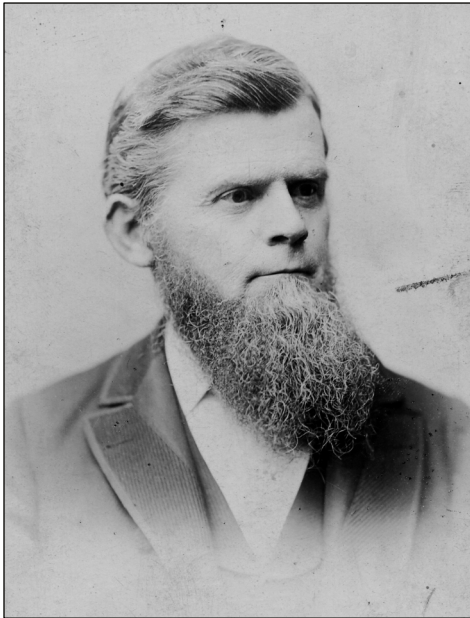


This Week in Eden History

January 7 | Karl Emil Otto



Karl Emil Otto, date unknown | Eden seminary Archives

When Karl Emil Otto (Jan. 7, 1837 –July 9, 1916) was censured by the Evangelical Synod of North America General Conference in 1880, it was the first and only time the denomination had conducted a heresy trial.

Born in Mansfeld, Saxony and educated at the University of Halle, Otto came to the U.S. in 1865 to accept a call from the Wisconsin Lutheran Synod, only to come in conflict over the denomination's increasingly narrow Lutheran doctrinal stance. He resigned from the denomination and accepted a call to St. Paul's German Evangelical Church in Columbia, Illinois in 1866.

Otto was offered a position to teach biblical theology at Eden Theological Seminary's predecessor in Marthasville, Missouri in 1870. He brought excellent teaching skills and an academic background steeped in modern biblical scholarship. This included the historical critical method of biblical interpretation, the examination of biblical texts in their original historical, cultural, and social contexts to more clearly understand their meaning.

Otto's methods—new and largely unknown in the U.S.—were controversial among those with traditional views of the Bible. Calls from pastors for an investigation led to a vote of confidence from the seminary's board of directors. An article published by Otto articulating a symbolic interpretation of the temptation story in Genesis 3 proved too much, however. After a special investigation, the denomination's General Conference voted for censure. Otto resigned his

teaching position and the denomination. He was later reinstated in the denomination and given a teaching position at Elmhurst College, demonstrating the spirit of tolerance that was a German Evangelical trait.

Many American denominations struggled with the new methods of biblical interpretation being taught in their seminaries. Crawford Howell Toy was forced to resign from Southern Baptist Seminary in 1879, E.C. Smyth was almost removed by Andover Seminary in 1886, and Charles Augustus Briggs was dismissed from the Presbyterian Church in 1893 in a very public trial over his teaching at Union Theological Seminary. Controversies over biblical interpretation continued to roil denominations well into the 20th Century, causing purges at Southern Baptist Seminary in 1979–1980 and Concordia Theological Seminary in 1974.

The General Conference of the Evangelical Synod censured Otto, but it could not censure his legacy or the influence he had on a new generation of pastors. Otto's academic genius and forward thinking were later widely acknowledged and appreciated within the Evangelical Synod of North America.