names or sound a triumphant note.

<sup>17</sup> — although its production quality was often less than professional — particularly after Kretzmann and McLaughlin left. Editor O.G. Schupmann simply had too many responsibilities at that point.

<sup>18</sup> This evangelical tone of the OLC stands in marked contrast to that often heard from the Concordia Lutheran Conference men — cf. "Some Sad Disappointments" in *"A Popular History of the Concordia Lutheran Conference"*, *op. cit.* Besides being unpleasant reading, the blatant partiality makes for questionable historicity — one needs to sort out the facts from the accusations and judgments.

<sup>19</sup> An email received 4/20/2000 from Rev. Mark Loest clarified what CHI has available: "The file ... has 38 items, some of which are several pages in length. This includes materials from the O.L.C., correspondence to Dr. Behnken from others and Behnken's correspondence to O.L.C.



primary source material from the OLC itself is still extant. The personal papers and library of Dr. P.E. Kretzmann were left to a member of his congregation in Minneapolis — these seem, from description, to be somewhat extensive and probably of historical value, but their custodian declined, when contacted, to give any real details as to their content, nature, or quantity. He also has denied access to the documents in the past when he felt a researcher might not treat Dr. Kretzmann's memory or legacy with proper respect.<sup>20</sup>

Three of the four pastors who remained in the OLC when it disbanded were sons of the Rev. Gustav Schupmann (pastor of the Chesterfield, MO congregation mentioned on page 4)<sup>21</sup>, and all three retained some documents from their OLC days. Arthur Schupmann, the youngest, is now a WELS pastor serving in Hot Springs Village, Arkansas. When contacted, he indicated that he was not sure what he might still have in his possession that might be of historical value; he did know, however, that he had thrown quite a few things out when he moved there from Milwaukee some years ago.<sup>22</sup> Albert Schupmann, who did not serve as a pastor again after the OLC dissolved, but who served the OLC over the years as secretary, president, and seminary professor, left some papers behind with his widow in Ballwin, Missouri, but she was uncertain what exactly they might be.<sup>23</sup> Otto Schupmann edited the *Orthodox Lutheran*, and his church and home in Minneapolis housed the OLC seminary; he also served for a time as OLC president. He and his congregation were involved in a number of the important struggles that took place at the beginning (with the

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and others. There are copies of legal judgments, newspaper clippings, and publicity. The materials date from 1952-1957. Some of the correspondence is copied on thin paper and is probably not reproducible, but is legible."

<sup>20</sup> Telephone interview with David J. Darsow, April 24, 2000. Mr. Darsow is "very cautious" with Kretzmann's materials and considered them "precious". Although he is currently a member of an LCMS congregation and has been in the WELS, he has had some bad synodical experiences with both LCMS and WELS and is therefore unwilling to donate the materials to either synod's archives.

<sup>21</sup> This is the point at which the author reveals that he is the son of Marie Samelson, *née* Schupmann, one of the 15 children of Gustav and Maria Schupmann. He also states for the record that his grandfather Gustav died before the author was born, and that both Otto and Albert died before he had a chance to meet or know either.

<sup>22</sup> Telephone interview 4/12/2000.

<sup>23</sup> The author is still awaiting a return phone call from Mrs. A.M. Schupmann.

Missouri Synod) and through to the end of the OLC's history. After his death in 1975, some of Otto's papers ended up with a nephew who is a pastor in the WELS,<sup>24</sup> unfortunately, these are far less revealing or complete than a researcher might hope.<sup>25</sup>

The puzzle pieces were scattered even farther and wider. There is a good chance that some other valuable documents are in the hands of men, churches, or schools of the Concordia Lutheran Conference or the Lutheran Churches of the Reformation. When the Concordia group split off from the OLC, they had some of the OLC officers among them — they might very well have kept any official documents associated with their responsibilities.<sup>26</sup> Both Kretzmann and McLaughlin became part of the Lutheran Churches of the Reformation, and McLaughlin taught at their seminary — some records from his years with the OLC (he also taught in the OLC seminary and served as its president) might also have been preserved among them — but where, and with whom, is part of the puzzle.

Still other primary source materials require some historical "legwork" to acquire and compile — most of which relate to the OLC's struggles with the Missouri Synod in its early years. If even a portion of the words and actions of some LCMS district officials — as related by various OLC men<sup>27</sup> — are true, then there might exist in those district archives some quite revealing correspondence. A number of the OLC-LCMS battles involved court action, as one part of a congregation sued another over denominational membership and control of property. The records

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24 The Rev. Philip Schupmann of Aurora, IL, son of the Rev. Francis Q. Schupmann, who died in 1954 — he also had been embroiled in a battle with the LCMS when he tried to lead his congregation into the OLC.

25 This author has had access to these documents. The most valuable among them are some letters to and from various "actors" in the OLC, particularly from the early years. Unfortunately, the papers were all received in a state of disorder, and it appears that Otto (or his family) had lost or disposed of a great deal of material before his death. The author and/or his cousin Philip may try to bring all the various Schupmann papers together at some point to see what kind of archive can be compiled.

26 Two enquiring emails sent through Concordia's web site have not been answered.

27 The correspondence in Otto Schupmann's papers reveals some serious allegations against some LCMS & district officials. A good summary of a number of different cases is found in the section titled "The Beginning of Our Conference, Formerly Called the 'Orthodox Lutheran Conference', 1951" in *"A Popular History of the Concordia Lutheran Conference," op. cit.*

of these court cases would undoubtedly also shed some light on what really happened in those congregations — and illustrate also the characters and positions of the various "players" in each case.<sup>28</sup>

One valuable source of information about the OLC and its members is sadly disappearing without being tapped. Almost 50 years have passed since the OLC was formed and the inevitable has occurred — most of the men and women with first-hand knowledge of those years and events have passed away, particularly the leaders, who were generally older than the rest. Those who remain find their memories fading and unclear; some, possibly recalling the strife and pain of those years, have no desire to remember. Some others perhaps want their OLC connections to be forgotten or ignored.<sup>29</sup> Men and women who left the OLC for one reason or another also drop out of sight — if they do not turn up in some other church body's records, their recollections cannot be collected.

The search for the documentary history of the OLC is therefore problematic and frustrating. What is easily accessible is insufficient; what else we know exists is often hard to find or outright inaccessible. What is out there, unknown, no one is sure — what insights or explanations lie locked in district archives, basement storage lockers, untapped memories, church records, and personal diaries? When a church body votes itself out of existence, where does its institutional memory come to rest? The jigsaw puzzle may never again be complete, with all its pieces in place; we will see some of the picture, and know the outline, but details will be missing, because some of the heirs lost their pieces, some threw them away, and some simply let the colors fade.

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<sup>28</sup> A portion of the Trinity, Chesterfield, MO case is recorded in "The Doctrinal Position of the Orthodox Lutheran Conference, A Court Statement," *Concordia Historical Institute Quarterly*, Vol. XXVII, April 1954, pp. 20-33. The OLC men, based on this excerpt, could have used a bit more sophistication and shrewdness in their dealings before the court.

<sup>29</sup> Current LCMS President Dr. A.L. Barry was a student at the OLC seminary in Minneapolis and a classmate of Rev. Arthur Schupmann. A letter sent to Dr. Barry 3/30/2000 inquiring about his OLC experiences and memories, as well as his reason for leaving, has not been answered.

## II. Points of Contact — Historical Overview

The Orthodox Lutheran Conference was born out of the Lutheran Church – Missouri Synod (LCMS), and its founders never truly wanted to leave the synod of Walther, Stoeckhardt and Pieper. As Martin Luther only wanted to reform, not leave, the church that he had grown up in, they only wanted to reform Missouri. Events and people in the LCMS, however, eventually convinced the OLC founders that separation was the only godly option for the true confessional Lutherans in the synod.

It is hard to say when the troubles really began. Kretzmann's *"Short History"* points to 1929, when the Chicago Intersynodical Theses were not unequivocally repudiated by Missouri, as the pivotal year; for others the critical year was 1945, when 44 prominent men in the Missouri Synod accepted and promoted the "Chicago Statement"<sup>30</sup>, which openly argued against long-held doctrinal positions of the Missouri Synod and proposed greater union with other Lutheran church bodies. Still others might consider the prayer fellowship case of Dr. Adolph Brux in the 1930s as the decisive beginning of the divisions that led to the formation of the OLC — and to the eventual destruction of the Synodical Conference.

Nevertheless, by the late 1940s it was becoming increasingly clear to conservatives in the Missouri Synod that things were changing for the worse — not all at once, not everywhere, but subtly and seriously. Unionistic pastors were not being disciplined, the attempts to find common ground with the American Church were resulting in doctrinal compromises, and professors at the St. Louis seminary were beginning to adopt higher critical methodology in their approach to Scripture. Dr. P.E. Kretzmann, a professor at Concordia - St. Louis, resigned his position there already in 1945 because his protests regarding the unscriptural and un-Lutheran positions of some fellow faculty members were going unheard and unheeded.

Much of this came to a head in 1949 when the Concordia - St. Louis faculty publicly stated that engagement was not tantamount to marriage. While in the year 2000 that may seem a minor matter, at that time it was seen and recognized as a rebellion against the historic teachings of the

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<sup>30</sup> Commonly known either as "A Statement" or the "Statement of the 44".

Lutheran church and of the Missouri Synod. If the seminary faculty were able to change the doctrinal position of the church — a position stated clearly in the Small Catechism used throughout the synod — merely by issuing an opinion, then no doctrine of Scripture was safe from such reinterpretation. Conservatives in the Missouri Synod — both pastors and laymen — resolved to fight this trend before it got any further.

Their fight, however, proved less than successful. Through groups like the St. Louis Study Club and the Chicago Study Club, and with publications like the *Confessional Lutheran*<sup>31</sup> and various mimeographed essays by Kretzmann and others distributed throughout the synod, the battle was engaged, particularly against the *Common Confession* adopted by the 1950 Synod Convention in Milwaukee. The size, power, and intransigence of the Missouri Synod soon proved too much for their little effort. By the fall of 1951 it became clear that neither the conservatives' voices within Missouri, nor the voices of Wisconsin and the Norwegians outside would be able to convince anyone of the imminent danger of theological liberalism.

Thus, in September of 1951, 22 men, mostly pastors, gathered at St. John's Evangelical Lutheran Church in Okabena, Minnesota, in order to consolidate and organize as true, confessional Lutherans. From this meeting came a newborn church body, the Orthodox Lutheran Conference, having already a full slate of officers and its own paper, the *Orthodox Lutheran*. A final constitution was adopted in convention in August 1952, and plans were finalized for the opening of the seminary the following month.

By this point the leadership of the Missouri Synod had finally begun to pay attention. Complaining conservatives might be ignored, but congregations being taken out of the synod was a serious concern. Wherever OLC pastors served, their congregations were pressured to depose them and remain with Missouri — in most cases this either succeeded outright or resulted in a split congregation, with the expected conflict and troubles that accompany such divisions. In some

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<sup>31</sup> Published by the Confessional Lutheran Publicity Bureau, Clinton, Iowa, the Rev. Paul Burgdorf, editor.

cases it appears that Missouri was even willing to play against the rules to get its way,<sup>32</sup> and this only strengthened the resolve of the OLC men and their conviction that Missouri's slide into liberalism was only worsening.

Regardless of the methods used by the Missouri Synod in response to the OLC breakaway, one element was consistent throughout: Missouri's leadership refused to acknowledge any change in doctrine or practice on its part — effectively labeling the OLC irrational troublemakers, making noise over nothing. This denial of change in Missouri — whether by deliberate decision or incredible ignorance on the part of the leadership (President Behnken in particular) — also served to frustrate the efforts of its Synodical Conference partners to address the issues.

Not all strife in the Orthodox Lutheran Conference was external, however. In its first years the OLC attracted a number of theologically conservative pastors who had been poorly treated by Missouri or their congregations, or both. There were also some men who apparently loved a fight, and were more interested in the struggle than in the gospel truth that was at the center of and reason for the struggle.

Eventually many of these men got tired of waiting for the Wisconsin Synod to break fellowship with Missouri and determined that Wisconsin was, by virtue of its inaction, heterodox, and therefore there could be no fellowship between the OLC or its members and any Wisconsin pastor or congregation. This view was in direct and serious conflict with that of the theological leadership of the OLC — Kretzmann and McLaughlin — and many others, including the various Schupmanns. This disagreement came to a head in 1955 and resulted in the split of the OLC at the beginning of 1956, both groups claiming to be the "authentic" OLC until the other group gave in and renamed itself the Concordia Lutheran Conference. The subsequent histories of some of these pastors in their new church body shows that they were indeed the kind of men who seem to crave controversy and find affirmation in standing alone — the type of men who have trouble staying in fellowship even with their own shadows.

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<sup>32</sup> For instance, in the court proceedings of the Trinity, Chesterfield, MO case, the LCMS visitor (circuit pastor) was apparently admonished by the trial judge for coaching witnesses and signalling answers to them — letters of Harold Strumpler of April 24 & 25, 1952 (in files of Otto Schupmann).

Another split followed a few years later when Dr. P.E. Kretzmann — in many ways, the heart and soul of the OLC — found himself at odds with his pastor, Otto Schupmann.<sup>33</sup> Kretzmann left Schupmann's church in Minneapolis, and therefore the OLC, at the end of 1958 and was basically without a church body until the formation of the Lutheran Churches of the Reformation in 1964. W.H. McLaughlin also left the OLC a short time after Kretzmann did<sup>34</sup> — they apparently joined together in a small Lutheran fellowship of their own in someone's Minneapolis home.<sup>35</sup>

The remnant of the OLC continued on their own from 1959-1961, continuing to produce both publications<sup>36</sup> and still carrying the banner of orthodox Lutheranism. When the WELS finally broke with Missouri in 1961, however, the reason for the OLC's separate stance had basically disappeared along with the effective dissolution of the Synodical Conference. The remaining four pastors and congregations of the OLC determined, after meeting with the WELS Council of Presidents in February 1962, that they were in doctrinal agreement; the OLC therefore would be dissolved, and the pastors and congregations would apply for entry into the Wisconsin Synod. And thus the Orthodox Lutheran Conference, just a little over ten years old, came to a quiet end.

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<sup>33</sup> This author has struggled to find the exact reason for this break. Kretzmann never wrote about it in the *"Conservative Lutheran Defender"*, which he published in Minneapolis until shortly before his death. It is well-attested that Otto Schupmann was not the easiest man to get along with. "Abrasive", "stubborn", "pig-headed", "bossy" are all terms that have been used to describe him — even by his siblings. The best recollection of the specific cause for the split with Kretzmann comes from David Darsow: apparently Schupmann had claimed that he as pastor had the right to unilaterally excommunicate a member. When Kretzmann attempted to correct his false doctrine, Schupmann responded by insisting even more strongly, precipitating a final break in fellowship. It is hoped that Kretzmann's papers might reveal more of the details of his split with the OLC.

<sup>34</sup> I have found nothing to suggest why exactly McLaughlin left. If for the same reasons Kretzmann did, one wonders why was it months before he left.

<sup>35</sup> Kretzmann's feelings remained strong in 1962. After the OLC men met with the WELS Council of Presidents and agreed to enter the WELS, President O.J. Naumann took it upon himself to write to Kretzmann in the interesting of arranging a rapprochement between the former OLC pastors and their former colleague. Dr. Kretzmann, in very uncharacteristically harsh language, eventually demanded that "the Schupmanns" apologize first, and wanted "a retraction of the insults which they hurled at me" (Letter to O.J. Naumann, Sept. 17, 1962). An earlier letter accused them of "tendencies toward lording it over the rest of us and some of them began to take a false stand on questions of church polity and even became guilty of false teaching" (Letter to O.J. Naumann, March 10, 1962).

<sup>36</sup> By this point almost everything published was either a translation from the German, written by Otto or Albert Schupmann, or copied outright from other publications.

### III. The Need to Uncover, Recover and Write the History of the OLC

Should the Orthodox Lutheran Conference be more than just a curiosity or footnote in the history of American Lutheranism? Should it be of value to anyone other than those with roots in it? Is the OLC worth a historian's time?

The answer is a definitive "yes". The history of the OLC is and should be of value to Lutherans — not just to historians, but to all who are interested in modern confessional Lutheranism. There are numerous reasons for this.

As should be obvious from previous references in this paper, the OLC has had an important influence on the "current history" of Lutheranism in the United States. The Concordia Lutheran Conference and the Lutheran Churches of the Reformation (and a number of other small church bodies) have their roots in the OLC, as do numerous individual pastors and congregations. None of these can be properly understood without a thorough knowledge of what preceded them.

Additionally, the issues that the OLC faced are still around today — the struggles to preserve sound biblical exegesis and doctrinal purity, the concern for proper fellowship practices, and the nature of church polity. Indeed, an argument can easily be made that the failure of the LCMS to listen and respond to the concerns of the OLC men at mid-century is responsible for most of the problems facing Missouri today — from theological liberalism to arguments over church and ministry and the perception of synodical dictatorship. It is more than a little ironic that a man trained by the OLC, President A.L. Barry, is fighting many of the same battles his teachers did some 50 years earlier.<sup>37</sup>

The history of the OLC is important for study also simply because of the role it actually did play in American Lutheranism. While such a small and short-lived church body can hardly seem to have had much lasting significance, the witness it gave to the problems of doctrine and practice within the Missouri Synod brought attention to many issues that might otherwise have remained unheeded. Their constant and consistent voice for reform within the LCMS, coupled with that of the WELS, undoubtedly provided a moderating influence on the most liberal of the

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<sup>37</sup> And sometimes it appears that he has far less support than they did.



Missouri men, keeping them from leading the synod as far to the left as they might have wished.<sup>38</sup>

Yet another contribution made by the OLC is a tremendous body of theological literature. P.E. Kretzmann was a prolific writer with a rare talent for presenting scriptural truth for public consumption. More of his writings — theological, exegetical, devotional, isagogical — should be made available to today's Lutherans for profitable study. Kretzmann was also quite an accomplished poet, and his devotional verses are found in many issues of the *Orthodox Lutheran*.

W.H. McLaughlin was also a good theologian, though he wrote less than Kretzmann. The men of the OLC also did a great deal of translation work, giving to English-speaking Lutherans many works of C.F.W. Walther, Francis Pieper and others that were otherwise accessible only to German speakers. All of these works, both original and translated, are well worth further study by today's theologians and historians.<sup>39</sup>

The lessons to be learned from the history of the OLC are myriad: How far is too far when it comes to stretching doctrines? How is the Eighth Commandment properly applied in theological disputes? How does the eventual split between the OLC and Missouri compare to similar divisions that exist today? How about the split between the OLC and the Concordia Lutheran Conference — what can be learned from that sad experience? All these questions are worthy of further study.

In the history of the OLC we find men cast as heroes and villains, we find examples not

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<sup>38</sup> The author is reminded of the lesson of the U.S. Involvement in Vietnam. A man who had served in the U.S. Foreign Service in Vietnam once told him that American objectives there had actually been met — we went there to contain communism and keep it from spreading in Southeast Asia. Communism did stop in Indochina and never got a foothold in Thailand, Burma, Malaysia or Indonesia; in that sense, our failed venture in Vietnam was actually a success.

Similarly, the OLC's struggle may not have had the trappings of success, but its long-term objective of witnessing to the truth was effectively accomplished.

<sup>39</sup> As an example of some essays and articles appearing in the *Orthodox Lutheran Theologian* (various authors): Walther — Four Theses on the Schriftprinzip; The Validity of a Scriptural Betrothal; Wine in the Eucharist; The Protoevangel; Dr. C.F.W. Walther as a Theologian (F. Pieper, translated); For us: The Mystery of the Vicarious Atonement; The Spirit of the Lutheran Chorale; The Festivals of the Jews; The Doctrine of the Real Presence; Stoeckhardt on "The Term Ekklesia in the Epistle to the Ephesians"; and much more.

In the *Orthodox Lutheran* we also find: "Church Dictatorship in the Missouri Synod"; "The Difference . . . Old Missouri New Missouri"; "The Oak Park Debate (Behnken vs McLaughlin at the Chicago Study Club)"; "False Leaven Permeates the Missouri Synod Lump"; Franz Pieper on "The Spiritual Life of the Christian"; "When Does a Weak Brother Cease to be a "Weak" Christian?"; portions of Stoeckhardt's Bible History; and much more.

only of doctrines we are familiar with, but familiar attitudes as well — prejudice, indifference to the truth, and stubborn pride; a willingness to listen, concern for the truth, and evangelical humility.

Much is still waiting to be researched and written about the OLC and its members. A comprehensive history would be welcome, so would shorter works discussing things like: the OLC Seminary — how it worked, who it trained, what it accomplished; the final years of the OLC — the break with Kretzmann and McLaughlin and its talks with Wisconsin; the doctrine of church and ministry as understood and practiced in the OLC; etc. A chart and timeline tracing the various pastors and congregations as they moved in and out of the OLC would also be helpful, as would be histories of the various congregations and their struggles with "Missouri factions".

Most neglected of all is biography, particularly of P.E. Kretzmann. For such a great and significant man, it is to a historian's shame that no biography of him has yet been written. Those who knew the man have nothing but admiration for him, and his life and character could serve as an example for many. His interests and talents ranged from biblical languages to the arts, to poetry to history, to the confessions to educational method and so on through a never-ending field of study. A survey of his writings alone could merit a monograph; covering the many moves, calls and positions of his life would require another book. Biographical treatments of McLaughlin and other leaders would also be helpful in determining the true nature and impact of the OLC.

The study of the Orthodox Lutheran Conference is plagued with the historian's purposeful curse — the deeper one digs and the more one uncovers, the more connections he finds to other topics and people and things. There is always more to discover. The difficulty in studying the OLC, however, is the broken connections — information pointed to but never found, useful records lost or destroyed, vivid memories erased by time and death, raging conflicts without a visible cause, and so on.

As we look back on this small and short-lived body, we hope that a lesson is learned in historical preservation. More importantly, we see a group of men and churches that was used by God in numerous useful and wonderful ways. For that reason we thank Him, and for that reason we continue in search of the Orthodox Lutheran Conference.

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