

THE REVIVALISTIC HERITAGE

OF THE

APOSTOLIC LUTHERAN CHURCH

OF AMERICA

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The quest for one's roots has always been important to peoples, nations and religions. Knowing whom ones ancestors are, their heritage and their goals contributes to the well being of a people or nation or religion. It provides a source of constancy. It presents lessons from the past to be learned as is, modified and then appropriated, or even rejected. Finally, it also provides goals for the future--whether they be the same as one's forefathers or new ones developed from the old.

The Apostolic Lutheran Church of America, like us of the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod, has a heritage in Martin Luther. Theirs however, while more unique than ours is certainly not better. His name is a part of their name as is ours, but Luther and Lutheran theology is down played among them. They possess a more important namesake--Lars Levi Laestadius. Thus congregations of the Apostolic Lutheran Church are often called Laestadian congregations and their people Laestadians. A part of their unique Lutheran heritage is their close spiritual ties to their native Finland and it's Lutheran State Church. Mainline Lutheran Church bodies while recognizing their Lutheran heritage and their indebtedness to the Old Country end their relationship there. We of the W.E.L.S. have our roots in the mission societies of Germany. We, however, no longer look to them for support whether financial or spiritual. Furthermore we no longer look to the Lutheran Churches of Germany to set our doctrine or practice. We have virtually cut all ties with them. The Apostolic Lutherans of America are unique in that their church

has retained a very very close relationship with Finland. Finnish is still spoken a great deal in these congregations and within 10 years a struggle similar to that experienced in the W.E.L.S. over German/English services will come to a head in the Apostolic Lutheran Church. A great many speakers annually make preaching tours--Finnish Laestadians coming to America and American Laestadians preaching in Finland. There is even a small group of Laestadian Finns in America who look exclusively to authorities in Gellivaara, Sweden for their Church polity.

What is the Apostolic Lutheran Church? Briefly, it is a main branch of Lutherans of Finnish origin. If this were 1962 we could say they were one of three different Finnish Lutheran churches in America. The former Suomi Synod was the largest of the three churches. They merged with the Lutheran Church of America in 1962/3. The other group was the National Church--smallest of the three but also the most conservative theologically. In 1962/3 they joined the Lutheran Church--Missouri Synod. Since 1962 the Apostolic Lutheran Church is the only distinct Finnish Lutheran Church in America.

The purpose of this paper is to show that the religious tradition of revivalism, which bore much fruit for the Lutheran State Church of Finland, has led the Apostolic Lutheran Church of America to a theology that is Lutheran in name only. We will examine the unique features of the Apostolic Lutheran Church in America--to see why these features have led them to hold a distorted Lutheran theology. These are their

revivalistic heritage (which is more pietistic than Lutheran) and their continuance, for the most part, as a lay movement which has brought with it attitudes that are anti-ministerial, anti-educational (for trained ministers) and factional. That Lutheranism can and did survive within the State Church of Finland is apparent from other Finnish immigrants to America who established Lutheran Churches that were more doctrinally sound than the Apostolic Lutheran Church.

I. LAESTADIAN REVIVALISM IN FINLAND

Revivalism in Finland is not unique to the Laestadian movement. Laestadianism began in the northern most region of Finland and Lapland because of the preaching of Lars Laestadius (1800-1861). Laestadianism spread rapidly among the northern region and later to the southern region primarily because the ground had been already prepared for this revival. This movement was, from its beginning, successful because of these two factors: First, the tradition and condition of the Lutheran Church in Finland and then, the religious movements which preceded it.

Religion was always important to the Finnish people. The churches always had a prominent place in every city. It was at the center of the town usually situated on a slight hill. The church dominated the lives of the Finns subdividing their lives into the Christian areas of growth and development associated with baptism, confirmation, marriage and finally burial. While few Finns had the opportunity of

attending school a great number of years yet nearly every Finn could boast of being able to read (not necessarily to write, however). The schools that taught them were the church schools. The materials they learned to read and continued to read were the hymnbook, Luther's Small Catechism and the Bible. Needless to say, the importance of religion among a people is not necessarily a reflection on the quality of one's spiritual life. The level of sanctification among the Finns and Laplanders left room for improvement. It was the pietists who made the contention that orthodox Lutheranism among the people left a dead faith. Though pietism was frowned upon by the Lutheran Church officials yet its influence came in through the back door by means of devotional materials and especially hymnody.

The history of the early 1800's in regard to spiritual leadership shows an element of truth to the pietists' contention against the State Church. Let's not blame to hastily the common people however, For they had a daily struggle against the forces of Satan while their pastors and the church in general were poorly equipped to counsel them, encourage them and properly educate them. Reasons cited for this failure were the rationalism that pervaded the theological faculty, the high turn over among the faculty during the early years of the theological division of the University of Helsinki and professors who were unknowledgable in pastoral care and theology.¹ The result was that the people were easy targets for the pietistic revivals. They found eager

listeners, comfort, and advice among the members of the conventicles. Another factor encouraging the growth of pietism and a turning away from the clergy was the unavailability of a pastor for every congregation. Pastors were few and far between. Nevertheless the people would meet and someone would read a sermon from one of the postils (most always of a pietistic persuasion). They would sing hymns, pray and discuss what the sermon said. In this way the lay preachers were born. This became more popular and thus a Lutheran-Pietist union was formed in what became known as the Readers Movement. One author describes it in this way: "Out in the rural districts humble folk would gather in their cottages to read the Bible together, and to share the devotional writings of the great Lutheran church fathers, Luther, Arndt, and others. They would read the prayers and confessions from the liturgy of the Church, and conclude by calling down the benediction of God upon themselves, their pastor, and their church. It was a quiet movement among the lay folk."² Another author contends that these people "were sometimes overcome by ecstatic experiences."³ In time this movement became more evangelistic in nature and more critical of the rationalistic dead orthodoxy of the Lutheran church.

From these circumstances Laestadius laid the foundation for his revival movement. But for him the course to be laid was not planned and when it came it was a struggle both for him as a Christian and a minister as well as for the people of his congregation. As with most revivals the interest

generated among the people by the originator of the movement is in direct proportion to the spiritual conflict and the quality of the religious experience which he undergoes. The transformation of the Laestadius that was, to the Laestadius that would be, was phenomenal. Extraordinary, indeed, if it is true that for the first 20 years of Laestadius' ministry he himself was without faith!⁴

Laestadius was theologically trained and came from a family that had Lutheran pastors in it for several generations. It must be stated, however, that Laestadius' father was not a minister, but Karl Erik, Laestadius' older brother was. Laestadius was by birth part Swede and part Lapp. (Lapland being both the designation for the northern most area of Sweden and the northern most area of Finland and part of Russia). The climate there is foreboding as this description shows:

"This is a horrible place, hidden behind the snow-covered mountains that seem to reach to the heavens. There is hardly any soil, only heaps of stone surrounded by chilling swamps on every side. Thousands of birds fly over and form a sort of mist in the sky during the short summer, and on the first night of the autumn there rises out of the earth a cold fog which spreads the mantle of death over all plant life."⁵

In 1825 he was ordained as a minister in the Swedish Church. He spent his first year in Arjeplog and then was sent to the city of Kaaresuvanto the following year. This parish was close to the border between Sweden and Finland. For the next 23 years he served this congregation. Laestadius had two problems facing him. First was his intense botanical

interest. This was apparently the reason for his assignment to Kaaresuvanto.⁶ It consumed a great deal of his time. The second problem he faced was the spiritual sluggishness and immorality of these people who were mostly Finns and Laplanders. To overcome this latter problem Laestadius preached the full weight of the law and the righteousness of God's wrath. In vain was his preaching. It was moralistic. It was condemnatory. It offered no hope--no gospel. In this way his ministry continued till the winter of 1844. At this time he heard the simple confession of a Lapp girl who was a member of the "Readers" movement. She opened her heart to him and ignited the fires of faith within him. Laestadius writes:

"Only then I understood and saw the way of life. It had been hidden from me until I talked with Maria. Her simple story of her wanderings and experiences made a deep impression on my heart, and the light was revealed to me. I experienced the foretaste of heaven that evening which I spent with Maria."⁷

This was the turning point in Laestadius' ministry. He had experienced his conversion. He had received a new and awakened heart. These became a new part of his rekindled zeal in preaching. He continued to believe that the law must be preached without mercy. He sometimes used harsh and even very coarse language in his sermons to awaken his listeners. At first this was shocking. Many people left the church but later they returned. "When I returned home," he wrote later, "there came into my preaching a strange power. ...Some began to feel restless, ...hearts turned either more sensitive or harder,

and gradually one after another, in increasingly larger numbers, came to the parsonage to seek guidance and comfort."⁸ He maintained that each individual must experience his own conversion and receive a new heart. More importantly every sermon came to focus on repentance and the shed blood of the Savior for the atonement of sins. So ingrained is this concept that no matter what Laestadian preacher one hears or reads these catch words concerning forgiveness will be found frequently "in the name of the blood of Jesus," and the "shed blood" of Jesus.⁹

In this regard Laestadianism has pressed its greatest influence and character into the State Church of Finland. Even today Laestadianism has preserved its identity while other revival movements have long since been swallowed up by the State Church. It is not uncommon to hear pastors of the State Church (who are not Laestadians) proclaim the forgiveness of sins in the name of the blood of Jesus.

Laestadius, more than the other revival preachers of his era and of those previous, stressed the religious experience of each person. He was confirmed in this belief when in 1845 God gave him a so-called sign of grace. It was the first ecstatic conversion in Kaaresuvanto. After hearing Laestadius preach a woman broke out in an ecstatic rejoicing--praising God. Simultaneously, there was an earthquake. Combined in this way this natural phenomenon and spiritual outpouring were interpreted as a divine sign. The ecstatic experiences continued for some time among the congregation.

These rejoicings, however, are no longer felt among the movement today with the exception of the Pollarites (a very small branch of Laestadians situated mostly in Northern Minnesota). It is unclear whether these ecstatic experiences should be regarded in the same way as the gifts of the Holy Spirit in the Pentecostal Churches of today. The Laestadians refer to them as "rejoicings" not speaking in tongues. They were a part of the conversion process for some. Also they were not a permanent part of the religious movement--they lasted only during the early years of the movement. Moreover there was no special emphasis on this nor was it elevated to the status of a special gift of the Holy Spirit as among the Pentecostal movement.

In 1849 Laestadius moved to a different parish in Pajala, Finland. Here he remained till his death on February 21, 1861. During this last phase his ministry took a new direction organizing lay readers. By recruiting lay readers Laestadius was able to spread his revival more effectively. They traveled about reading the sermons Laestadius wrote for them. As time passed these lay readers began to preach on their own. Eventually they became the primary force behind the spread of this movement.

Juhani Raattamaa (1811-1899) performed a great service for the Laestadian revival movement. As the successor to Laestadius he crystallized much of their peculiar doctrine. Already at his youth he was picked out by Laestadius to be a teacher in the Kaaresuvanto Church. But he had not yet

experienced personal conversion. His repeated drunkenness bothered him greatly during the early years of the revival in Kaaresuvanto. Laestadius was able to help him by preaching the forgiveness of sin in the name of Jesus.¹⁰ After this Raattamaa became a powerful teacher and lay preacher. On account of the doctrines he introduced this awakening movement, which was in the beginning more legalistic, became more evangelical.

The doctrines which he developed for Laestadianism are these:

- 1) Spiritual priesthood of all believers. Only the Christians who received the Holy Spirit were priests. They were given the keys of the kingdom of heaven and they were to use them.
- 2) Personal absolution. To be a Christian one must receive the assurance of forgiveness through personal absolution.
- 3) Only the church can forgive sins because it contains the true believers.
- 4) Only the spoken word has power to forgive sins and create faith. The written word is powerless to do these.
- 5) General rejection by Laestadians of the third use of the law¹¹ as outlined by the Lutheran Confessions.

II. THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN LAESTADIANISM AND THE STATE CHURCH OF FINLAND

The State Church of Finland has been mentioned above. Some clarification can be made at this time. Prior to the 1920's the State Church was the one and only official church of Finland. All who were born in Finland were automatically a part of that church. Since the 1920's the State Church has

become less of a State Church and more of a peoples' church. The church now functions by its own authority. The Finns of today are free to join any church or fellowship they desire. By way of comparison Norway has retained a stricter control of the church than Finland and Sweden is somewhere in between those two.

Laestadians have always been a part of the State Church but they have their own prayer houses and organization. They regularly attend the State Churches for communion and have their children baptized there. But their spiritual authority remains in their Laestadian group. The reason for this is that the Laestadian movement has continued to be a lay movement. The majority of Laestadian preachers are lay preachers. Because they are lay preachers they refrain from distributing the Lord's Supper and performing baptisms. There are, however, about 200 formally trained Laestadian ministers within the State Church. This does present problems because as a minister of the State Church its pastors are called upon to do things that are foreign to Laestadian doctrine, e.g. teaching according to the Lutheran Confessions. To a certain degree there also exists friction and antagonism between the Laestadian ministers and the lay preachers. This is the fault of both parties. The lay preachers are suspicious of the ministers-- more so than the lay people; and the ministers to a certain extent feel superior to the lay preachers.

The State Church was at first indifferent towards the Laestadians. When, in the 1870's and 1880's, the movement

began to spread rapidly the State Church turned hostile. This trend continued till 1900's when Baptists and Methodists pulled out of the State Church but the Laestadians were seen to stay. Because of this they gained acceptance. To this day there are no independent Laestadian Congregations.

On Sunday at 10:00 A.M. every State Church of Finland holds its services. State law forbids any other group from having services on Sunday mornings while the State Church has its services. A great many of these services are broadcast on radio. At this time the Laestadians generally stay at home unless the minister of their congregation is one of the 200 or so Laestadian ministers or unless a Laestadian lay preacher is speaking at the service. (Not just anyone can preach at a State Church, however. A preaching permit must be secured.) Then usually in the afternoon or early evening the Laestadians meet in their prayer houses. These prayer homes have no altar. They have a table behind which the lay preacher sits and speaks. They sing hymns, pray, read from the Bible and listen to the sermon.

III. THE FOUNDATION OF LAESTADIANISM IN AMERICA

In the 1870's the Finns began emigrating from their native land--especially from the areas of Oulu and Vaasa. John Wargelin offers a number of reasons for the immigration of the Finns to America during the following four decades. The three primary causes were 1) economic 2) political/military and 3) "wanderlust."¹² The greatest number of Finns

settled in the northern iron mining regions of Minnesota and the copper mining area of the Upper Peninsula of Michigan.¹³

Since the greatest number of Finns emigrated from the northern part of Finland it is not surprising that most of the immigrants to this country were Laestadians. The Laestadians were the first in fact to establish a Finnish Lutheran Church in America. This happened in Calumet, Michigan. At first (1870) they joined a Lutheran Church that was composed of Scandinavians but their differences caused a deterioration in fellowship. When the church got a new pastor in 1871 he eventually excommunicated all the Laestadians. Under Salomon Korteniemi they organized a congregation called the "Salomon Korteniemi Lutheran Society" in 1872/3.

The name was changed by the congregation in 1879 under the leadership of John Takkinen to "The Finnish Apostolic Lutheran Church of Calumet." That they called themselves Lutheran was of no surprize. Their heritage was a Lutheran heritage. Why they chose "Apostolic" is more of a puzzle. It certainly was not a part of their heritage. The Laestadians of Finland had never used the designation. That it has no reference to an apostolic succession of ministers or bishops is also plain when one recalls that the Laestadians are a lay movement. It has been suggested that the name "Apostolic" was the invention of John Takkinen in part or in whole. It is possible that the name has its origin from letters of Juhani Raattamaa that speak like this: "We uphold the confessions of the church, but even more than that we want to be

in the Apostle's, Gospel's, and in the prophet's doctrine in this manner that if we are Apostolic we are biblically based."¹⁴

IV. CHARACTERISTICS OF LAESTADIANISM IN AMERICA

The continuing story of the Laestadian movement points quickly to one of the chief characteristics of the Apostolic Lutherans--that of factionalism. It was not an invention only on this side of the Atlantic but it permeated the Laestadians of Finland first. Every splinter group on this side of the ocean has a corresponding group on the far side of the ocean save one--the Pollarites. Kukkonen hits the hammer on the head when he writes:

"The story of American Laestadianism is one of revivals, internal conflicts and divisions, attempts at reconciliation, and new conflicts. It is a story of a revival movement turned church that is intensely concerned about harvesting without giving patient attention to the less exciting work of planting and fertilizing and watering. The conflicts and controversies point this out. Today there are five brands of Laestadians scattered in small groups throughout the land, because lay preachers, all of them Lutherans concerned about living Christianity, could not agree on such theological matters as the meaning of God's Word, the use of law and gospel, the nature and function of the church. Their failure to agree stemmed largely from lack of training and experience in theological reflection which resulted in confusion of the theology and practice of Christian life."¹⁵

He does not specify the "five brands of Laestadians" but he probably had in mind these which are still alive in 1984:

1) The Federation--the largest group of Laestadians comprized

of the union of the Lannavaara Firstborn (a part of the original followers of John Takkinen) and A.L. Heideman group back in 1908 at the First Big Meeting. The Federation held its 75th Annual Convention in the summer of 1983. In a certain sense one could say they are the Apostolic Lutheran Church in America. Their church paper is the Christian Monthly the "official organ of the Apostolic Lutheran Church." As its name suggests the Federation is a union of Laestadian congregations. Its structure, however, is rather loose for it has no authority among any congregation. It presently contains two more of the five brands of Laestadianism named above. These two maintain their distinctiveness within the Federation. They are: 2) The New Awakenists a group which adheres to the third use of the law! 3) The Heideman group a splinter from those Heidemans mentioned above who broke away in 1916/17 but returned in 1928 at the Big Meeting in Calumet when the Apostolic Lutheran Church was formerly established. Totally distinct groups of Laestadians not in the Federation are 4) The Gellivaara Firstborn and 5) The Pollarities. All five of these groups consider themselves to be Apostolic Lutherans.¹⁶

A second characteristic of Laestadianism in America is the doctrinal peculiarities of the movement. One is struck while reading A Brief Statement of the Principles of the Doctrine of the Apostolic Lutheran Church of America, the Gospel Sermons of Aatu Laitinen and How to Gain Peace of Mind by Andrew Mickelson with the conclusion that a church

movement dependent almost exclusively on non-theologically trained laymen is prone to a great deal of theological perversion. Allegorizing seems popular especially in the parables. A great diversity of thought is also revealed--Lutheran, Pietistic, legalistic and antinomian seem to be rolled into one mass. On the one hand revelation, inspiration, justification and good works follow a Lutheran tradition. Confession and the laying on of hands is over emphasized. Conversion experience is heighten in importance. A doctrine of baptisms is espoused--those of water, of Holy Spirit, and of blood. The Lutheran Confessions are ignored.

A third characteristic which influences both of the above is the attitude against a trained clergy. The way lay preachers among the Firstborn were trained in Finland was like this: A young man of the congregation was chosen to become a lay reader. He would spend about 10 years reading the the first sermon of the worship service. This would be a sermon of Laestadius'. The regular lay preacher, not the young man, would follow by giving the "free sermon" i.e. his own sermon on a Biblical text. After the 10 years the lay reader would be able to read the text for the lay preacher. After five years of this he would be invited to accompany the lay preacher on mission journeys to neighboring parishes. Eventually he would become a lay preacher.

In this description we hear nothing of Biblical exegesis or hermeneutics, nothing of dogmatics or pastoral theology or homiletics. The emphasis is on absorbing the

doctrinal content and the homiletical style of Laestadius' sermons by reading and rereading them. In regard to homiletics the Laestadian tradition was that the preacher opens his mouth and God fills it. That means written sermons were frowned upon. Salomon Korteniemi was openly criticized for writing out his sermons when he came to America in the 1870's. But he was not known as a preacher before coming to America. The Laestadians in Finland up to this day remain suspicious of the clergy of the State Church. Among the Firstborn in Finland there are absolutely no ministers--only lay preachers. Among the other Laestadians there are three times as many lay preachers as ministers.

In America the situation has been changing. There are more theologically trained ministers in the Apostolic Lutheran Church in America than in Finland. Apostolic Lutherans are more open to the idea of formal training and can see the advantages. One area that remains unanswered is whether the ministers of the Apostolic Lutheran Church are paid as full time workers within the church.

Since 1966 efforts have been made for providing a trained clergy for the Apostolic Lutheran Church. This is the Inter-Lutheran Theological Seminary now situated in Plymouth, Minnesota, a suburb of Minneapolis. Its classes are held in an Apostolic Lutheran Church, a member of the Federation. Total enrollment for 1983/84 is 4 students; none of whom will graduate this year. This seminary serves not only the Apostolic Lutheran Church. It will accept any students as

its Seminary handbook states:

"The Inter-Lutheran Theological Seminary shall be an independent agency of and for Bible-believing evangelistic Lutherans in general and must not be controlled by any synod or church body. It accepts students from any Lutheran circles, and also other Protestants, if a sufficient unity of faith exists. The graduates of the Seminary shall have freedom to accept calls to any fields of service." ¹⁷

The man greatly responsible for the continued success of this seminary is Dr. Uuras Saarnivaara. He teaches at the Seminary during the first semester and then returns to Finland where he also teaches. He is a Laestadian and a former faculty member of Suomi College, Hancock, Michigan.

The Apostolic Lutheran Church in America has made progress toward establishing itself as a more Lutheran Church than its counterpart in Finland. The revivalistic heritage of the Laestadians, however, still remains a ball and chain holding them back from achieving a truly Bible based theology. They are to be credited, none-the-less, for establishing a Seminary. Though as a matter of survival perhaps they felt they had no choice but to do so. They are further to be credited with seeing a need for a trained clergy though this breaks with their tradition. With all probability the doctrine of the universal priesthood is engrained in the seminarians who plan to enter the Apostolic Church lest they feel superior to the laity and especially the lay preachers. It is heartening to hear that the Apostolic Lutheran ministers are called upon at ordination to support the Unaltered Augsburg

Confession and Luther's Small Catechism. It is disheartening to hear them say they support them only as they are rightly to be understood. More disheartening is the news which came across the Atlantic. In a 1978 article of Christianity Today it is indicated that Finland is preparing itself for a sixth revival. If it happens will it not also spread to the Finns in America?

But the God of grace does work through his Word (whether read or heard!) and the true light may yet shine to open the understanding of these Apostolics and make them cling more dearly to their Lutheran heritage than to their Laestadian heritage.

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- ¹Harjunpaa, Toivo, "Beckian Biblicism and Finland: A Study in Historical Perspective," The Lutheran Quarterly, XXVIII (November, 1976), p. 303ff.
- ²Jalkanen, Ralph J. (ed.), The Faith of the Finns (Michigan State University Press, 1972), p. 119.
- ³Heikkinen, Jacob W., "Lars Levi Laestadius," The Lutheran Quarterly, VIII (November, 1956), p. 361
- ⁴Saarnivaara, Uuras, The History of the Laestadian or Apostolic-Lutheran Movement in America (Ironwood: National Publishing Co., 1947), p. 8.
- ⁵Heikkinen, op. cit., p. 360.
- ⁶Ibid, p. 361.
- ⁷Saarnivaara, op. cit., p.9f
- ⁸Heikkinen, op. cit., p. 362.
- ⁹Laitinen, Aatu, Gospel Sermons (trans. Helmer Peterson, ed. Mrs. Andrew Mickelsen) one needs only browse briefly through the sermons of Aata Laitinen for example to see this.
- ¹⁰Jalkanen, op. cit., p. 91f gives a detailed account of his religious experiences that led ultimately to his conversion.
- ¹¹Ibid, p.97.
- ¹²Wargelin, John, The Americanization of the Finns (Hancock: The Finnish Lutheran Book Concern, 1924), pp. 40 ff.
- ¹³Ibid, pp. 52-63 especially the chart on p. 61.
- ¹⁴Raittila, Pekka (translated by Elmer Ylineimi), Pastor's Seminar at the Inter-Lutheran Theological Seminary, October 18, 1982. Tape 3, side 1.

¹⁵Jalkanen, op. cit., p. 106.

¹⁶Saarnivaara, op. cit., for an indepth history of these developments.

¹⁷Inter-Lutheran Theological Seminary Handbook put out by the Seminary, 1978, p. 3.

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