

WHY AUGUSTANA DID NOT JOIN THE ULCA

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American Church History

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The question I wish to answer in this paper is "Why did the Augustana Lutheran Church not join in the founding of the United Lutheran Church in 1918?" Many people have felt that Augustana refused to merge because of doctrinal reasons. They think the Swedes were more conservative than other members of the General Council. However, I wish to demonstrate in this essay that the Augustana Synod stayed out because of language and ethnic reasons.

First let us consider the background in Sweden from which the Augustana Synod and its leaders emerged. The first thought which must be kept in mind is that the church and the state are united. All citizens are automatically members of the church and pastors are officers of the state. They have jurisdiction in their particular area. These facts should be kept in mind because, as one will see, they will explain certain actions of Swedish pastors in the United States.

But the fact that there was a state church in Sweden does not mean that there were no religious movements within and outside of the church. The first movement one needs to take note of is revivalism. In this movement emphasis was placed on individual conversion rather than doctrine or loyalty to the church. In the late eighteenth century followers of Count Zinzendorf did mission work among the Lapplanders and in this way brought their influence into the mainstream of religious life in Sweden. Revivalism was combined with the orthodoxy of the state church to make

what was known as "Older Pietism."

After 1800 however, there arose a new form of pietism known as "New Pietism." Mattson says about this movement:

The movement as a whole was characterized by a sharp insistence on a personal experience of sin and grace, a tendency to isolate itself from those areas of life which were considered "worldly" and an avid use of devotional literature. Dancing, card playing, and the theatre were looked upon as evil in which the faithful must under no circumstance participate.<sup>1</sup>

The temperance movement in Sweden can be traced back to this time. In Lars Esbjorn's day, the pietistic movement was led by George Scott, an English Methodist, and Carl Rosenius, a Swede converted by Scott.

Henric Schartau, a pastor in the university city of Lund, spoke out against this subjectivism in Christianity. Doctrine should be based upon God's Word and not pious feelings. "Clarity of doctrine, especially as regards the order of salvation, reform and renewal within the church and greater faithfulness to orthodox Lutheranism were some of the abiding influences of this spiritual leader which were continued in the tradition of the Augustana Church."<sup>2</sup>

Thus, for the most part, the men who founded the Augustana Lutheran Church were, in the main, confessional Lutherans. However, they were tinged with pietism which

could cause them to be unionistic and look upon those of a stricter confession as dead orthodoxy.

Now let one consider a man who emerged from this background, Lars Esbjorn, founder of the Augustana Lutheran Church. Because of his actions in Augustana's leaving of the Synod of Northern Illinois, he is looked upon by many as a conservative. In 1860, when Augustana was created he was fairly conservative. But up until that time a portrait of this man emerges that shows him to be quite liberal in his beliefs and practices, a child of the religious environment described above.

Lars Esbjorn was born in 180<sup>8</sup>. He was ordained in 1832. Seven years later he himself experienced an "awakening" or at least an intensification of his own spiritual life. He did not observe strict confessional fellowship practices. Rather he associated himself with Methodists and Presbyterians. Esbjorn went so far as to become involved in the Swedish Missionary Society, inter-confessional in character and organized in 1835.

Esbjorn was concerned about his fellow countrymen who has emigrated to America's Middle West. He resolved to help them. Arriving in New York, he first was associated with Olof G. Hedstrom, Methodist missionary in New York harbor. Hedstrom offered to help him in his work. Later

a certain Unonius, a Swede ordained by the Episcopal Church who was doing Swedish mission work in Chicago, offered help to the young Swedish-American Church. Both of these offers were rejected. These facts are often pointed to as evidence of Esbjorn's conservatism. But what is left out is that Esbjorn did accept help from the American Home Missionary Society, a group supported by Congregationalists. This was clear unionism.

Esbjorn appears to have grown more conservative when he reached Illinois. There was an outbreak of cholera. Esbjorn was felled by it and was forced to stay in Chicago while his party went ahead to settle <sup>n</sup>near the Mississippi. When he finally arrived, he found his group split and many stolen away by sects. Perhaps Esbjorn realized then he could not make common cause with other Christian denominations. He published a tract appealing to the Swedes of the Midwest to remain true to the Augsburg Confession and the Small Catechism.

However, Esbjorn had not become conservative enough. He soon affiliated with the Synod of Northern Illinois whose doctrinal statement merely said that the Augsburg Confession was "mainly correct."<sup>3</sup> People have tried to apologize for Esbjorn's unionistic behavior. They have pointed out that Esbjorn did not want to isolate himself and thus

repeat the same mistake New Sweden on the Delaware made. Others point to the fact that Esbjorn insisted upon a much stricter doctrinal position for his Swedish churches than put forward by the Synod of Northern Illinois. Still others have said that Esbjorn anticipated a great<sup>+</sup> influx of Scandinavians which would lead to their domination of the Synod of Northern<sup>b</sup> Illinois and also cause a change in that body's doctrinal position.

The fact remains that Esbjorn joined a group that had a very weak doctrinal position. In practicing Scriptural fellowship principles, one does not join a group in hopes that it will become more confessional. As to the claim that Northern Illinois was Esbjorn's only chance to cease to be isolated, let one remember that the Missouri Synod, having been organized in 1847, was only a hundred miles down the river in St. Louis. If Esbjorn could break ethnic lines by joining English and German people in Northern Illinois, there would have been no problem in joining Missouri.

Esbjorn's lack of confessional principles showed itself soon after. He was on a committee which recommended that the Synod of Northern Illinois join the General Synod. True, he maintained that this action was not an avowal of the General Synod's doctrinal position. But as long as the

Scandinavian churches were not disturbed but allowed to follow their own beliefs and practices, Esbjorn did not break off his incorrect fellowship practices. Thus Erick Norelius could write, "Esbjorn was at that time (1853) unionistic and remained so until 1860 as well as most of the members of the synod, that is to say, they believed that it was possible to work together with those of a different confessional standpoint in a synod created for churchly purposes."<sup>4</sup>

In 1860, the crisis came which made Esbjorn and most of the other members of Augustana realize that their unionistic practices were wrong. A college had been created in Springfield in order to train men for ministry in Northern Illinois. The Scandinavians were granted a professorship and were supposed to send their men to this school. That professor was Esbjorn. At the school Esbjorn saw the false doctrine with which the Scandinavian students were being infected. He therefore resigned his post and spoke out for ending fellowship with the Synod of Northern Illinois. The Augustana Lutheran Church was organized in Jefferson Prairie, Wisconsin in 1860.

It appears that Lars Esbjorn finally learned the error of his ways. Perhaps he did. But three years after the founding of Augustana, he returned to Sweden and his possibly conservative influence upon that church body ended.

From that point until the dawn of the twentieth century, the Augustana Lutheran Church would be dominated by T. N. Hasselquist who served as both professor at its seminary and president of the body.

No one could accuse T. N. Hasselquist of being a conservative. While on one hand Esbjorn spoke out for leaving Northern Illinois, Hasselquist was content to remain in that synod as long as it paid lip service to the confessions in its constitution.

It was Hasselquist, more than anyone who was in favor of joining the General Council. Roughly fifty years ahead of his time, Hasselquist did not want Augustana to be only an ethnic group, ministering to one particular immigrant faction. Through his involvement in Augustana's relations with the General Council, I will demonstrate that Hasselquist, like Esbjorn, was liberal in doctrine and thus could not have influenced Augustana in such a way that it left the Council in 1918 for confessional reasons.

The first item which indicates Hasselquist's liberalism is his relationship with Dr. W. A. Passavant, one of the leaders in the General Council. While known to most as an organizer of Lutheran Hospital, this man is known to Wisconsin historians as the one who single-handedly alienated the Michigan Synod, eventually causing



it to leave the Gneral Council. During the 1884 General Council meeting in Monroe, Michigan, Passavant openly broke the Galesburg rule by preaching at the local Presbyterian church.

Such a man was a good friend of Hasselquist. He spoke at the 1870 convention of the Augustana Lutheran Church with the express purpose of encouraging the synod to join the Council. In the book celebrating the fiftieth anniversary of the Augustana, he is spoken of as a conservative Lutheran.

Another point which demonstrates Hasselquist's lack of confessionalism is his relationship with the members of the Synodical Conference, particularly the Missouri Synod. Disregarding Scripture, Hasselquist thought it a sin that Missouri did not condemn slavery as a sin, something Hasselquist often did in point. As a pietist, Hasselquist looked upon Missouri as dead orthodoxy. In the fiftieth anniversary <sup>b</sup>ook this was said,

We escaped the bitter experience of our Norwegian brethern, who affiliated with the German Missouri Synod, and found themselves entangled soon, not only in the Predestination Error(?), but also in the heartless dogmatic orthodoxism and the objectivism of that Synod, and in the self-satisfied exclusivism of that body,

which, to most of our Norwegian brethren at last became unbearable, and compelled them to withdraw, and form an organization of their own. <sup>5</sup>

Because of his views about Missouri, Ander suggests in his biography that Hasselquist was purposely absent from the first General Council meeting in Reading, Pa. Passavant wrote him that Missouri would be represented at this meeting. This cooled Hasselquist's enthusiasm. Ander writes,

Although Passavant had expressed doubt that the Missouri group would actually join, the Swedish leader would not take any chances and refused to recommend that his Synod should unite under circumstances which he described as "a bad fix." He also feared that the Wisconsin Synod might come in...<sup>6</sup>

When it was certain that Missouri would not join, Hasselquist welcomed the General Council with open arms.

Also, the Swedish leader's liberalism is shown in respect to the "Four Points." Conservative synods such as Ohio and semi-conservative synods such as Iowa refused to join because of the unsatisfactory answers they received in regard to these issues. However, in Hasselquist's report to the church he said,

"The expectations to be able to unite the different genuine Lutheran elements in America have been more than realized through that meeting. Some questions, the

so-called Four Points, were brought up, seemingly in order to cause confusion, if not disruption, but even the enemies of the General Council were surprised at the calm and friendly manner in which the discussion was carried on, and at the important decisions arrived at by the Council.

Although the gulf between the General Council's doctrine and practice grew wider through the years, Augustana under Hasselquist stood by the Council. In 1910 Augustana described the Council as "the most conservative Lutheran body in the United State."<sup>8</sup>

So far I have demonstrated that the two leading men in the history of the Augustana Synod were not conservatives. Their fellowship practices were unionistic and since both together trained the majority of Augustana's pastors in its first fifty years, it stands to reason that their view was the most prevalent one. The other great leader in this area, Eric Norelius, while more conservative than either Hasselquist or Esbjorn, was a staunch defender of the General Council. I cannot see, therefore, how one can maintain that the Augustana Synod left the General Council in 1918 for confessional reasons. Therefore, in the second part of this paper I will demonstrate that the church did (not) merge with the ULCA for ethnic and language reasons.

The same was true with other Lutherans, even General Council Lutherans. This can be best demonstrated by an incident which happened in Minnesota.

Beginning in 1883 the Home Mission Committee of the General Council had sent missionaries to the territory of the Minnesota Conference of the Augustana Synod. The English-speaking congregations resulting from this work were recruited largely from the Swedish population, but instead of uniting with the Augustana Synod they formed in 1891 the Synod of the Northwest as a district of the General Council.

This irritated the Augustana Synod to such an extent that cries were heard demanding an end to the synod's involvement in the General Council. The Synod resolved in 1887;

Our Home Mission work, both on account of language and by reason of the special features of the mission field, does not permit any transfer to another authority.

The next fact to be noted is that the Augustana Synod became more Swedish through the years. Usually it is the history of a synod that it becomes more Americanized through the years. However in the case of Augustana, Swedish immigration did not reach its height until 1890. Thus the Augustana Lutheran Church was more Swedish at the turn of the century than in its early years. This led to strong nationalistic feelings which can be illustrated by the story of the founding of the General Council's seminary in Chicago. The General Council invited Augustana to unite its Rock Island seminary with its new seminary in Chicago. The Synod flatly refused.

Ander writes of Hasselquist;

He believed, however, that if the Council had located its seminary at Rock Island, the Synod's decision might have been different. The real explanation, Norelius and Hasselquist thought, was to be found in the stronger feelings of nationality induced by the increasing number of immigrants, who made the Synod "too Swedish" to adopt the plan they had recommended.

The last fact which proves Augustana refused to join the ULCA for ethnic reasons is Augustana's history after 1918. Soon after this time, a new generation arose which spoke American and considered itself American. The Swedish organ of Synod, the Augustana, declined while the Lutheran Companion, the English magazine, gained in popularity. After 1924 convention minutes were written only in English. By 1930, English was the language of both synodical and conference conventions. An Association of English Churches was dissolved and these churches were absorbed into the different conferences.

Once the ethnic and language problem was solved, there did not seem to be an organization which Augustana did not join. In rapid succession it became a member of the National Lutheran Council, the American Lutheran Conference, the Lutheran World Federation, and both the National and World Councils of Churches. This culminated in Augustana's merger in 1962 with the very church body it rejected in 1918.

FOOTNOTES

<sup>1</sup>Emmer Engberg (editor) Centennial Essays (Rock Island: Augustana, 1960) p. 34

<sup>2</sup>Ibid, p. 35

<sup>3</sup>Ibid, p.39

<sup>4</sup>Ibid

<sup>5</sup>The Augustana Synod; A Brief Review of its History, 1860-1910  
(Rock Island: Augustana, 1910) p. 226

<sup>6</sup>Oscar Fritiof Ander, T. N. Hasselquist (Rock Island: Augustana Historical Society, 1931) p. 109

<sup>7</sup>The Augustana Synod, A Brief Review, p.226

<sup>8</sup>Ibid, p. 228

<sup>9</sup>Ibid, p. 204

<sup>10</sup>Abdel Ross Wentz, A Basic History of Lutheranism in America (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1964) p. 198

<sup>11</sup>Ander, T. N. Hasselquist, p.115

<sup>12</sup>Ibid, p. 113

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