
B E C K E R

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S W E D E N

Toward an understanding of the
role of Dr. Siegbert W. Becker in the
formation of the
Lutheran Confessional Church in Sweden

Senior Church History Paper

by

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On the ninth of September, 1972, the largest circulation daily in Sweden, and the most respected, *Svenska Dagbladet*, carried the following headline on its church-news page: "American Theology Professor: The Bible entirely reliable, also in earthly things." Next to the headline appeared a five by five photograph of a man obviously engaged in discussion, the look on his face one of a man with an extremely important and urgent message. Who was this "American theology professor"? Dr. Siegbert W. Becker. The article begins with these words:

"In our church no one can be a professor or a pastor who cannot without reservations accept the Bible as infallible--for example in what it says in the creation account, that God created the earth in six days and that Eve was made of Adam's rib." With "our church" Siegbert W. Becker means the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod in the USA, in whose theological faculty he is a professor. WELS is one of the four large denominations of American Lutheranism and has ca. 300,000 members and one thousand pastors.

How did it come about that a member of the Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary faculty--a group not usually known for its bravado or popularity on the lecture circuit--could make such a huge splash in the Swedish papers? How could it come about that a WELS theologian became an instant news item, without even committing some heinous crime?

In answering that question, a couple of things should be presupposed. For the first, Becker committed no heinous crime--he simply said such outrageous things as those quoted above. Secondly, one must realize that for such simple Biblical statements as those made by Becker to prove entirely

shocking in a "Lutheran country," there must be something very different about the Swedish *Weltanschauung* than that of the United States. One shouldn't of course have to mention this, but for the narrow parochial perspective of a goodly number of Americans. Nor are the differences simple or even easily explained.

The simple fact is that an unusual set of circumstances--circumstances of time and place, men and women, churches and church papers--all orchestrated by the providence of God himself brought about the complex and unusual history which this paper hopes in particular to contextualize and to begin to explain to some inadequate extent.

When Dr. Becker came to Sweden, he naturally brought with him a world view and educational-experiential background greatly different from that of the Swedish churchman. He recognized this himself. In his opening statement, read at all of his lectures in 1972, in which he explained briefly his background, synod and fellowship principles, he also stated the same in the following way.

I have come as a representative for our synod in order to inform you somewhat about our church and what it teaches. We want you to know what we stand for and we believe fully and firmly that our position is truly Lutheran. We on our side would like to get to know you better and become fully informed about what you teach. I must confess that most of us in WELS up until now have not paid too much attention to the ecclesiastical situation in Sweden. There are very few of our members who can read or speak Swedish, and we have excused ourselves by assuming that the Scandinavian Lutherans in America should interest themselves in Scandinavia.¹

¹S.W.Becker, "Wisconsinsynodens principer för gudtjänstgemenskap," *Biblicum*, 1972:4-5, p.206.

Naturally Becker was somewhat acquainted with Swedish church history in general, and by way of the correspondence which had been exchanged, also of the immediate situation and circumstances which had brought him there. Yet no one raised in the American church situation can immediately appreciate what it means to exist in a scandinavian "folk-church" situation. That includes those fully intimate with the state church situation in Germany, where the ecclesiastical and even the social situation are distinctly other. For example, in Germany there are churches, *Landeskirchen*, some Lutheran, some union, some Roman Catholic--and even if these were the only three churches in Germany (not to mention synagogues and mosques which are virtually non-existent in Sweden) this still leaves the people with a sense of pluralism, which, even though narrow by American standards, nevertheless is not even comparable to the situation in Sweden. In Sweden there is *The Church*, the Folk Church (*Folkkyrkan*), The People's Church.

Yet a different type of pluralism does exist. In fact it results from the 'one people, one church' mentality in Sweden. As theological students, we WELS (Synodical Conference) Lutherans study from an historical angle the pietistic movements in nineteenth century scandinavia, and we perhaps become familiar with the nature and theology of the Swedish Covenant Church in the midwestern United States. Yet we have no grasp of what it means to have such groups, with worship houses and tent meetings of their own, as function-

ing *ecclesiolae in ecclesia*. We use expressions such as "high church" and "low church" in reference to a pastor's liturgical tendencies, or to speak of a general movement. But we have no experience with what it means to have a High Church Movement such as the Swedish Kyrklig Sammling, with a board of directors, a periodical, and a printed, theological and practical platform, that meets for "synods," and decides how next to sway and influence and change the greater Church to which they belong. And while we may read with naive amazement reports on theological debates in Europe regarding fundamental doctrines, an American theologian finds it hard to even begin to grasp what it means to belong to a church which has its *Agenda* approved for printing by the Swedish parliament and argues that it is out of sync with its nature as a "Folk-Church", a people's church, to exclude forty percent of its members simply because they are not baptized--members who are guaranteed the right of membership by their Swedish citizenship. An example of what such debates entail, appears in the new book *Jag tror på folkkyrkan*, (*I Believe in the Folk-Church*) in which the author gives more than a few clues as to the nature of the Swedish Church:

In and of itself the whole situation with unbaptized members is therefore something abnormal and unfortunate. Is the solution to this situation that the church convention pass a resolution that those who are not baptized cannot be members in the Swedish Church? The old folk-church position has been to give baptism to as many as possible and let the baptism be followed by a Christian life and a life of faith. A folk-church offers, makes available, Word and Sacrament. On the other hand a folk-church does not exclude, does not

sever. That attitude belongs to the sectarian churches.²

This view also underlines another important aspect of the nature of Swedish church-view and theology which served as the context for Becker's visit: theology is not argued or even taught on the basis of the Scriptures, which at very best are paid lip-service and at worst are tacitly rejected. Theology is debated on the basis of name-calling and the dogmaticism of "broad-minded" pronouncements. "Thus saith the Lord" has no place in a theology of "this is the way it is," and "this is the way we do it and have always done it in the church." That should help in understanding the reaction to Becker's lectures on the part of those who were keenly interested in the Bible and its teachings. For them, even those who had valiantly fought for and promulgated and taught the Scripture's own teachings, had been trained in a theological method much more concerned about proper intellectual format, than with the simple "foolishness of preaching." When Becker lectured, people were warmed in their hearts by the Holy Spirit, because Becker had give them God's own medicine and means--the Word. In an article describing his lectures in Umeå, under the title

"Unforgettable Days in Umeå," *Biblicum* magazine wrote:

Seldom have any study-days around God's Word been so gripping for people as *Biblicum's* study-days in Umeå the 9th to 13th of August (1972). Even though the participants listened to lecture after lecture from 10 o'clock in the morning, they didn't want to disperse

²Bengt Wadensjö, *Jag tror på folkkyrkan*, (Stockholm: Proprius Förlag, 1985), p.52f.

after the conclusion of the program at 8:30 in the evening. They wanted to hear more of that which had come from the mouth of God, so the get-together often lasted till 11:00. Professor Siegbert W. Becker from the Wisconsin Synod in the U.S.A. had the the ability to talk about the Scripture's great and deep mysteries in a way that everyman could understand. What joy it was to get to listen to a man who didn't produce a lot of personal speculations but poured forth from the well of the water of life, the Holy Scriptures, which are trustworthy in all things. Many have asked to have a copy of these lectures in print as soon as possible. This clear and irreproachable teaching on the inspiration of Scripture and infallibility, objective and universal justification, rightly dividing law and gospel, God's wrath and God's love, ought to be known by everyone. We hope to gather these lectures into a book.³

The politicization and secularization of the church, furthermore, is also so totally foreign to us that we can hardly even grasp what it means to have the church councils of the parishes are elected at the public polling booths of the respective parishes on ballots that list the candidates by political party. It's beyond our sensibilities to think of the church as such a thoroughly socio-political institution. It's hard for us to imagine that a "Lutheran" land should have such a totally calvinistic denial--really unawareness--of the doctrine of the two kingdoms. And so when we read that Sweden is the most "Lutheran" land in the world, in our ignorance we quite unintentionally give such statistics a subconscious benefit-of-the-doubt.

How do Swedes view the church? Wadensjö, a churchman, demonstrates his total lack of understanding of the church's mission in a statement characteristic of his argu-

³Biblicum, 1972:3, p.156

ments throughout, as well as the thoughts of most of those who still find any usefulness for the church.

The people need the church. The people need the elevation it contains, that the window is opened to God's heaven, that meditation fills souls. We might need to reintroduce the old Sunday holy-day, with closed stores, more peaceful rhythm in the community and church attendance. We need that as a corrective against restlessness. Let us begin by pointing out how important it is to participate in attending church! Not going to church has become a social monster in our land. This is now more deeply ingrained in our people's subconscious than what we active church members most often are aware of, at the same time as there is a collective memory that one is supposed to go to church. The whole Swedish people gladly sing, every Christmas "This is the way we go to church, go to church go to church, this is the way we go to church, so early Sunday morning" with out the words getting stuck in their craw. With each passing year this collective memory is weakened in the subconscious of the people.⁴

The folk-church idea, if it is to be associated with anything in American society, might be compared to a time and a place, if there ever was one, where everybody in town belonged to one church, this membership being considered a matter of patriotism and good order and in that sense religious. To view church otherwise in Sweden is the practical equivalent of being a German-American during World War I and holding or attending worship services in the German language. This is not to say, as Wadensjö points out, that people consider *active* membership essential or even useful. It's like the boy scout issue. There aren't that many boy scouts. But publicly challenge their theological basis, and one is considered anti-American, anti-country, anti-God, anti motherhood, etc.

⁴Wadensjö, p. 57.

Thus if there is any attachment to the church remaining, it is almost exclusively this sort of sentimental nostalgia and nothing more. If people were suddenly to follow Wadensjö's advice and attend church services they would find little there to bring them back again. Following Olaf Palme's death in late winter, 1986, an editorial comment in the national daily *Expressen* described the radio messages of the church as much less engaging and uplifting than the ten minute daily exercise program on Swedish radio, program three, both of which, as the writer correctly pointed out, try to preach the same message--you can do it if you try, if you push yourself.

With such an overwhelming apathy toward things spiritual, where does one begin? Fortunately for Becker he didn't have to decide. He was invited to speak by and for a specified group, who resembled in many ways the 7000 believers remaining in Israel in Elijah's time. With such an opportunity at his disposal, Becker, at the synod's urging, was prepared to set out for Sweden.

One of the most important things that Dr. Becker did for the sake of gaining a hearing and in order to be able to listen, was to take it upon himself to learn the Swedish language. As the stories are told, Dr. Becker takes on an almost mythical aura, when it comes to his linguistic abilities. It is true that Dr. Becker had an immense capability for linguistic *sprachgefühl*. That is what it takes, more than anything else, to be able to effectively grasp the

tenets of any language. Furthermore, Dr. Becker was quite conversant in German. The combination of English and German automatically render Swedish a not too difficult language in which to gain a general ability. In addition Becker had one more thing which is absolutely indispensable to learning any language, namely the *desire* to learn, together with the knowledge that it would be of great personal and synodical value. Becker was able to spend time from mid-April through June of 1972 attending a Berlitz course in Swedish. And this gave him, by the time of his trip in August of the same year, the ability at least to demonstrate the willingness of a fellow-Christian to "be all things to all men." At this point in time, of course, his Swedish was tenuous and he used it only in informal settings, yet people were warmed by his desire to meet them more than half way. Even after the church was formed in 1974, Becker continued to work on his Swedish, so that by 1975, after expressing his hesitations and doubts about preaching a convention sermon in Swedish at the LBK's first annual convention, it is reported that he did just that.

It would be one-sided to leave the reader with the impression that Becker learned Swedish only for the sake of the Swedes. The fact is, this was one of the most important factors which enabled the WELS and the LBK to establish fellowship in 1975, and to maintain it relatively untainted throughout Becker's remaining years. This is because Becker could translate and distribute such pertinent correspondence

and doctrinal statements as were deemed necessary for good inter-church relations. That really put the ball into his court, when it came to understanding, making sense of and explaining for others on the CICR just what the situation was in Sweden.

In reading the *Northwestern Lutheran* articles written about Sweden in the 70s and early 80s, one obviously gets the impression that this was almost exclusively the work of Dr. Becker, at least as far as help from the west is concerned. In many ways this is true--but not by design. It was simply by default. Only Becker could read and understand Swedish. He wanted the CICR as involved as possible, and did involve them. But every involvement on the part of others meant first being briefed by Becker. He was always forced to choose: Do I translate this item word for word and get a back ache while typing? Or do I give them a rough overview, which leaves them reliant to some extent upon my appraisal?

The most amazing thing about Becker's work, this the astounding amount of material he *did* translate and present to the CICR, so that they could make sensible, informed decisions. The work was never ending, as the LBK, without adequate training for its "colloquy" pastors in particular and the remainder in general, and without the unifying force of a joint *alma mater*, never ceased to have the internal disputes so characteristic of WELS' early history--disputes

which to a great extent can be simply attributed to lack of mutual trust and respect.

In addition to his linguistic abilities, Prof. Becker was also able to make use of his Th.D. degree. One of the most useful aspects no doubt, that he found in his title, was the way it opened doors for him, among those who were not actively (or even at all) seeking the truth of the Scriptures. One reads with utter amazement, for example, a lecture delivered by Prof. Becker at the Theological Faculty of Uppsala University in September 1972. The present writer attended a lecture at this institution in October, 1985, presented by Bishop David Preuss concerning the processes leading to the formation of ELCA. The professor who introduced him, shyly stated afterwards "We have to confess to not being too aware of the situation in American Lutheranism. We've been concentrating more on the eastern religions." So far from Christianity is this seminary that they actually study Buddhist and Hindu principles as sources of truth in their course "Religious Knowledge," a course which once was known as dogmatics. Before this faculty Becker stood in 1972, by some miracle of God, and leveled charges against those who accuse confessional Lutheran theologians of "intellectual dishonesty," right in front of those very culprits and their students--and by their invitation! He concluded his talk with these sentences:

I have more respect for an honest atheist, who confesses his unbelief on his way to hell, than I have for a christian theologian who uses fine christian terms which have a long tradition behind them, with the in-

tent of betraying God's people and leading theological students astray. One of the saddest situations in the world today, is when pious young men come to prepare themselves for the pastoral ministry, who are completely convinced that the Bible is God's Word, that Jesus is God's Son who came into the world in order to be their Savior, and then they leave a theological seminary as men who have been made into unbelievers by unbelieving professors.⁵

But these weren't Becker's only qualifications. It was through *Christian News* that the connection was first established between Dr. Becker and disgruntled state-church Swedes, a connection which eventually led to the formal invitation to lecture which brought Dr. Becker to Sweden. No doubt one of the reasons that the CICR heartily consented to have Dr. Becker represent them in Sweden, upon receipt of this invitation, was the fact that he had personal experience with the painful process of leaving a "mother-church." What is perhaps less known to his American brothers, is in what way he was able to use this, both in his empathetic writing and speaking, and in his decision-making. The latter would be difficult to trace, but the former exists to some extent in print. When Professor Becker travelled about on his first lecture tour in 1972, he generally began by explaining his reasons for declining to fellowship at such events, using a prepared statement. In 1973 it was printed in *Biblicum* magazine. In this statement which is very delicately and diplomatically worded, Becker makes reference to his experience of leaving the Missouri Synod:

⁵S.W.Becker, "Att Studera Teologi," *Biblicum*, 1974:3, p.60.

Many of you, surely, find the thought of completely breaking with the Swedish Church unthinkable at the present time. I know how difficult it is to leave a church in which one was baptized and confirmed. I can talk about it from experience. I was baptized, confirmed and ordained in the Lutheran Missouri Synod, which for forty years thereafter was a solidly orthodox Lutheran church. Still today it would be difficult to find there such crying unbelief as we sometimes see among the highest officials in the Swedish Church. But the beginning of such an unbelief can also clearly be seen there, and about ten years ago I also felt conscience-bound to leave my church, in which I had learned to know my Savior, because it no longer was the church it had been when I was ordained."

That Becker's background and concomitant empathy were a useful attribute, is verified in a lecture delivered at the annual synod of the LBK, July, 1985, entitled "What do we want?" Dr. Seth Erlandsson, commenting on the need for caring attitudes in the LBK's congregations, had the following to say about the example set by Dr. Becker:

When professor Becker came to Sweden the first time in 1972, the majority of us here belonged to a false church, a church which allowed and gave a lot of room to false doctrine. What do you think would have happened if professor Becker had hit us in the head and hurt us by saying: You are false teachers. You are heretics. We would surely have wound up in the psychological situation that we wouldn't have wanted to listen to him. But he didn't do that. Rather he fed us bit by bit with Biblical teaching. Through this we began to ask ourselves: Can it really agree with God's Word, that which we had heard time and time again, that one should remain in a false church no matter what, as long as there is someone or some who are true believers there? We'd learned that again and again. And we didn't know any better, i.e. we were weak in knowledge, we were weak in faith. But thanks be to God, we didn't become hardened and choose false teaching over true teaching by never getting to hear the truth. When we finally got to hear it, indeed, God was so gracious that he gradually opened our eyes through His true and pure Word, and we saw what God's word clearly and pre-

*S.W.Becker, "Wisconsinsynodens principer för gudtjänstgemenskap," *Biblicum*, 1972:4-5, p.207.

cisely teaches. The exact same thing is what we should be doing now. ...Full of love and with true concern we should sow the word of truth. Insults and contempt do not create faith, only Scriptural teaching, God's pure Gospel.⁷

These were more than just idle words of praise. Dr. Becker's experiences in the Missouri Synod had no doubt taught him a great deal of patience, but more than that, they had taught him well to know the difference between ignorance and weakness on the one hand, and hardened apathy and heterodoxy on the other. When Becker came to Sweden he lectured for people who despite their affiliation with a heretical outward organization were searching as true children of God for the truths of His Word. He saw people who in many ways were in a similar situation to his own of not many years before.

Furthermore, although Becker was not raised a Wisconsin Synod theologian, yet he possessed the unique characteristic that distinguishes a true Wauwatosa theologian from others, namely, the ability to see all Scripture as not only a witness of Christ, but a witness to Christ as the only means of salvation, with that salvation of individual souls as the goal of every word, and then the ability to take Scripture on its own historico-grammatical terms, fully confident that this will not lead to disagreement with the truths set forth in the Lutheran Book of Concord, but will substantiate, expound, and make clearer these doctrines. This confidence

⁷Seth Erlandsson, "Vad Vill Vi?" Landskrona: Bokförlaget Per Jonsson, 1985.

gives the Wisconsin theologian the freedom to discuss doctrine without an overbearing barrage of quotations from the fathers, but rather with the *nuda Scriptura* as his starting point.⁸ Becker evidenced early on that this would be his approach. His Swedish book, which is a formal translation of his 1972 lectures, bears as its title *Skriften och Saligheten, Scripture and Salvation*. Another theologian might well not have had the clear perspective which stands behind this title, but rather have lectured under the one-sided theme "Scripture's Infallibility," "Church Fellowship," or some such similar perspective.

Becker's age and experience further rounded out his qualifications as a most capable emissary from the Wisconsin Synod. He had through the years been through the doctrines of Scripture time and time again--and from all angles--so that he was well aware of the dangers and implications of yielding an improper point. This fact became more than obvious in the Communion controversies which arose and remained to haunt him and others.

Beginning with the 1972 tour Becker had many such wonderful opportunities to preach the Gospel to those who had rejected, limited, never really understood, or otherwise contorted it. It is another question as to how many of even the theologically engaged Swedes were willing to listen. In the highly-charged emotional atmosphere of a church gone apostate, personalities are bound to conflict in an unusu-

⁸cf. August Pieper on Walther, "Anniversary Reflections," *Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly*, Spring, 1987, 84:2, pp. 105ff.

ally forceful way. It could be well argued that Satan himself has much freer reign in Sweden, than even in the United States, because the chain that keeps him at bay--the preaching of the Gospel--has been slackened so violently there in the last several generations. Satan has gained so much ground, and he has no desire to yield any of it. His strategy is "*divide et impera*," and he seems to have mastered it.

We have already discussed Swedish receptiveness in general. How Swedish theologians reacted to Becker's message is another story. Beginning with the theologian who was clearly Dr. Becker's most outspoken antagonist we will examine their receptiveness.

Dr. Tom G. A. Hardt had already at the time of Becker's arrival in Sweden been conducting services in Stockholm for an extremely small group of his faithful adherents. They called themselves both St. Martin's Church, and The Evangelical Lutheran Church in Sweden, perhaps with the hope of growing beyond the Stockholm group. Hardt is a gifted research scholar. His doctoral thesis, written on the Lord's Supper seeks to support a doctrine which demands the bodily presence of Christ from the moment of the speaking of the words of consecration. This became his hobby-horse so that even twenty-five years after his congregation was founded, the majority of the articles which he puts into print, deal to a great extent with this doctrine of his.

Hardt, besides being an intelligent man is also a politically wise man. Somehow, besides making enemies, he

also knows how to win friends and influence at least certain types of people. For this reason he partook of quite an extensive correspondence with theologians around the globe, fascinating them with his clever wit, but also appealing to the jealousies of their sinful nature, by indulging them with thinly disguised gossip.

Such a man was bound to have a run-in with Dr. Becker. One of the reasons for this can be readily appreciated. For thirteen years already at the time of Dr. Becker's visit in 1972, Dr. Hardt had stood alone, witnessing to the doctrine of church fellowship and thus the necessity of a break with the Swedish state church.⁹ People had let him talk, even giving him a printed forum. (For example Danell had already published articles by Hardt in his *Nya Vaktaren* before 1972). Meanwhile, as Hardt saw it, *Biblicum* had been enjoying all the glory and financial support which went along with its remaining within the state church. One can see his point. Yet it is far from being that simple. Hardt had made his Evangelical Lutheran Church in Sweden such an exclusive, romanizing little conclave, that no one really was able to take seriously any of his overtures. Hardt's view of his role as the pastor rivaled that of Grabau and the Buffalo synod. His insistence upon private confession in a confessional booth and his view of the sacrament of Holy Communion, strongly influenced by the high church Anglican traditions which he learned from a British abbess, complete with

⁹Hardt had translated, published and distributed the CLC document "Concerning Church Fellowship."

bell-ringing to mark the moment Christ's body becomes present in the sacrament *inter alia*, made him unapproachable.¹⁰ The entrance to his chapel in Stockholm urges non-members not to break the good order of the doctrine of church fellowship by praying or singing with his orthodox congregation when visiting. Not to worry--who would visit?

Besides this, as one might suspect most European theologians--but in particular Hardt--despise the historico-grammatical Wauwatosia theology of WELS' theologians, for the simple reason, that the plain meaning of exegetically-treated *nuda Scriptura*, leaves little room for the intellectual back-patting involved in "discovering" new insights through research into tomes, long buried under the dust of time. Such an approach as that followed by Becker, who was first and foremost a Greek exegete, is disarming to the theologian who sees something to be personally lost when this method is employed, because it denies that there is any doctrine which can only be properly understood in the light of the research of the *litterati*.

Tom Hardt seems to have decided early on, that such an intrusion of American influence was not to be tolerated. He had already corresponded with Pres. Naumann. In 1968 he had had a brief informal doctrinal conversation with prof. Lawrenz at the main railway station in Copenhagen. And he had already expressed disagreement with WELS in such a way, and of such a nature, as to make evident that there was not

¹⁰Interview with Rev. Carl Heinrich A. Schmutzler, February, 1987

much point here in pursuing the contact on the part of WELS. He had corresponded with representatives of the CLC, and also with the ELS. The CLC, while expressing themselves on church fellowship in a way with which Hardt could agree, nevertheless turned him off early by clearly stating their position on the sacrament, as that of the old Synodical Conference. The ELS on the other hand proved to be more receptive to Hardt's ideas on Church and Ministry, and Holy Communion, to the point where he singlehandedly had brought about a situation where relations would in the later 1970s be strained and tested between WELS and ELS.

Through his letter-writing, Hardt also sought support for his notions among those, who for conscience' sake--i.e. whose consciences had been wounded by appropriate doctrinal admonitions--had something to gain in their stature before men, by putting down those who might expose them to be less than the orthodox teachers they claimed, namely the theologians of the Wisconsin Synod. Such accomplices, Hardt found at Oberursel, which is the place alluded to in the following letter to Sten Johansson:

I could mention that before his (Becker's) departure for Sweden some in Germany suggested the thought of a travel marshal for him, in order to avoid what might happen. Wisconsinites are known for their mistakes. From the U.S.A. it was said afterwards, that the man in question lacks deeper theological insight..."¹¹

¹¹quoted in *Biblicums kamp för biblisk tro*, Seth Erlandsson and Sten Johansson, Uppsala: Biblicum, 1974, p.101.

In a scathing follow-up letter to Sten Johansson, Hardt again mentions Germany as the source of criticism against Becker.

I want to point out that my condemnation of him (Prof. Becker) as ignorant is a kindness. Normally I would be obliged to render harder judgments.... In my earlier letter...I mentioned that some in Germany wished that he would have a travel marshal to avoid mistakes--thus it is not I who have "labeled him" in need of help, but people with longstanding and sad experience with men like professor Becker. If you think that professor Becker is a learned man or at least an able man, you're free to do so--it's no sin, only a weakness.¹²

In view of this it is encouraging to read that Becker did not hide from Hardt during his visit to Sweden in the summer of '72. Parts of two days were dedicated to doctrinal talks--August 29th and 30th. During this time Dr. Becker was able first-hand to gain insight through conversation as to the spirit of Hardt, a spirit which caused him to exclaim in exasperation at one point regarding Hardt's views on the sacrament "I will never change, you will never change--God convert You!"¹³

In the letter Hardt subsequently sent to Becker at Biblicum, Hardt gives both evidence to this spirit which Becker would find frustrating for years to come and to his doctrinal differences with WELS. He lists as the three main bones of contention the doctrine of church fellowship, which as stated above, he found to be insufficient in the

¹²*ibid.*, p.102. During a subsequent visit to Oberursel by Dr. Seth Erlandsson and pastor Sten Johansson of Uppsala, assurances were given that Hardt must have taken some statement made in jest, and considered it a serious appraisal.

¹³Mimeographed open letter from Hardt to Becker, dated September 5, 1972.

"Doctrinal Statements of the Wisconsin Synod," the doctrine of the Lord's Supper as historically taught by the Synodical Conference, and WELS' "deemphasis" of absolution as a special ordinance of God, (although he conceded that he would be satisfied with a change on our part which still fell short of calling it a sacrament!). The letter was written in a very high style, bespeckled with biting comments in dignified words. At one point, Hardt makes a not so disguised reference to Dr. Hermann Sasse, or perhaps Kurt Marquardt in a way which sounds very much like a child's "I'm going to tell on you," or maybe "I've already tattled on you." Hardt wrote:

A Lutheran Pastor, active in the pastoral ministry in Australia, who is a man of blameless orthodoxy probably even in your own eyes, recently wrote to me saying: 'Already, I detect them / the Wisconsin synod / losing the Real Presence'. This may be exaggerated as the sentence stands, but it may be that the leaven that I point to above is at work.¹⁴

Soon thereafter, upon returning to Mequon Becker heard from Dr. Hardt again. He made clear that he was not interested in seeing any work in Scandinavia being done on the part of WELS, nor did he have any desire for a new "competitor" church. Becker wrote to Seth Erlandsson, director of the Biblicum Institute in Uppsala, Nov. 18, 1972:

I had a rather nasty letter from Tom Hardt in which he wrote, "I am very thankful that the meeting in Piteå ended in nothing, not even the decision to have a next meeting." I will send you a copy of my answer to him, which will put my relations with Tom Hardt into cold storage for a while. I was sorry to see him take such

¹⁴ *ibid.*

an attitude. He seems to have the cause of free Lutheranism in Sweden more at Hardt than at heart.

Relations between the two were forever to remain in "cold storage," and if anything to grow worse, due specifically to the communion controversy, but much more realistically to the very nature of Hardt's brand of ecclesio-political theology.

In a letter of February 25, 1978, Becker wrote down his judgment of the Hardt theological style, writing in the following way:

I have almost finished translating Hardt's latest diatribe. It would be almost funny if it did not do so much damage, and I mean damage to Hardt himself. A more hate-filled article I have not read in a theological journal. His only hope is to set up enough straw men that he can make Zwinglians out of us. He must know that we have never denied that it is the words of institution that create the real presence. If I were a Donatist I would doubt, however, that they do this when they are uttered by Hardt.

It wasn't only Hardt, however, who found himself offended by Becker--or rather by the Scriptures, as clearly expounded and applied by Becker. Gustav Adolf Danell, Cathedral dean at Växjö, member of the Biblicum board, and editor/publisher of the monthly *Nya Vaktaren*, (*The New Watchman*). Danell, too, stood to lose a lot through Becker's meddling. As Cathedral dean, Dr. Danell was an influential man. Leaving the state church meant giving up his position, his parsonage and his pension. But most importantly Dr. Danell realized--and rightly so--that if Biblicum were to adopt a Scriptural position on church fellowship, it

would lose the majority of its supporters. That was a consequence he was not willing to participate in bringing about. The sad story of his departure from the Biblicum board, and his attempts to disguise his spinelessness through false accusations against other members of the Biblicum board via *Nya Väktaren*, are well documented in the book *Biblicums kamp för Biblisk Tro*, written by Seth Erlandsson and Sten Johansson, and translated and distributed in mimeo form by Dr. Becker.

That the consequences of a break with the State Church would be hard, is made clear from the program for the dedication weekend of the new Biblicum building, the 14th and 15th of October, only a little over a month since Becker had flown back to Mequon. At 2:15 and 3:15 that Saturday afternoon, Dr. Hugo Odeberg, honorary chairman of the Biblicum board and Dr. Seth Erlandsson, director of Biblicum would hold their lectures in one of the great lecture halls of the Uppsala University, before the group moved to the new building for the rite of dedication. On the following morning, Sunday, at 9:00 a.m., a service complete with confessional address and communion would be celebrated in the Uppsala Cathedral, the seat of the Archbishop of Sweden, led by Gustav Adolf Danell, Cathedral Dean in Växjö. At 3:15 there was another lecture at the University by Prof. Odeberg followed by a Vesper service in "St. Angar's Chapel." Anyone familiar with the work of Biblicum today, can understand the deep feelings which would be aroused in men like Danell, at

the thought of leaving the state church. If he felt Biblicum's work would be hindered in any way by obedience to the Scripture's teaching on Church fellowship, he was right. When he and Biblicum parted ways, he was left with his cathedral and his pension. Was he better off? He knows, as does the readership of his magazine, what peace his decision cost him. He knows first hand the personal wrestling with his conscience, against better knowledge, the years have brought him. In 1987 Danell is publishing more frequently than ever articles which argue for stepping out of the state church for the purpose of forming a truly confessional Lutheran church.

Dr. Becker's writing was first introduced to Sweden through Kjerstin Jonsson, wife of pastor Per Jonsson, when she translated an article by him into Swedish which had originally appeared, as has been mentioned, in *Christian News*. Kjerstin proved through the years to be remarkably adept both at translating--her command of English being superb--and at grasping the theological issues at hand. She chose for the most part to stay in the background, however, allowing her husband to come to the fore, and in many ways be credited with the work of two people. The two worked well as a team, and one might wonder how much influence each had upon the other. In combination their work of publishing articles--through the magazine *Kyrka och Folk*, (Church and People), the the organ of the high church movement *Kyrklig Sammling*, (Churchly Gathering), through Danell's magazine

Nya Vaktaren, by publishing several pamphlets consisting mostly of non-original material, the most influential of which was "*Lutherska bekännelsekyrka*" ("Lutheran Confessional Church"), and beginning in 1973 through their own newly begun paper *Lutherskt Sändebrev* (Lutheran Letter)--did much to build momentum for the establishment of a free Lutheran confessional church in Sweden.

Per Jonsson had had something of a checkered ecclesiastical past. By their own description, neither Per nor Kerstin had the gift of conversing with and convincing individuals, being much more comfortable in their cluttered apartment behind piles of aged dogmatic tomes. Through their reading and study, the Jonssons had come to realign themselves several times, first with the high church movement, a group gathered by one unifying cause--to combat the ordination of women--and then later with the pietistic movement known as *Bibeltrogna Vänner*, or "Bible-faithful Friends," a group dedicated more or less to upholding the inerrancy of Scriptures but also devoted to such causes as avoiding the evils drink and dance.¹⁵ Jonsson, who by the time of his alignment with this group was already fairly well studied in the Lutheran dogmaticians had hardly warmed up to this group out of personal pietistic convictions. Plainly put, Per Jonsson showed himself to be a fairly good politician. Since a number of the *Bibeltrogna Vänner* would show them-

¹⁵This is the group from which the magazine *Nya Vaktaren* had arisen through its original editor, the influential lay-preacher Axel B. Svensson.

selves really sincere in their desire to uphold the Scripture and its teachings, this proved to be of great advantage in the actual summons to leave the state church and form a Lutheran confessional church. Jonsson's writings, translations and publications--he had started his own publishing concern for this purpose--would be a useful tool in fighting the arguments of those with less courage in facing the "church question."

While Per's writing and publishing were of advantage, also in defending and promulgating the teachings presented by Dr. Becker, relations on a more personal plane were at least a little more difficult. Through his polemical condemnations of the church in sermons preached while still an assistant pastor in the state church, little was accomplished. While his paper influenced a good number of people, he managed in his city of Landskrona, in the long run, to have a congregation made up only of his family plus one. That situation had not changed by 1987, except that the "one" now lives far from Landskrona.

One of the great advantages to Per's more "political" nature, is that he proved also to be a great organizer. One reads with amazement for example the "book of reports and memorials" prepared already for the first annual convention of the church in 1975, and sees the prim and proper adherence to form, characteristic of a church body with a long history. One sees the order of business for the days of the convention, drawn up in useful and practical manner. It was

probably due in large measure to this nature of his, in addition to the fact that he was the most under-employed, that Jonsson was chosen chairman of the board of the new church, a position in which he would remain until the troubles of 1987.

As a man who got swept up in the "church question" in a political and polemical way, Per Jonsson proved adept from a human point of view in the formation of a church much larger than that of Hardt in Stockholm. However, this also would prove somewhat troublesome in the years which followed the church's formation. Per's hands had been "stained with blood" by the hard battles that were fought in print with those who refused to understand the Bible's doctrine of church fellowship, as well as other Biblical doctrines, such as that of the Sacraments. Once the church had been formed, naturally, an ever increasingly large portion of its time and efforts, as Becker often pointed out, should have been going toward the winning of lost souls, in a nation of people who had no knowledge of God's plan of salvation. Instead, however, Jonsson seems to have become more and more bitter that only several hundred had left the state church to join the new church during its first decade. Obviously all were somewhat disappointed by this, but Per couldn't leave well enough alone. While teachers and pastors like Seth Erlandsson in the later seventies and early eighties began to direct more of their attention to asking searching questions about how the unchurched might be reached, Jons-

son--as seen particularly in his tone and choice of articles for the *Lutherskt Sändebrev*--more and more began to feel like Elijah when he bitterly complained that he was the only one left. This also led him more and more into a mindset, intent on purifying the "True Church," by refining its doctrine and practice. His time was more and more devoted thus to "refining" the liturgy (e.g. replacing "Lord have Mercy" with "Kyrie eleison," returning the choral melodies to their "original" sixteenth and seventeenth century forms, returning the long discontinued "exorcism" to the baptismal ritual, etc.) and to refining the doctrinal formulations of the new church.

For the most part, Becker did not interfere in any of this. He had always insisted that the Lutheran Confessional Church should truly be a Swedish, not an American church. Becker perhaps had little way of knowing what was historically Swedish, and what was German import, what was pertinent and what was artificial in the liturgical "reforms." However, Becker did begin to notice variances in the theological realm, which he worried might seriously hurt the church in Sweden. Having weathered the Lord's Supper controversy between WELS and ELS which had actually been imported from Sweden from Tom Hardt via Bjarne Teigen, Becker was naturally quite sensitive on this doctrinal point. Jonsson, not even an adequate exegete, fancied himself a dogmatician, mainly due to his long hours and years of reading in the dogmaticians, much of whose work he and his wife had

translated in the *Sändebrev*. As he haplessly delved into these writers more and more, influenced by the writings of Tom Hardt--ironically an arch enemy, mostly for personal and political reasons--Per more and more began to be won over to Hardt's positions. When Becker was heavily involved in the question, in dealing with the ELS, he wrote his paper on the Lord's Supper. Per responded in such an outspoken way that Becker asked him if he would like an official response from the CICR. Per felt the article was poorly written and made this known throughout the LBK as well as to Dr. Becker. He felt it was severely flawed in that Becker based his entire argument on an exegetical-isogogical treatment of the word of institution. Per wrote back that Becker should have included numerous quotes from the fathers, and even suggested, that the Swedish version of the problem should be better handled, if one were simply to translate and publish the "clear words" of Gerhard on the matter.

Such an approach to theology is of course no defense at all against false teachings, and by 1980, Jonsson could write about the Lord's Supper in such a way that Tom Hardt in reviewing Per's *Lutheran Church History* for Danell's magazine *Nya Väktaren*, would write that it is "astounding, that this book being reviewed emphatically and verbosely confesses itself to the doctrine, which he had earlier condemned."¹⁸ Becker was worried about this, but seems to have been convinced by Kjerstin's response to his private, urgent

¹⁸*Nya Väktaren*, Dec. 1980, Vol. 73:12, review by T.G.A.Hardt

letter to Per, where she passes over the issue with a short remark about Hardt's "trustworthiness," which Becker was obviously unwilling to stake anything on.

Thus Becker's proclamation of the truths of Scripture in Sweden was greatly influenced by Per Jonsson and his wife. At first, their good relationship proved one of mutual cooperation, and while relations were strained more and more in later years, Becker never lived to see the day, now come, when he would be denounced as a false teacher by this former brother in the faith.

Much more so than in the case of any other theologian at the time, Becker found a staunch ally in Dr. Seth Erlandsson. Erlandsson had received his doctorate in 1970, on the basis of his thesis "The Burden of Babylon," dealing with the exegesis of Isaiah 13:2-14:23, and demonstrating the unity of the book's author. Subsequent to receiving his degree, Dr. Erlandsson was immediately appointed to be the director of Biblicum, in charge of its day-to-day operation and instruction, and editor of its magazine, then known as *För Biblisk tro*. Soon thereafter, by virtue of his recognized ability at Hebrew exegesis, he was appointed assistant professor (*docent*) in the faculty of Uppsala University. In addition to his work at Biblicum, and as a result of his study of Scripture, Erlandsson has been instrumental in the formation of another sort of *ecclesiola in ecclesiae*, a semi-independent congregation of students from the University, which had eventually called him and Dr. David Hedegård

to serve them with Word and Sacraments. This congregation, known as the Evangelical Lutheran Mission (ELM), later served as a major catalyst toward forming the new church. Those who attended the services of the congregation were not inclined to be very fond of even the external organization of the church.¹⁷ Since Erlandsson and the others participating in these services, then, were already worshipping separately and, unlike the vast majority of those who heard Becker speak in 1972, also celebrating the sacrament independently of the services organized by the state, it was only a one logical step further, that Dr. Becker was taking them, when he boldly and clearly elaborated the doctrine of church fellowship as taught by Scripture.

Docent Erlandsson was a true compatriot of Becker, also by the very nature of his work as an exegetical theologian, and thus in the desire to use Scripture itself as the basis for the formation of a new church. Becker's words and approach thus found in Erlandsson open ears and a receptive heart.

On the sixth of October, 1972, less than a month after Dr. Becker's one month lecture-tour in Sweden, Seth Erlandsson wrote to Dr. Becker concerning the formation of the new church. This was his first letter to Becker after his visit, and it indicates the extent to which Becker and Erlandsson had seen eye to eye, particularly on the doctrine

¹⁷For this reason, one can read of Danell, during his time on the Biblicum board, apparently avoiding their services when visiting Uppsala.

of church fellowship, as Becker had clearly set it forth

both publicly and privately in Sweden. Erlandsson writes:

In our dark situation here in Sweden in regard to all the false teaching and the mixed-up situation it is really a big comfort to have got in contact with you. Since you left a lot of things have happened and I myself am very close to leaving the Church of Sweden now. I know that it will affect Biblicum's work very much. But it cannot help. Maybe most of our supporters will leave us, because they cannot understand why it is necessary to leave the church. According to most of the Lutherans in Sweden the Church of Sweden is the symbol of ev.-luth. doctrine. Therefore they cannot understand that it is necessary to leave the Church of Sweden in order to remain a true ev.-luth. confessor.

One can see here much more than a personal reprieve between two men who respected and admired each other. One sees respect and admiration on the part of Dr. Erlandsson for the entire Wisconsin Synod. This is truly a credit to Dr. Becker, who represented our synod as a whole. Seth in particular was very comfortable with the thought of membership in the WELS, but much more than that. Particularly at this point in time Erlandsson expresses his desire to if possible join the Wisconsin Synod, but at the very least flaunt the ties with Wisconsin for the sake of assuring sceptical and frightened people. His concerns were genuine, as we have seen from the brief study of the context into which Dr. Becker suddenly flew. Erlandsson continues:

Our problem is how to build up a true ev.-luth. church. Because of the suspiciousness I mentioned above it is very difficult to convince even the most strong people on the true ev.-luth. side of the necessity of a free ev.-luth. church. Earlier attempts have frightened them and earlier attempts have also meant a separation from the right doctrine. If we could manifest a closer relationship to your synod I think it would be easier. You are something, we are nothing. We don't yet have a

lot of books, instructions, regulations, etc. You have. If we could say: why belong to a false church when there is a true ev.-luth. church to belong to instead, it would be much easier. You could leave one synod and enter another already existing. I think it is worth thinking over again, as I mentioned to you before you left, that we need a Wisconsin mission or church in Uppsala. We have now started exploratory services and very soon I think Sten (Johansson) will be called as the pastor for "us," the congregation. But I think that our mission work ought to be linked more closely to your synod in order to make it clear that here is the old ev.-luth. doctrine in practice, the old ev.-luth. church, not something new and dangerous without any books and traditions behind it. Maybe the only supporter of Biblicum after I have left the Church of Sweden will be your synod. Then Biblicum will be your institution and fortress in Scandinavia. Why not? Then you have a centre for your mission in Scandinavia and also a research centre which can serve the whole synod....

Recent developments, particularly since Dr. Becker entered his eternal rest, have borne out the fact with much clarity, that people's fears toward a new church are well founded. Without e.g. policies of church discipline and appeal in place, along with a well-established, experienced and properly trained ministerium, problems can arise against which even an apostate state church has checks and balances. And so Seth Erlandsson emphasized the same thought--with further explanation, and a suggested course of action which belies his heart's desire--in a letter to Prof. Carl Lawrenz dated Nov. 13, in response to the official letter he had sent in the name of the Commission on Doctrinal Matters on October 10th:

As Prof. Becker has informed you the situation in Sweden is very complicated and furthermore orthodox lutherans are a bit afraid of or psychologically blocked for the thought of a lutheran free church. You know that all the free churches in Sweden were estab-

lished because of reformed influences and false teachers and the state church was the symbol of the truly orthodox church holding firm to the lutheran confessions. Therefore (people think) every free church is suspect, something fabricated by men, while the state church was founded in Sweden from the very beginning of the Christian era in Scandinavia....Now I must say that Dr. Becker did a marvelous job here. People who earlier could not think of a free lutheran church are now seriously considering the bad situation in the state church and the necessity of a separation. But still most of them do not know how....To establish a free lutheran church in Sweden would, I think, be much easier, if this new free church already is an old church, namely the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod, or in close contact with that synod. ...What we need today is prof. Becker. Biblicum needs him in the work for better literature about the Bible. If you could send him over to us again for a time he could also at the same time examine Sten Johansson and help him (and me) to build up a free lutheran church in Uppsala (and Sweden). What prof. Becker did here in August both for Biblicum and for 'a wake up' concerning the church membership is impossible to measure. He is the right man to help us convince our people that we have to build up a free lutheran church.

These concerns were something with which Dr. Becker would have to deal, although in decisions regarding the nature of Wisconsin Synod help to the new church the CICR would be involved to the highest degree. It is in this regard perhaps that inexperience, both on the part of Becker and of the CICR, may perhaps have proved unavoidably detrimental. It was in 1925 that the last really new orthodox Lutheran free church had formed in Europe, the STLK of Finland, and that had occurred under the guidance of the Missouri Synod. Money certainly played a role in the decisions concerning the nature of the bonds that would exist between the new church and WELS. But probably the chief factor in discouraging any kind of organic connection between the two

churches, was a policy, stated in print, which lists as one of the purposes of the CICR the encouragement of confessional Lutheran movements throughout the world, a wording which seems to expect the maintenance of an organic separation. The unwritten rules of this policy seem to be to make a distinction between third world areas, who theoretically are new to the Gospel and the church, and old world areas, where mission work is thought to be relatively futile, and people are assumed to at least have a good chance at the hearing the Gospel through those whom God has seen fit to appoint as the leaders of their area church. In theory this makes beautiful sense, particularly when areas like Africa are eagerly crying out for the Gospel--and the financial resources required to preach it.

Perhaps, however, history will show that this "policy" was applied in a somewhat short-sighted way. For while financial resources were sent through non-budgetary offerings, good advice would not always be quite as forthcoming, for the simple reason that no organic union of any kind had been established between the two churches. Becker was almost always consulted, and was generally able to provide fantastic advice, but Becker would not always be with us. Without proper channels and procedures in place for an old and mature church to provide guidance to an immature and infant church, problems would be inevitable. The Wisconsin Synod would eventually recognize this, in convention by encouraging the formation of an international Lutheran synodical

conference. It is to be regretted that this important matter was not as clearly seen at an earlier day. Ironically it may have been the communion controversy, which originated in Sweden and eventually strained relations between WELS and ELS which demonstrated the serious lack of a proper forum to discuss problems that might arise--a forum which had existed until the dissolution of the Synodical Conference. An example of the confusion that resulted from this unintentional intersynodical aloofness, could be seen during the controversy referred to in 1977. In this connection Dr. Erlandson wrote to Becker:

It is tragic that the ELS intends to discuss LBK *on the basis of Hardt's false information*. Shouldn't ELS' sister church WELS be asked for advice about Hardt, who is not in church fellowship with ELS? And shouldn't WELS' sister church LBK be allowed to give its viewpoints on Hardt's false information *first*, before ELS reaches its conclusions about what Hardt has said?

That the whole matter of inter-church relations was so *ad hoc* is due in large measure to the confusion and loose ends which resulted from the severing of fellowship between Wisconsin and Missouri, and is simply a matter of history, but as such it is something to be learned from.

Finally, an understanding of Becker's work in Sweden can perhaps be best appreciated by examining the sheer number of his letters, written out of concern for people whom he loved, on matters ranging from finances to doctrine to pastoral theology. Becker wrote hundreds of letters and received just as many. He wrote both asking and advising about provisions for pastors who had taken the brave step

out of the state church, or who had been trained by Biblicum for part-time service in some small isolated congregation. He wrote to urge evangelism on people who had hardly heard of the word. He wrote about resolving personality conflicts. He wrote about doctrinal controversies, suggesting what and how much should be published. He wrote about the church's future, suggesting, and eventually helping to implement a Swedish Church Extension Fund, started with money gathered during his many speaking engagements, and as a result of his many *Northwestern Lutheran* articles about Sweden. When a controversy in Råneå threatened to divide the church in 1982, Becker's mailbox was flooded with letters from both sides. And when the situation became too much for the little church to solve on its own, Becker was flown over at their expense to save the day. And that's exactly how long it took to solve a situation which had dragged on and become more and more inflamed during six months' time. He was able to solve it because he was trusted. Here the real story is that Becker was *consulted*--constantly and admirably. Most had come to adoringly view Becker as a father figure, who could solve problems because of his deep knowledge of Scripture and his long years of experience. They had come to know him as a man who knew them--and their language and country. It is little wonder that when the board of Biblicum heard of his impending retirement, they seized the opportunity to issue him a call to come and live, work, preach and teach in their midst. The Lord in his providence

saw fit to "terminate" that call, by issuing a call of his own, a call to eternal rest. The fledgling church Becker left behind in Sweden has surely demonstrated in a tragic way how much they miss him.

S O U R C E S

Personal correspondence, 1971-1984, between Dr. Becker and Dr. Erlandsson.

Official correspondence between Dr. Becker and other CICR members and various pastors and members of the Lutheran Confessional Church.

Interviews conducted during the months of September, 1985 through June 1986 with Dr. Seth Erlandsson.

Biblicum, 1971-1980.

Lutherskt Sändebrev, 1973-1987.

Nya Väktaren, 1968-1975.