

JACOB FABRITIUS: THE PASTOR WITH A SECOND CHANCE

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CHURCH HISTORY

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Suppose a congregation sent a report like this to the district president. "We have a few complaints about our new pastor. He definitely has a drinking problem. He goes on a vacation without telling the congregation. He dresses his children in bright red clothes." Suppose this pastor then moved to a different part of the country and served as a faithful shepherd for many years.

Although such a description simplifies the historical record too much perhaps, anyone acquainted with the ministry of a man named Jacob Fabritius will recognize this as a generally accurate summary of his career in colonial America. Jacob Fabritius was a pastor who made a mess of his ministry in one place but made a comeback in another. But why? Why did Fabritius fare so miserably in New Netherland and gain a respectable reputation in New Sweden? This paper will attempt to answer this question by looking at Jacob Fabritius, the pastor with a second chance.

We must remember that Lutherans in colonial America didn't have seminaries in which they could train future pastors. As a matter of fact, to have a pastor was quite a luxury. A congregation might have a vacancy for years, eagerly anticipating the day a pastor would lead their worship services. Such was the situation for the Dutch Lutherans in the New Netherland towns of New York and Albany, who appealed to the Amsterdam Consistory in the mother country to send them a pastor. For over three

years (1664-1668) New York and Albany appealed to the Consistory, while at the same time the Consistory tried in vain to fill this vacancy. Apparently the hazards were too great and the pay too meager for most pastors!

Suddenly Jacob Fabritius appeared on the scene in November, 1668, before the Amsterdam Consistory. The minutes from the Consistory's meeting provide a little biographical information about this man.

"There appeared Jacobus Fabritius from Groslogauw in Silegien (Gross-Glogau, in Silesia), a refugee pastor, who, having shown his credentials, asked for an allowance (viaticum). In view of the fact that he is already a mature person and has no wife or children...."1

One week later Fabritius made a favorable impression on the Consistory with a trial sermon.

"Whereas Ds. Jacobus Fabritius, last Sunday evening, preached a sermon as guest speaker (gastpredight) here and displayed his gifts, and was judged to be a doughty person and capable preacher for the congregation of New York and Fort Albany, he was summoned for that purpose and, having appeared, offered and tendered the call and pastorate of the aforesaid places...."2

New York and Albany would finally receive the pastor they had waited for so long.

After his arrival in New York in the middle of February, 1669, Jacob Fabritius started off on the right foot. Fabritius first took care of the required paperwork with the New York government and then immediately began his work among the New York Lutherans. When the New York Lutherans wrote to the Amsterdam Consistory about their new pastor, they gave the following glowing report about his activities.

"Thereupon our pastor publicly began to preach, to visit the sick, to baptize, to marry and to administer Holy

Communion. On Dominica Quinquagesima he preached the first sermon and on Dominica Oculi he celebrated the first Communion. There were 45 persons at the Lord's table and we cannot conceal the joy of our hearts at the happy success, since we see not only a growth of this small congregation, as now and then many many scattered Evangelical Lutheran members, of whom heretofore we had no knowledge, reveal themselves and come to us, but also, on Dominica Palmarum, a 50 year old Negro was baptized and named Emmanuel. There are also others whom our Rev. Magister is already busy instructing and to whom otherwise we look forward with great hopes."³

In preaching, administering the sacraments, witnessing and other pastoral duties Fabritius was doing just about everything the New York Lutherans could hope for.

Two months later Fabritius traveled north on the Hudson River to the town of Albany (Fort Orange) about one hundred fifty miles away, arriving in late April. Here Fabritius failed to take care of the required paperwork with the local authorities and brought nothing but headaches on himself and the Albany Lutherans.

"He had held the service without first exhibiting to the magistrates his license to preach, whereupon he was summoned to appear in court on April 29. He ignored the order, and was reported to have said that he 'did not intend to exhibit his license before the honorable court, but is willing to show it privately in his home.' Consequently he was forbidden to preach in the city, an order which was sustained by the Governor, and his suspension continued for more than a year until he made a public apology to the court."⁴

Sadly enough, Fabritius' troubles were only beginning.

During the next twelve months Jacob Fabritius acquired such a bad reputation among the New York Lutherans that they asked the Consistory to send them a new pastor. Fabritius apparently did not mind this request, for he had an inclination to move to the

Swedish Lutherans on the Delaware River. What follows is part of a letter from the New York Lutherans to the Consistory.

"We can, therefore, now that the opportunity offers itself, not refrain from informing you once more that he does not behave himself or live as a pastor should. He is very fond of wine and brandy and knows how to curse and swear, too. In his apparel he is like a soldier, red from head to foot. He married a woman here with five children and has dressed them all in red. For himself he has had coats and a hat made like the pastors at Hamburg wear. He pays little attention to people, so that our opponents or neighbors have nothing else to talk about but the Lutheran pastor. This has lasted as long as he has been in this country. He traveled to the South River without notifying any one of us and remained there for seven weeks. When he came back and preached again, he announced from the pulpit to the entire congregation that we must write for another pastor. It seems that he likes it better among the Swedes at the South River. There he can follow his own will and live in the woods, away from the people (in dem busch van de lüeden). Our governor here in this place wishes that he were gone, for he has much trouble on his account. The man has caused us much expense, both at Fort Orange and here. He has been once at Fort Orange and got into such trouble with the magistrates there that he is not allowed to come back. We here and at Fort Orange have agreed with him about his salary and allowed him eighty beavers for one year. On that he could live decently here in this country if he were a capable man."5

What a shocking and surprising about face, especially in view of the earlier glowing report!

The New Amsterdam Consistory granted the request for a new pastor by sending Bernhard Arnzius, who arrived in New York during August, 1671. Thus Fabritius' stay in New York-Albany lasted only two and a half years, years characterized by turmoil for the most part.

We might expect Fabritius to resign from the ministry altogether. Or we might expect Fabritius to make reservations on the first ship sailing east on the Atlantic. However, Fabritius did neither. He remained a pastor and remained in the colonies.

He packed up his gear and moved southwest to the colony of New Sweden on the Delaware River.. He became pastor of congregations in Philadelphia and Tinicum, Pennsylvania, on the upper Delaware River..

Apparently Fabritius' ministry among the Swedes started off in less than ideal fashion, as the following quotations indicate. The second quotation is especially interesting, because it was written by a contemporary of Jacob Fabritius.

"Evidence concerning the life and character of Fabritius remained ambiguous for a while. Four years after his transfer to the Delaware he was hauled into court for using 'bad words which do not become a priest' and was charged with being one of several 'ringleaders in causing a tumultuous disturbance.'"⁶

"The Lutheran preacher, who ought as a statua Mercurialis to show the Swedes the way to heaven, is, to say it in one word, a drunkard."⁷

"Fabritius continued in the ministry among the Swedes on the Delaware until his death in 1693, but unfortunately he was involved in a number of disgraceful episodes, as revealed by the court records."⁸

However, Fabritius did eventually win the loyalty and respect of the Swedish Lutherans.. Nelson describes the last years of Fabritius' life in the following encouraging way.

"On the other hand, nine years later, when the parishioners who desired 'a further continuance of his service' in Philadelphia pledged contributions toward his salary, the response was generous, and he was commended for 'pure doctrine and an exemplary life.'"⁹

What a touching picture of a good relationship between a pastor and his flock, when "in 1682, he became blind, and thenceforth had to be led to the pulpit."¹⁰ In 1696 (one source claims 1693) Fabritius died.

Why did this Jacob Fabritius fare so poorly in New Netherland

and fare much better in New Sweden? Was it due to some improvement in Fabritius' personality? Was it due to cultural differences between the Dutch and the Swedes? Was it due to some minority in the New Netherland churches, which had an ax to grind? In order to be fair to Fabritius and the several congregations he served, let me point out that a conclusive analysis is probably impossible at this point. How beneficial it would be to talk with Fabritius and those who knew him in person! How beneficial it would be to have more sources to work with!

However, when we do consider those sources which are available, we can make a few suggestions concerning the question stated at the beginning of the previous paragraph. Why did Fabritius fare so poorly in New Netherland and much better in New Sweden? 1. Fabritius drank too much. 2. Fabritius got married. 3. Fabritius was a refugee. The next paragraphs will treat these three suggestions in more detail.

1. Fabritius drank too much. If the report from New York is accurate, he had acquired a reputation for being "very fond of wine and brandy."¹⁴ Perhaps a result of his drinking was his cursing and swearing. Certainly an alcoholic pastor is going to bring trouble to himself and his congregation. That Fabritius' drinking was a major reason for his quick downfall in New Netherland seems unquestionable.

In New Sweden Fabritius apparently limited his intake of alcohol sufficiently to spend about twenty years there and to be commended for his work later in his ministry. That he did not put aside his bottle completely is evident from the reputation

he acquired.

"Four years after his transfer to the Delaware he was hauled into court for using 'bad words which do not become a priest' and was charged with being one of several 'ringleaders in causing a tumultuous disturbance.'"¹²

Even thirteen years after his arrival in New Sweden a contemporary pointed a finger at Fabritius, calling him a "drunkard".¹³

Just as drinking and driving don't mix, perhaps Fabritius finally learned that drinking and the ministry don't mix.

2. Fabritius got married. Here I am not advocating the Roman Catholic concept of the priesthood. Neither am I ridiculing the state of matrimony. Instead, I am pointing to certain circumstances surrounding Fabritius' marriage. He had married "the widow of the Lutheran tavern-keeper."¹⁴ In marriage he inherited an instant family of five children, all of whom he dressed in red. Although these circumstances of Fabritius' marriage are not suspicious by themselves, it is interesting that the New York Lutherans requested from the Consistory "if possible, a young man who is not married."¹⁵ Perhaps Fabritius' wife was having an unhealthy influence on Fabritius' ministry. Perhaps the instant family of seven members taxed the limited economic resources of these young congregations too heavily. Whatever the reason, the next pastor who came to New York was already married and yet acquired a very good reputation during the many years he spent there. Perhaps Fabritius' choice of wife was a questionable one--at least for a man of the cloth.

There is one fact in particular which strongly indicates that Fabritius' marriage has something to do with his better showing in New Sweden. Apparently the New York church records reveal that Fabritius' wife owned a house on the Delaware River.¹⁶

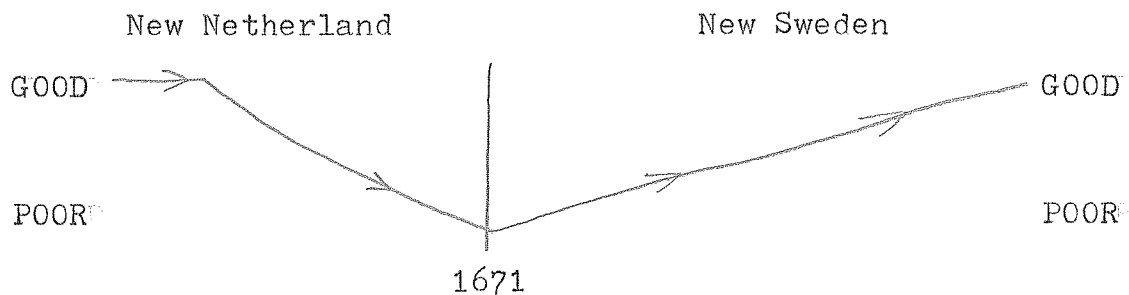
This in turn suggest that Fabritius' wife may have been one of these Lutheran Swedes. Certainly this would explain Fabritius' seven-week absence. Certainly this would explain a yearning on the part of Fabritius (and his family) to move to the Delaware River. Certainly this would explain a greater committment on the part of Fabritius to make the most of his second chance.

3. Fabritius was a refugee. Here the emphasis is not so much on the thought of fleeing one's native land as on the fact that Fabritius came from a different country with customs of its own. Perhaps Fabritius' native Silesia was accustomed to bright red clothing and to pastors who drank a little too much liquor once in a while. Perhaps the Dutch Lutherans, a minority in a Reformed environment, had little tolerance for such behavior. Perhaps the Swedish Lutherans, a virtual majority where they lived, were more willing to overlook the same behavior which so annoyed the Dutch. Also in support of this suggestion is the long stay of Bernard Arnzius as pastor in New Netherland. For twenty years he conducted a "quiet and constructive" ministry.¹⁷ Certainly Arnzius wasn't hampered by the fact that he was from the Netherlands itself, unlike Fabritius.

In summary, how did it happen that Jacob Fabritius, the man with a second chance, fared so poorly in New Netherland and much better in New Sweden? First, Fabritius' loved his liquor more than his own reputation. Second, Fabritius married a woman whose home on the Delaware River made him dissatisfied with his living conditions in New York. Third, Fabritius' lifestyle clashed with the expectations of New-York-Albany Lutherans more than the

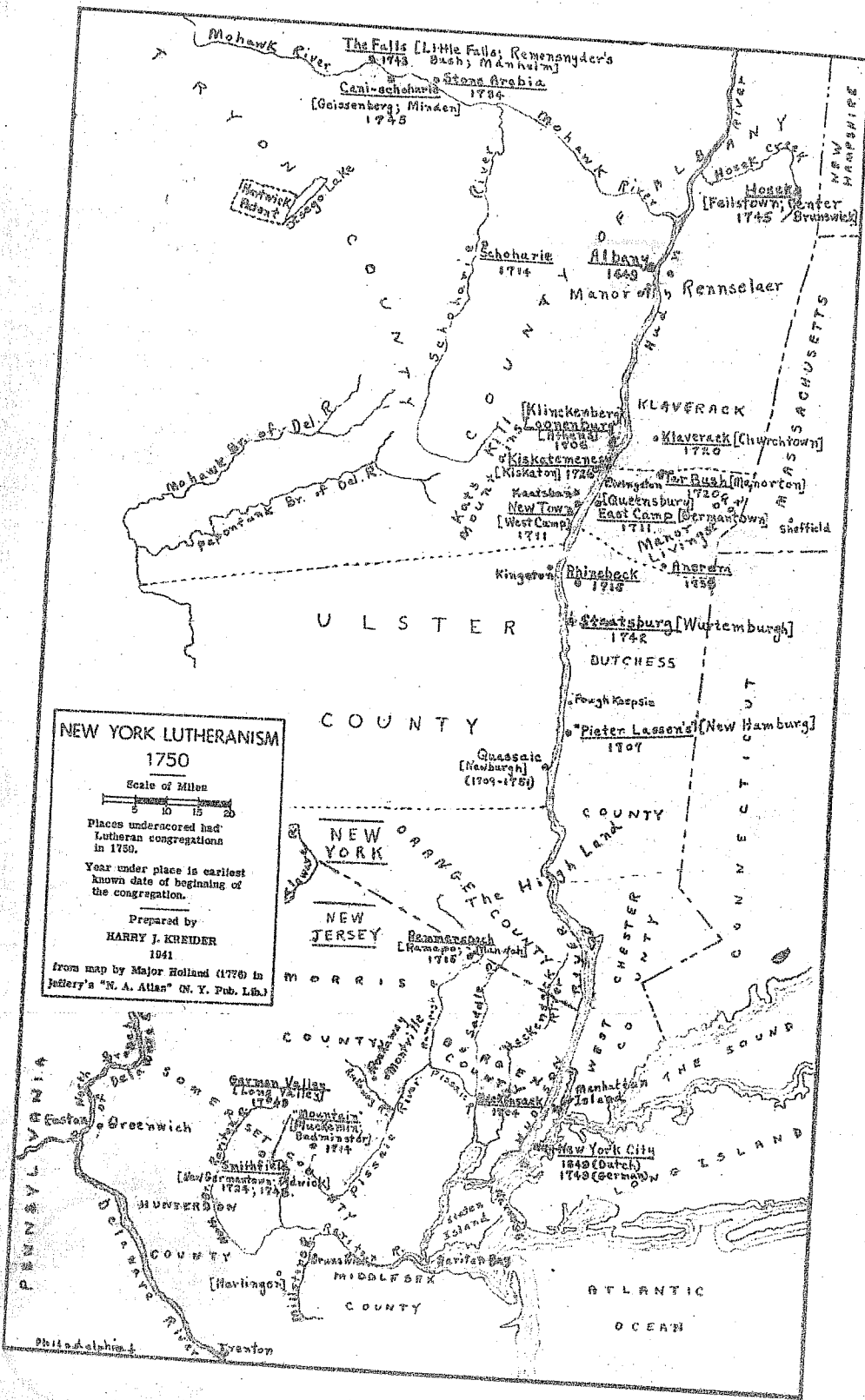
Swedish Lutherans.

Perhaps we could diagram Fabritius' colonial ministry like this.



Fabritius started well and ended well. Perhaps we would do well to put the best construction on his ministry by remembering this. Despite the many obstacles God in his infinite wisdom certainly used this man to help plant his kingdom in colonial America. May God likewise use all of us, in spite of the many obstacles we place in the way!

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2. Ibid., p. 64.
3. Ibid., p. 68.
4. Harry Julius Kreider, Lutheranism in Colonial New York. (Edwards Brothers, Inc., Ann Arbor, Michigan, 1942), p. 24.
5. vanLaer, op. cit., p. 76.
6. E. Clifford Nelson, editor, The Lutherans in North America. (Fortress Press, Philadelphia, 1980), p. 11.
7. Albert Cook Myers, editor, Narratives of Early Pennsylvania, West New Jersey, and Delaware. (Charles Scribner's Sons, New York, 1912), p. 399. This book contains original narratives of early American history. The passage quoted is from the chapter entitled "Circumstantial Geographical Description of Pennsylvania," by Francis Daniel Pastorius, a German emigrant who laid out the settlement of Germantown, Pa., and served as its first mayor. The passage quoted is from a part of this chapter called "Positive Information from America, concerning the Country of Pennsylvania, from a German who has migrated thither; dated Philadelphia, March 7, 1684."
8. Kreider, op. cit., p. 26n.
9. Nelson, op. cit., pp. 11-12.
10. Myers, loc. cit., note.
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12. Nelson, loc. cit.
13. Myers. loc. cit.
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15. vanLaer, op. cit., p. 77.
16. Nelson, op. cit., p. 9.
17. Ibid., p. 10.

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