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A Curate's Notes on Colporteurs and Mission Friends

Arthur A. Helgerson*

The records of the Church of Sweden, specifically the parish registers of births, christenings, marriages, and deaths, are a gold mine of information for the genealogist. However, if you pay attention, you can come upon a variety of historical information including epidemics, floods, droughts, crop failures, and even royal decrees.

In some parishes the pastors have recorded a listing of the parish pastors since the founding of the parish church. Of particular interest can be the musings and observations of an observant pastor who dares to record his comments in the parish register amongst the vital records.

As I worked through the registers for Romelanda Parish, in the province of Bohuslän, in developing my paternal grandmother's ancestry, I came upon a fascinating essay handwritten by a young pastor assigned to the parish as curate (*pastorsadjunkt*). He clearly had read the input of other pastors in the parish. Nicolaus F. A. Jörlin had arrived in the parish as curate in October 1879. Not until 22 January 1880 did he begin to record his observations. From his writing you soon learn that he had arrived in a parish regularly visited by colporteurs (*kolportörs*) and populated by a growing number of Bible readers, already known as *läsare*. Eventually these ardent searchers in scripture were to coalesce into a breakaway denomination known to us as Mission Friends (*Missionsvänner*). In the course of time, they became the Evangelical Covenant Church of Sweden. As the Swedish immigrants of their persuasion grew in numbers here in America, they formed the Evangelical Mission Covenant Church of America (now Evangelical Covenant Church).

Having been raised in Covenant churches in Rhode Island, I was very familiar with some of the terms. Colporteurs were traveling book salesmen, more and more of whom became traveling preachers. Clearly they were selling Bibles and other religious writings of the time. My paternal great-grandfather, in his letters to his sons in Providence, Rhode Island, used to urge them to subscribe to *Pietisten*, a newsletter for these mission friends. The colporteurs were encouraging the people to read and interpret the Bible for themselves. The Swedish Lutheran Church was slow to recognize the growth of reading capability in the populace.

The name of Waldenström was also familiar to me in church and family. Little did I know then that he was a proper pastor of the State Church of

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Sweden, who in the course of time took up the cause of these Bible readers, tried to accommodate their desire to take holy communion at their own worship gatherings, and was defrocked by the Lutheran Church. He in turn became a colporteur and eventually a schoolteacher in Romelanda (*vide infra*). In the words of the young curate we read the other side of the story in a fascinating account. My translation of his account covers only his commentary on the colporteurs, Waldenström, parish house calls by horseback, school visits, and the list of his commentary on Dr. Luther's letter regarding laypreachers.

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**Commentary by Nicolaus F. A. Jörlin, Curate in
Romelanda Parish, as found in the parish register**

Although not the pastor of the parish, but only his curate (*pastorsadjunkt*), I venture nevertheless to record random reflections about happenings in the parish during my stay there. The reason these notes will be few in number lies in the fact that only near the end of my stay here did I learn of the presence of prior annotations in the book and, therefore, I could not begin to write therein until quite late. However, I must console myself in the same way as *Prosten* (the rural dean) Bohlin does at the beginning of his notes, when he quotes the old proverb: Better late than never. Romelanda parsonage 22 January 1880.

The first Sunday I preached in the Romelanda church, a day in early October 1879, there were uncommonly few people present. Country people will as a rule, when they hear a new pastor is to preach, generally appear in fairly great numbers. But not even the rumor of the new pastor had been able to induce the good Romelanders to betake themselves to the church. What a poor prospect there must be for regular attendance in a congregation, when not even curiosity will beguile people to church!

At a communion service that was held in Romelanda some days before Christmas in the same year, it happened that several colporteur families (i.e., families who favor colporteurs) partook of Holy Communion together with the rest of the congregation. Pastor Magnusson spoke of this as something particularly remarkable. The colporteurs' people, you see, as he later stated, had over the passage of several years constantly stayed away from church and communion: They took communion in homes within closed doors and only with such they considered children of God. In an examination for communion and even privately, I have tried to enlighten the congregation concerning the conflict with scripture in such behavior. It is sad, however, that what a pastor says as instruction in such a case will not be of benefit for those who have been led astray. It could be of benefit if they attended church. But that they do not do. They do not have enough

confidence in a pastor to dare to hear him there. O, what a trick of Satan is it not, to bring about such a division between teacher and audience! How much work is needed on the part of the teacher, how much love, shown to the sheep who have been led astray, if these are not still to flee from him as from a stranger, without recognizing in him the good shepherd's voice.

My time here has been short and I have accomplished little in this matter. May another have better success. May God raise up a man of His mind and spirit, a man who, while having his attention on his herd and guarding her from the wolves, lets himself be led by the spirit of wisdom, love, and meekness, so that he seeks the lost sheep until he finds them.

In the late fall of 1879, a substitute schoolteacher in Romelanda, Waldenström by name (his name was Waldenström and he was Waldenström, i.e., Paul Peter Waldenström) undertook for himself the ill advice to say to the children in his school that Jesus wishes that all Christians shall preach and teach, and that one might therefore just as well go to the mission house and hear the colporteurs as to go to church and hear the pastors. Personally, he, i.e., Waldenström, never went to church but traveled to Göteborg in order to hear teachers of new evangelical color.

However, Pastor Magnusson was himself present in the school one time and heard Waldenström let fall the above-named audacious utterance. This he, Magnusson, thought went too far and therefore intervened a little in the instruction, correcting the daring phrases. In addition he urged the teacher to examine the class on the third commandment of the catechism. Waldenström, who realized that he would thereby come to the section re "scorn the sermon and God's word," declared that he could not examine at that locus because the children had not gotten that far. Pastor Magnusson persisted in his wish and ordered him to examine on the third commandment. At that point the teacher, Waldenström, became enraged, slammed his fist on his desk, screamed and shouted that he had been persecuted by the pastor, and left the schoolroom promising that he would nevermore return. The pastor, however, continued teaching the children as if nothing had happened. After an interval, Waldenström returned and was then somewhat more humble. Not long thereafter he was relieved of his duties. Pastor Magnusson told this story to me. I myself saw and heard so much of Waldenström that I perceived that the man had a predisposition for bullying and insubordination. Otherwise, he was not bad in his teaching. May God protect schools and congregations from similar *Waldenströmare!*

If one compares the citizens of Karreby with those of Romelanda, in the matter of church unity, the result is as follows: the Karreby church is nearly always full of people at worship; church attendance in Romelanda, on the other hand, is very irregular. Sometimes it happens that there are many in church, sometimes few. This situation has its explanation, apart from the separatist movements that were almost exclusively confined to the Romelanda parish, in the natural local conditions. The Karreby church you

see lies more centrally in the parish. Conversely, the Romelanda church lies at one border of the elongated parish. Ordinarily the rule is that the church shall stand in the midst of the town. But they paid no attention to this rule when they built Romelanda's church. One must think they favored the pastor's convenience over the congregation's.

Parish calls within the parish are at times both numerous and difficult. The latter is particularly true of those that come from the undeveloped countryside of the so-called crofters' district of Romelanda parish. As evidence for the former on the other hand, it can be stated that within a period of two to three months, twelve to fifteen parish calls can occur. There are people as well, who, even if healthy and sound of body, call the pastor to minister to themselves because they feel that it is too cold and stormy in the winter to go to church and partake of the sacraments. Naturally the pastor may not consider it cold and stormy to travel to them. Such misuse of the precious parish calls privilege should, however, if it continues, be the subject for attention at a future visit.

In the year 1880 on the 8th of January, I was called on a parish call to Höghult to which the road went over the so-called Bratteliden (steep way), from which dizzying height one had a beautiful bird's-eye view over the village of Solberg, the Göta River and the plain alongside the river. During the transit by horseback of this road, which meandered and zigzagged all the way from bottom to top of the mountain, one could scarcely escape thinking of Napoleon, when he climbed the Alps.

Having arrived on the spot, I found that the sick person was an old man in poor circumstances. Not long before he had had, like Job, a visit by two friends (presumably relatives of his) of colporteurs who had conversed with him concerning his soul's salvation. The main point of their conversation had been that he now surely lay at death's door and that he, therefore, ought to be sure whether he would wind up in heaven or hell. Were he not sure, he would certainly sink down into the abyss of lost souls. The poor man became very concerned over this and asked them what he should do, asked them if he should call for a teacher or a pastor. Thereupon they retorted that he might rather forget that, for there would be no use to that. I asked him then, if these officious folks who had so upset him about his spiritual welfare had also advised him how he should come to that certainty and peace in his spiritual life about which they had talked. He answered, "No, they did not," but as soon as they had posed a few questions and pronounced the frightening words, they went their way.

I became strengthened, hereby, in my belief and conviction that the care of the soul that is left at the sickbeds, by the colporteurs and their disciples, is just as distorted as that practiced in their conventicle. To talk in this manner to the worried soul so he/she falls into despair is no skill. The devil is capable of that much skill. But that is not to talk as God's word speaks. God's word speaks so that it both smites and heals, both deadens

and brings to life, both to hell and therefrom. But whoever speaks of the spiritual can speak as God's word speaks. If the colporteurs and their friends speak as above related, then they are not speaking God's word. They are, for that reason, blind leaders and know not what they say or what they condemn, however much they intimate that they are driven by God's spirit and that the anointing teaches them all things.

The same day in the afternoon I visited Fredborg's school, where he was teaching in Solberg. There were many children present. Fredborg examined them on the first commandment of the catechism. By example from the Bible and by personal experiences, he showed that he supported the teaching, that he explained it to the children. The main fault in his catechismal study was probably that he, himself, talked too much and the children too little. There was an associated tendency to lose himself in specialties. Otherwise, he associated well with the children, maintained good discipline and, on the whole, acquitted himself well.

On the 26th of the same month, I again visited the grammar school in Solberg, with the object of hearing Fredborg instruct in subjects not previously heard. That objective was, nevertheless, not won, for Fredborg's wife, *Fru* Fredborg, substituted that day for her husband at the school. Fortunately, she herself had previously been a teacher, so one can hope that the schoolchildren do not suffer particularly in such an exchange. At least this applies to the teaching of Christian knowledge. In that subject, she instructed just as well as her husband, to my mind. Like her husband, she was good and friendly toward the children when she talked to them. She even drilled them in song and gymnastics. Few teachers have at their disposal so good a singing voice as *Fru* Fredborg.

As something notable in its way may here be noted, that under my period of service of about three months, not a single christening was officiated at in church. Such ceremonies now take place in the parsonage during office hours. It would be strange if this practice doesn't soon come to be cited as justification for an attempt to take communion in groups, which gather not in church, but here and there in homes. It will then come to be said: when one of the sacraments, christening, can be conducted in private homes without losing its sacredness and blessing, why not that other sacrament, the Holy Communion? He who lives will see how it goes.

In the month of January 1880, the noteworthy occurred: Romelanda church for several Sundays in a row was nearly full of people. The reason for this was the following. I had assured myself of the fact that the so-called Mission Friends (colporteurs' friends) regularly stayed away from church and communion, and considered what could become the consequence hereof, namely that others still not affected by separation might take a fancy to this and follow the stream. So I undertook to read to the congregation from the pulpit from Luther's well-known letter concerning sneaky corner preachers and to accompany this with necessary commentaries. These

readings lasted for four Sundays. The prologue to the readings was of the following wording. As it often enough happens here in the congregation that now one, now another lay preacher appears with a sermon and a spiritual discourse without, neither he nor his listeners having presented themselves before the parish pastors. The former to inform the pastor of the teaching he proclaims; the latter to seek advice, whether such a worship service is good and in accordance with God's word. Also to hear the arguments that might be brought forth for or against, without both, layspeakers and layhearers, considering themselves in this matter far too intelligent to take counsel from someone other than themselves. And, consequently, it is to be feared that a different doctrine is being promoted at the laymen's meetings than at our evangelical Lutheran church meetings. Since in any case our layman friends should also hear our church's proper teacher, which they do not do, or if they do it, they do it very seldom and very unwillingly.

So I have resolved to the service of those who have not yet taken final farewell of our evangelical Lutheran church's temple, pastors, sermons, communion, care of the soul, etc, to express some thoughts concerning named laypreacher's right to practice churchly soul care in visited congregations, as well as benefit or injury for distressed souls entrusting themselves to such spiritual leaders. But though I know that the people who are in pain gather around layman speakers here in the parish, they already have gotten so far into unchurchliness that they set little or no trust in what the church's teacher has to say, even if he strengthens his talk with arguments taken from the Bible and the Creed. So it would be rather presumptuous of me to hope that anyone of the layman friends would respect my word and, on that basis, change their convictions.

For that reason I plan to begin by letting another teacher of the Church speak in my place, namely Luther; if any spark of faith in this man should still be found present with the lost and any of them possibly change their minds about the devil's snare. Also I wish, then, first of all to cite the letter that Doctor Luther wrote in 1531 on this matter to Eberhard von der Tannen, county man in Württemberg, which letter most clearly alludes to Anabaptists, but even in the greater number of parts are applicable to our time's lay preachers and to those who hear such. The letter has the following wording: I have heard...etc.

Since this letter was read in church, the congregation was made aware of the fact that Luther here most definitely disapproved that laymen teach and preach publicly in the congregation, and he does this principally for the following reasons:

- I. They are *smygare*, (operate furtively, on the sly).
- II. They do not have the right calling.
- III. They are unknown.

- IV. They assume the office of others.
- V. They establish *parte* (division?).
- VI. They break up the orderliness of the Church.
- VII. They scorn the confession of the Church.
- VIII. They distort Scripture.

These sentences were each explained and proof of their truth cited from the Bible and the Confession. Finally, the conclusion was drawn from this that it is wrong, both that laymen rise up and preach openly, when there is no need at hand, and that others hear them. In connection herewith the congregation was warned against false teaching and admonished to remain with God's word and the Confession's healthy teaching. May God give his blessing hereto so that any troubled soul comes to realize the urgency that she not only hears God's word, but that she also hears a clean and clear God's word, a word that can make her blessed, and also prays God to protect her from all such preachers, who teach differently than God's word teaches, as Luther does when he says "Whoever differently teaches and lives than God's word teaches, he desecrates God's name among us." Protect us therefrom, O Heavenly Father!

Postscript

So read the first fifteen pages of his annotation. I have another fifteen pages untranslated and there are more pages that I did not copy. I can only say that this was an enlightening glimpse into the turmoil engendered between the staid and self-assured Church of Sweden and the newly literate populace that chose to explore and interpret the Bible for themselves.

This was by no means the only parish where the church experienced this new phenomenon. My research has taken me to many parishes in Älvsborg *län*, where the household examination rolls record absence from the examination. In many, the notation *egen fata* is recorded.

By *One Spirit* (Chicago: Covenant Press, 1962), the definitive history of the Evangelical Covenant Church of America (now the Evangelical Covenant Church) written by Karl A. Olsson, gives the Covenant slant on the origin and growth of the denomination. It also details the visit of Doctor Waldenström to the United States in 1889.