

The Old Apostolic Lutheran Church

Old Finns in a new millennium

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Introduction

Three men gather at a local eatery. They are business men, acquaintances, not quite friends. As is the tendency in informal meetings like this, things that are sensitive issues are brought to the table for discussion. The issue on this night is religion. One man is quick to state that he is a Lutheran, a member of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. The second man adds that he is a Lutheran as well, a member of the Lutheran Church – Missouri Synod. The third man, not to be left out, states that he is a Lutheran too, an Old Apostolic Lutheran. At this point, the conversation dies.

This was a conversation that was recounted to a seminary student by his father in law. With this story he asked, “What is an Old Apostolic Lutheran?” That is the focus of this paper. What is an Old Apostolic Lutheran – where do they come from, where are they today, and where are they going?

The Prophet of Lapland

Humble would be a good way of describing the beginnings of a man who would change the way that Finland would worship. The practice of the Finns was the same as their parent country – Sweden. They had a State Church, just like Sweden; and it was Lutheran, just like Sweden. However, just like Sweden there was much of the country that was not highly educated and needed to be brought to “real” religion. It was into this country, full of religious possibilities that Lars Levi Laestadius was born. In 1800 he was brought into the world in the usual way in a small town called Jackvick. This “town” was high up on the Finnish/Swedish border, a place labeled “Lapland.” A pioneer village, the

people of Jackvick and Lapland were hard people. The people have been called Reindeer Lapps.¹

Here Lars grew. Here Lars felt he belonged. He delved deep into the history of the area, he gathered the histories and the myths of the area and published them in a volume he named, "Fragmenter i lappska mythologien."² It was also in this area that Lars developed a love for Botany, a passion that remained with him for the rest of his life; one that even plagued the early part of his ministry.

Ministry was not something unheard of in the Laestadius household. Lars was born into a family that had many State Church ministers, however his father was not among them. He was actually a manager of a silver mine in the arctic village. But the closing of the mine meant that he would take up agriculture. This ended up being a rather tough time for the young boy, who went to live with his older brother Karl Erik, along with his parents and younger brother, Petrus.³ It seems that Lars was influenced by his time living with Karl, because he soon followed in his steps. After graduating from gymnasium, Lars attended the university in Uppsala, just like Karl, and seemed to have a promising career in Botany, just like Karl. And again just like Karl, botany became a moonlighting expedition for the poverty-stricken young man, who took on the ministry for sustenance.⁴

Lars took to the ministry in a very surprising way. With no apparent excitement at all. He worked near his beloved Lapland, in the Karesuando parish in 1826, near the Finnish/Swedish border. In fact, the parish was on the Muonio river, which forms the

¹ Kukkonen, Walter. And I'll Take the Low Road. Parta Printers, New York Mills, MN. P. 30

² A Swedish work that was lost in America until an accidental discovery in 1959. Ibid. P.28

³ Foltz, Aila & Yliniemi, Miriam. A Godly Heritage. Self published by editors. 2005 p.18

⁴ Main, Donald. Will the Federation Continue. WLS Essay file. 1985. p.5

border of the two Scandinavian countries.⁵ This was a place that sustained about six hundred pragmatic souls that, though they proclaimed Christianity, lived rather unsanctified lives.⁶ These problems were met by Lars' moralizing from the pulpit, but had no backing in the area of one on one counseling. Lars preferring the pursuits of botany to speaking to people about sin. This is not to mean that Lars was not diligent in his work as a Pastor. He continued to educate the people of Karesuando, holding catechism classes that lasted for five weeks, and refusing communion to those who signed up, but were ignorant of the Christian beliefs that would be professed by the Sacrament.⁷

This rather hum-drum existence and 'maintenance' ministry began to wear on the man. Soon he fell ill. His sickness was such that at the age of 32, he thought he would die. Alas, this did not come to pass. And though he brushed with death, he found no spiritual awakening. As is the tendency with things of this world, things got worse for Lars. 1839 brought about the death of his beloved son, Levi. Again, though the spiritual realm seemed to be so close, Lars had no spiritual awakening. This tragedy took the already reclusive man and made him pull even more away from the material world.

Lars did continue in the ministry, and in 1843 went to renew his state license by means of an evaluation. Part of this evaluation included going to other parishes and preaching. During the year 1844 Lars made a visit to the village of Asele, where he came into contact with a group of "Readers."⁸ While with them, Lars was able to lead in worship and preached to this moderate group. It seemed that something about Lars caught

⁵ Foltz. p. 18

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Foltz. p. 19

⁸ Readers were those who were authorized to read from the Bible and sermon postils in public meetings. Kukkonen. p. 30

the attention of a young woman named Maria (sometimes referred to as Lapp Maria). After the service, she confronted the middle aged Pastor and spoke with him about her experiences. She spoke how she too had felt convicted of sin, but not sure of forgiveness. She guided him through the steps that she took that led her to the conviction that Jesus Christ was her savior, and that she had the assurance of salvation.⁹

This moment became that awakening that Lars' had been in need of. He returned to his parish in Karesuando a different man. A man who was sure of his forgiveness. His preaching also took on a whole new aspect, calling to repentance, but also announcing the sweet gospel of forgiveness. It is of no small note that Lars took the most comfort in speaking of forgiveness in the blood of Christ.

As Lars looked around him, he noted well that he was in a wild country, and because of this, along with his message, he soon found the he longed to be like John the baptizer, the "voice calling in the wilderness." And so he took to his "new" preaching with great zeal, which would be reflected in the people. Soon it was noted that this message "burned the snow in Lapland."¹⁰

These "reindeer Lapps" that Lars preached to were called such because the followed the migration of the reindeer. For this reason, the teachings and the excitement that he created were soon spread far and wide in Finland and Sweden. One aspect of the movement that Lars did not expect was confession. His preaching brought many to insecurity about their hearts and salvation. They began to come to the parsonage for counseling with more frequency. Lars did not feel that he was a very good counselor. He

⁹ Main. p. 6

¹⁰ Kukommen p. 30

would utilize the Scriptures, reading passages that he thought were pertinent, but would withhold absolution, figuring that God would bring the case to conclusion.¹¹

The Laestadian movement was now underway, but it wasn't fully charged yet. It was full of people who were questioning, but had no answers, no absolution. That all changed on December 5th 1845. During the service on that day, Pekka Piltto's wife, Maria, became the first in a long line of people to have a first hand experience in the Laestadian revival. During the service she became overwhelmed by a feeling of relief, and in her heart she heard the words "your sins are forgiven you," and with those words was a sign of grace, an earthquake. As she shouted in delight, the earth shook and Laestadianism exploded in Scandinavia.

What were the main teachings of this movement? It all seemed to center on confession and absolution. The preaching would upset the nature of the heart, and the person would confess their sin. It was desired that the person make the confession to the person who was wronged. After this confession was made, absolution would be given. But it was not absolution in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Laestadius thought that the Trinitarian formula took the focus off of the center of forgiveness, Christ. So the formula in the Laestadian movement became "in the name and blood of Christ."¹² Another aspect of the movement was "liikutukset" or rejoicing.¹³ This would be what Maria Piltto went through on December 5th.

Lars continued his movement for some time. He continued in his emotional preaching, convicting people of their sins (drunkenness was perhaps his favorite thing to

¹¹ Foltz. p. 23

¹² Main. p. 8

¹³ It should be noted that much of the movement adopted Finnish as the language of religion, so many of the church practices have been named in the tongue of the movement.

preach against, having a large following in the temperance movement), and urging them to confession and absolution. He climbed the ladder of the state church, and even hand picked his successor before his death in 1861.

The Revival Continues

The hand picked leader to follow Lars was a man named Juhani Raattamaa. Born in 1811, he had a similar background to Lars, in that he was sickly as a child. His connection with Lars was that he was a student of the Lapland prophet. They had quite a close connection, despite the fact that Juhani had confessed his sins to his pastor (Laestadius) and did not receive absolution.¹⁴ After noting the exceptional skill that Juhani had as a student, and his spiritual awareness, Lars became his primary teacher.

Juhani's rise to the revivalist level is no less spectacular than Maria Piltto's.

The change took place in the beginning of 1846 while Raattamaa was listening to Laestadius's sermon in the Karesuando church. New anxieties began to oppress him soon afterwards, and while struggling with these, he fasted and prayed. As he was lying on a reindeer skin in his room one day, he saw a door opening and the devil himself coming towards him. Terrified, he jumped up, but then the assurance of Jesus' atonement overwhelmed him and he cried out: "Come on, Satan, if you dare. Jesus is living in my heart." At that, the devil withdrew. Raattamaa heard these words spoken in a clear voice: "My grace is sufficient for thee: for my strength is made perfect in weakness." A sense of God's grace and love filled his heart. He entered into life in the power of the risen Christ and the Holy Spirit.¹⁵

Juhani was invigorated in his work as a teacher and lay pastor in Lapland.¹⁶

However, it was upon his hearing that people were still unsure about their own forgiveness. He struggled with ways to convince people of their justification. He knew

¹⁴ This occurred in 1829, a time when Lars was still in doubt as to his own spiritual state. Foltz. p.88

¹⁵ Foltz. p. 89

¹⁶ He would technically be a lay pastor as he did not go through the state school for a formal preaching license.

his Scripture. Laestadius recounts how Juhani had used Scripture to battle liquor sellers in the village of Lainio. His use caused the “dragon,” as Laestadius called him, to pour out his liquor.¹⁷ But this knowledge did not give him the words to assure people of forgiveness.¹⁸

Juhani struggled with this until 1853, when he was confronted with a woman who was entirely convicted of her sin. She teetered on the edge of despair. As she came forward, Juhani questioned her about the grace of God. Upon her confession he laid hands upon her and announced the forgiveness of sin, according to the formula that retained the emphasis on Jesus, “in the name and blood of Christ.” Thus Raattamaa’s role in the movement was that he showed concern for the hearts of the people who were under the oppression of sin.

After the death of Laestadius, Juhani began to make a move towards a more unionistic idealogy. His death in 1899 was a blow to the entire Lapland. Many of the residents came to his funeral, they formed a processional for him that was nearly a mile.¹⁹

Finns in the New World

Mostly under the leadership of Raattamaa did this religious movement of Finnish people come to America. It was 1864 that brought about 20 Finns (or “Kvaener” as they were sometimes called) to the “copper region” of the Upper Peninsula of Michigan.²⁰ Initially these *Kvaener* worshipped with the other members of the state church of Scandinavia, the Norwegians and the Swedes. In 1867 these three nationals formed the

¹⁷ Ibid. p. 91

¹⁸ This was his perception.

¹⁹ Ibid. p. 100

²⁰ Heikkinen, Jacob. The Story of the Suomi Synod. Parta Printers. New York Mills, MN. (no copyright date) p. 6

Scandinavian Evangelical Lutheran Church.²¹ But since not all of the Finns could speak Norwegian (the language of the Scandinavian church in America), and the *Kvaener* that were Laestadians were quite critical of this body led them to make their own go at a religious body in the free land. These Laestadians emphasized the home meeting for worship, and they continued the practice of Raattamaa of the individual forgiveness of sins in the worship setting.

Already at this time the Laestadians were showing themselves to be counter-cultural and stand-offish. They were severe in their clothing, shunning all adornments, even pocket-watches and neck-ties.²² This avoiding of worldly things also could be seen in their refusal to have an organ in their worship spaces!

They continued in this manner, a group within a group for a short time. 1871 brought about a schism. The Laestadians left the Evangelical Lutherans for good. It was under the leadership of Salomon Kortetniemi that the Laestadians in America went then. Eventually they took his name as the heading for their movement.²³ Later (supposedly in Cokato, Minnesota) the name was changed to the “Apostolic Lutheran Church” (supposedly to show their faith was the same as the apostles).

What is so “Old” about them anyway?

1876 saw many men coming to America from the shores of Finland. A pastor came, by the name of A. E. Backman, who became a resident of the Copper country. And also some men sent by Juhani Raattamaa who were to inspect the goings-on in the

²¹ Ibid. p. 8

²² Ibid. p. 9

²³ Ibid. p. 12. The group was officially registered in 1873. Foltz. p. 186

Midwest. Backman led the more “traditional” state church like Evangelical Finns, while Salomon Kortetniemi seemed to have almost papal control of his group.²⁴

Raattamaa, still in Finland, sent over another man to clear up the copper country troubles. A powerful preacher named Juho Takkinen was the champion. After some hard struggles he won over the people, and started the “First Apostolic Lutheran Church of Calumet.”²⁵ And so it was under Takkinen’s much more pronounceable name that Laestadianism was taken into the 20th Century.

It is pertinent to note that in 1885 another Finnish pastor came to the copper country, a J.K. Nikander, who was to lead an organized Finnish church body that would later become the Suomi Synod.²⁶ A difference between the Laestadians and the more traditional Finnish state church reared *Kvaener* is important.

Later in time, the Laestadians would splinter again, forming at least six other bodies: The Old Apostolic Lutherans, Apostolic Lutheran Church of America, Laestadian Lutheran Church, First Apostolic Lutheran Church, The Pollarite Groups, and Grace Apostles Lutheran Church. The interest will be on the first group from here on out.

The Old Apostolic Lutheran Church (OALC) is the largest of the Laestadian splinter groups, with near 10,000 members spread throughout the United States. Obviously there is a concentration of this group in the Midwest, as one member called it, “Its God’s country, you know.”²⁷

²⁴ Foltz. p. 191

²⁵ Both Calumet and Cokato are said to be the heads of the Laestadian movement in America, so it is no surprise that differing sources would assign the honor of the naming to different sites. It is very sure that it was at one of these two locations that the “Apostolic” heading was assigned to the Laestadians in America.

²⁶ Foltz. p. 194

²⁷ Kukkonen. p. 28

These congregations are served by approximately 38 preachers, who (contrary to popular belief) are doing mission work – though primarily in Alaska. For worship, there are special services during the Solstices, a tradition that came from Scandinavia. They also continue to read a sermon of Laestadius in their services, to keep a connection with their heritage.

They have no formal periodical publication. It has been supposed that this is because they think that the truth that only they have will be enough to bring true seekers into their church, but that would be pure speculation.

“Old” in their title seems to therefore bring to mind the original practices of the Laestadians. Meaning Laestadius’s sermons, the formula of forgiveness introduced by Raattamaa, and the general “liikutukset” (rejoicing, ecstatic behavior) of the service.

An account of a woman who visited an OALC church was quite interesting:

I wore a dress, because I knew all the women wore dresses. I had short hair, not long, worn in a bun, as they all did. When we arrived, they met us and had us sit in the second pew from the front. I noticed that all the women had scarves lying around their shoulders. When the sermon started, on went the scarves. At the “Amen” off came the scarves. The Minister talked about how they all loved each other; how he drove through a certain small town and saw someone that he knew, so he stopped and they visited right there in the street for a long time. The “sermon” went on like this for quite some time. The only religious words spoken was [sic] the Twenry-third psalm, which the minister read, later in the service. Communion was served. During this time, the women wailed in a high, loud voice.²⁸ They would run up to the stage and embrace one of three or four men who sat in the back, behind the speaker. They asked for a blessing. On the way out, on of he older men told me that Jesus would be happy if I didn’t cut my hair. I told him I have Jesus in my heart. He also told us the [sic] the elders were coming from Lapland later in the summer, as though it would be a great occurrence.

²⁸ I would presume this to be the modern idea of the “liikutukset.”

Before the service, many of the young people gather outside near the entrance and smoke, so there is a cloud of smoke as people enter the church.²⁹

It is interesting that smoking would be found in these churches. Laestadius's involvement in temperance movements seems to run counter to the idea that smoking would be largely accepted. After researching OALC on the Internet, it is apparent that those who leave the church often have a large complaint about the acceptability of this habit.

Where are they going?

The Laestadian movement is far from dead. The OALC is far from dead. Though they do seem to have fairly eccentric practices³⁰ their rather "fundamental" ideals, a down home, family oriented outlook, are appealing to a growing number of people disillusioned with the modern way of living. Their approach to people does smack of their Laestadian roots. A look again at the account of Mrs. Keskey shows that even though they talk about Jesus, they still have a legalistic look on much of life.

They will not find much help in their growth from Lutheran communities. One will note that as the history was recounted, there was no mention of Luther. This church bodies affiliation with Lutheranism is one that ends at the sign post.³¹ The Finnish translation of the Small Catechism was used in the old country, and an English one used today, however, the church does not reference their Lutheran heritage much at all, in favor of the more emotional, enthusiastic Finnish Laestadian history.

²⁹ Account from Virginia Keskey, a WELS member at St. Peter's Ev. Lutheran in Darwin, MN.

³⁰ Second hand accounts from a Mr. Jason McDonald (who was supposed to be available for interview for this paper, but was un reachable) through Norman "Skip" Joers are that the current members of the OALC do not have Television or radios in the home. Though access to current technology for work is fine, computers, cell phones and the like.

³¹ If the church does, in fact, have a sign post. Mr. McDonald's home church does not.

Though they are small in the realm of church bodies in America, the OALC will still be around for a few more generations. Though without the resources of a larger body, and without the fuller use of a firm organization (especially important in a body that is prone to schisms) their days may be numbered. They do have the Word, though not the central focus, and God will use his means to sustain his own.

Conclusion

So, what now? What to tell that man who asked what an Old Apostolic Lutheran is? Obviously there is no quick easy answer. Any attempt would lessen the rich heritage that they so clearly have, and dearly hold on to. They aren't going to be major players in the religious scene in America. They aren't even going to be so popular outside of the rural areas of the nation. But they are there. They stand for the fundamental beliefs. They retain their heritage as *Kvaener* (Finns). They continue to announce forgiveness in the name and blood of Christ, who does give his forgiveness freely. In the best summary, I suppose one could say, "They are Christians," and leave it at that; though they certainly are far from being Lutheran Christians. God grant that they continue to realize the forgiveness that his name and blood gave them. As long as they hold to that truth we can delight and wish along with them, as Lars Levi Laestadius said: "May the gracious Lord Jesus give us the grace to see one another in heaven and there sing: Amen, Hallelujah, forever."³²

³² Foltz. p.222

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<http://www.extoots.blogspot.com/>

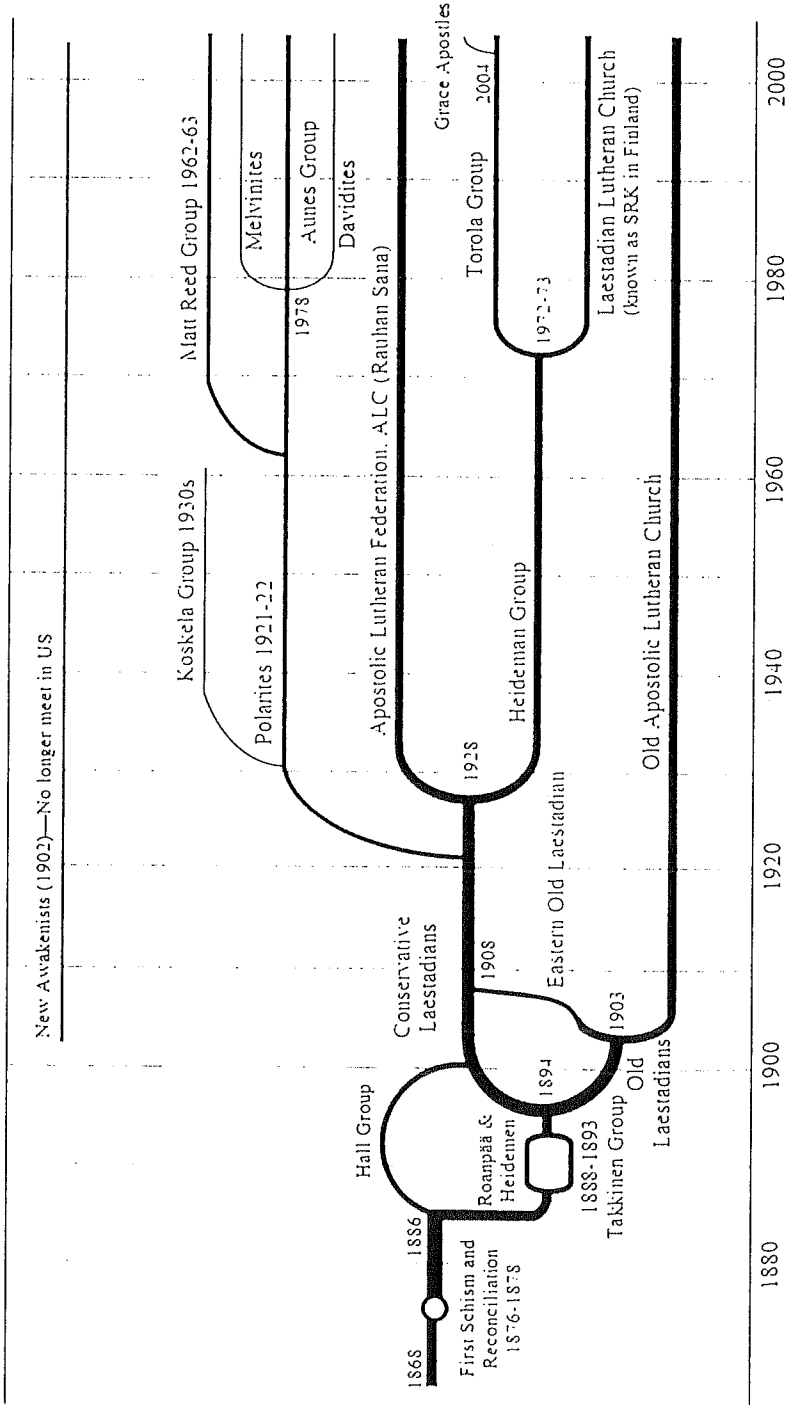
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TIMELINE OF NORTH AMERICAN LAESTADIANISM



Adapted from diagram by Marko Sagulin, Tuomas Palola, and Jouko Talonen—used with permission.



Lars Levi Laestadius, the founder of Laestadian revivalism, was a Swedish state church minister (1800-61). Before his repentance in 1844 which started the religious movement, he was an active scholar in botanics and zoology as well as ethnography, having the prize of the French Academy (the medal on his costume).



The calender of the services still follows the migrations of the reindeer Lapps to their winter and summer camps. This picture shows how Lapp boys are introduced to their culture by their grandmother showing how to catch a reindeer by throwing a lasso around the neck of the reindeer in the separation fence.