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A Light Shining in a Dark Place: Can a Confessional Lutheran Voice Still Be Heard in the Church of Sweden?

Rune Imberg

In *Hamlet* we encounter one of Shakespeare's most famous expressions: "Something is rotten in the state of Denmark." My task is not to comment on the situation in Denmark but rather the one in Sweden. Of course, there are many elements that can be described as rotten, both in the country as such and in the Church of Sweden. A female bishop was recently elected archbishop, which to all confessional Lutherans is a catastrophe. Furthermore, in the election process she was very vague in her theological statements. For example, she did not even want to state openly that Jesus of Nazareth is superior to Muhammad. She was not the only one; at least four of the five candidates for archbishop were very vague in their dogmatic statements.¹

The reaction that biblically conservative Lutherans from Sweden normally get when describing this situation to Lutherans from the United States is understandable: why don't you just leave the national church? Why haven't you already left it and created another church body? Such questions are, of course, very relevant, but there are several reasons why many confessional Lutherans still belong to the Church of Sweden. The primary one is that they see their call from God to be that of a light shining in a dark place.

If such an exodus of confessional Lutherans from the Church of Sweden should already have taken place, the natural time, historically speaking, would have been in the early 1960s when the first female pastors were ordained within the Church of Sweden. In fact, dozens or even hundreds of pastors and many thousands of laymen were ready at that time for such a departure to take place. Many people in Sweden were inspired by the disruption that took place in Scotland in 1843, when the

¹ The details of this process are well documented in the Swedish press in autumn 2013 (e.g., in *Kyrkans tidning*).

Free Church of Scotland was formed.² But one man, more than any other person on the conservative side, worked against a split, trying to do what he could to preserve the unity of the church, waiting for better times to come. This Moses who was not yet ready to leave Egypt is well known among American Lutherans: Bishop Bo Giertz.³

Why did Giertz not initiate an exodus? Did he make a mistake, or was he led by God in deciding to take up a spiritual fight within the church, one that is still being waged? While there are no definitive answers to these questions, the historical development of Christianity in Sweden does provide insights that may help us understand better the church's situation today.

I. The History of Christianity in Sweden

When studying the history of Sweden, it is important to note one fact: Sweden was not Christianized like Italy, Spain, or other countries that belonged to the Roman Empire. By the time the countries of northern Europe came into existence, the Christian ideology was already present by way of Christian mission work; thus, Christianity influenced the creation of the nation. Sweden received its first bishop and diocese in Skara approximately one thousand years ago! The church province of Lund, comprising all of northern Europe, was established in 1103. The church province of Uppsala, consisting of six to seven dioceses, was created in 1164, with a French monk as archbishop. Yet Stockholm, the capital of Sweden, was founded some ninety years later, around 1250, though no one even knows the precise date.

It is no coincidence that all Nordic countries have some sort of cross in their flags. Even if some so-called kings existed before the mission period,

² Lay leaders who were influenced by the Scottish development included David Hedegård (1890–1970), editor of *För Biblisk tro*, and Axel B. Svensson, lay preacher and journalist and leader of the mission society Swedish Lutheran Mission (*Missionssällskapet Bibeltrögnä Vänner*) from 1911 to his death in 1967.

³ Among those believing a split was necessary was one of Giertz's closest friends, Rev. Gustaf Adolf Danell, Dean of Växjö (Cf. Erik Petré, "Bo Giertz och Kyrklig Samling," 378, in Rune Imberg, *Talet om korset: Guds kraft: till hundraårsminnet av Bo Giertz födelse* [Göteborg: Din Bok & co, 2005]). Dag Sandahl explains how and why Giertz worked to defend church unity and not create any split ("Bo Giertz och kampen om kyrkan" in Imberg, *Talet om korset*, 365ff.). Danell was interested in following the line of the SELK in Germany and was influenced by Franz Pieper in the LCMS (Oloph Bexell, *Präster i St. Sigfrids stift*, 3, 44ff.). Why the SELK never came to influence the Swedish situation is an interesting question that has yet to be investigated.

it was Christianity that influenced the creation of these nations. And one element in particular that gave the king extra legal authority, the coronation, developed according to biblical and ecclesiastical categories.⁴

It is often said that Gustav Vasa, who ruled from 1521, and as king from 1523 to 1560, made Sweden a Lutheran country. This statement is not true. While the Reformation in Denmark under the leadership of the king only lasted some fifteen years and was completed in 1536, a similar process in Sweden took more than seventy years.⁵

During certain periods of Vasa's rule, he assisted the Lutheran reformers, but during other periods he tried to exert control over them.⁶ In 1539, two of the three Reformation leaders were condemned to death then later pardoned. The Reformation in Sweden took a long time to be victorious, partly because the king considered the Lutheran bishops to be too independent.⁷

After the reign of Gustav Vasa, who often promoted his own causes more than Lutheran theology, Sweden had four consecutive non-Lutheran kings. Erik XIV, who had Calvinist leanings, was deposed by his brother Johan III, a Reform Catholic who tried to create a reunion with the Roman Catholic Church. Johan's son Sigismund, also the king of Poland, was a staunch Roman Catholic. He was deposed by his uncle Karl, who was more Calvinist than Lutheran.

Against the pressure of a Romanizing king (Johan III) and the Calvinistic influences of another (Karl), who was inspired by the development on the Continent and in England, a majority of the clergy and some bishops, together with a number of lay Christians—noblemen, magistrates in the

⁴ Cf. Bo Giertz, *Christ's Church: Her Biblical Roots, Her Dramatic History, Her Saving Presence, Her Glorious Future*, trans. Hans Andrae (Eugene, Oreg.: Resource Publications, 2010), 74–86.

⁵ In fact, Sweden's first truly Lutheran king, Gustavus Adolfus II, did not come to power until 1611.

⁶ For the following discussion, see Åke Andréén, *Reformationstid, Sveriges kyrkohistoria 3* (Stockholm: Verbum, 1999).

⁷ This complex development is brilliantly described by Bo Giertz in his novel *Tron Allena* ("Faith Alone") (Stockholm: Svenska Kyrkans Diakonistyrelses Bokförlag, 1943). Naomichi Masaki deals with parts of this confusing period in his thesis, *He Alone Is Worthy!*, where he shows how the Swedish reformers succeeded in proclaiming the gospel also through the liturgy. See Naomichi Masaki, *He Alone is Worthy!: The Vitality of the Lord's Supper in Theodor Kliefoth and in the Swedish Liturgy of the Nineteenth Century* (Göteborg: Din Bok, 2013).

cities, and peasants—led the Reformation in Sweden (including modern Finland) to victory.

During this period, the Church of Sweden produced two brilliant Lutheran documents: the *Church Order of 1571* and the decision of the Uppsala Synod of 1593. The latter defined Sweden as a Lutheran country. This decision went against the policy of *cuius regio eius religio* that dominated the political landscape in Europe, and occurred just months after a Roman Catholic became king in Sweden. The process of Sweden's unification as a Lutheran nation at the end of the 1590s came under the leadership of a number of Lutheran pastors and bishops, together with a number of laymen, who defeated the will of several kings.⁸

The seventeenth century brought a period when the country was formed by Lutheran orthodoxy, which influenced everything from church life to social life and culture. Many of the church leaders from this time were quite impressive in their activities and theological knowledge, even by modern standards.⁹ But silently, orthodoxy began to be threatened, and the church appears not to have recognized this. The orthodoxy itself began to become legalistic and rationalistic, and the church as such became heavily dependent on political power, namely, the king.

Following the defeat of the Swedish armies by Russia, beginning in 1709, and the death of King Charles XII in 1718, the Swedish people grew weary. They were not only tired of wars but also of a rather rigid orthodoxy and autocratic parish pastors who exercised great power in the local community. Up until the early 1700s, Sweden had been one of the most Lutheran countries in the world, characterized by a consensus culture that slowly began to break up. Lutheran orthodoxy still remained dominant for a time, but the Enlightenment began to influence the higher classes.¹⁰ When Pietism appeared, a typically Swedish theological synthesis came into existence, namely, "mild orthodoxy."

Gradually, from the eighteenth century onward, the divisions within the Church of Sweden increased. The Enlightenment became dominant,

⁸ With pride Bo Giertz referred to this development in *Christ's Church*; cf. also his *Herdabrev* ("pastoral letter") that he wrote upon becoming bishop in 1949.

⁹ Consider bishops like Johannes Rudbeckius (Västerås, d. 1646); three archbishops in Uppsala, Olaus Svebilius (d. 1700), Eric Benzelius the elder (d. 1709), Haquin Spegel (d. 1714); and Jesper Swedberg (Skara, d. 1735), who promoted mission work in North America among not only colonizing peasants but also native Indians.

¹⁰ Rationalism became—and remains to this day—an important element in Swedish culture.

and most of the church leaders belonged to the “neology” faction. In Giertz’s famous novel, *The Hammer of God*, the young Pastor Savonius is a typical exponent of the neologist’s way of thinking.¹¹ One also finds a peculiar Swedish mixture of Orthodoxy and Pietism, called *gammalpietismen* (“Old Pietism”), in *The Hammer of God*. The farmer’s wife Katrina and some of the laymen in the first novella belong to that group, and after a while Savonius joins their ranks.

In the early nineteenth century, Sweden began to experience a number of revivals. The first ones, in general, strengthened the Church of Sweden spiritually, especially the revivals connected with Schartau, Rosenius (who also appears in *The Hammer of God*), and Laestadius. However, a number of figures connected with other revivals started to break away both from Lutheran theology and from the Church of Sweden. In *The Hammer of God* we meet all sorts of Christians, especially Baptists and people following Waldenström of the *Mission Covenant*.¹² They wanted to follow the Bible closely but quite rapidly became very un-Lutheran. Nevertheless, it was at this time that neology was weakened and a kind of confessional revival appeared.¹³

In the late nineteenth century, a Swedish cultural battle began that influences the situation to this day. Rationalism, with roots going back to neology but also being a kind of secularized orthodoxy, became increasingly important. Agnosticism and atheism began to influence the cultural elite. Liberal and socialist thinkers criticized Christianity as being out of date. The idea of a “general development” was influential, and when it joined forces with anthropological influences from Rousseau—namely, that man might have a number of problems, but is, basically, not a sinner—the result was a toxic ideological brew.

¹¹ Bo Giertz, *The Hammer of God*, trans. Clifford A. Nelson, ed. Hans Andrae (Minneapolis: Augsburg Books, 2005). Originally published as *Stengrunden* (Stockholm: Svenska Kyrkans Diakonistyrelses Bokförlag, 1941). See also Masaki’s critical description of the *Liturgy of 1811*, a typical example of bad neology, 52–53.

¹² Four critical references to the Baptists causing a rift in church unity are missing in the American editions. See also Rune Imberg, “Bo Giertz’s *The Hammer of God* in English,” *Lutheran Quarterly* 28, no. 3 (2014): 288–289.

¹³ Masaki describes this development and the influences from Germany (especially Luther and Kliefoth) and from Sweden itself (the Reformation and neo-orthodoxy) in chapter 5 of *He Alone is Worthy!*.

A modernist way of thinking began to influence the country through the universities of the church.¹⁴ The young Pastor Torvik in *The Hammer of God* (chapter 7) is a brilliant depiction of how confused a pastor in the early twentieth century could be when entering his ministry.

II. Giertz's Battle within the Church of Sweden

Toward the end of the 1920s, Bo Giertz appeared on the scene. He and many with him began to perceive that the Church of Sweden was not created by man but had its roots in the apostolic church, that it had a rich heritage from the medieval centuries, and that it had rediscovered the gospel through the Reformation. He was influenced by new trends in Swedish academic theology (as promoted, for example, by Fridrichsen and Linton) but also by a number of revivals, including the high church movement (Gunnar Rosendal), older revivals (Schartau, Rosenius), and also the Young Church Movement and the Moral Re-Armament (M.R.A.).

In book after book, Bo Giertz voiced these re-discoveries: *Christ's Church* and its companion volume *Kyrkofromhet* (Church Piety) in 1939, *The Hammer of God* in 1941, *Tron Allena* (Faith Alone) in 1943, and his *Herdabrev* (pastoral letter to the clergy and congregations in the diocese of Gothenburg) in 1949. Thousands of pastors and laymen were inspired by him.

In 1949, Giertz became bishop of Gothenburg. He was appointed by a Labor Government that previously had wanted to disestablish the church but now preferred to take control of it. As bishop for twenty-one years, Giertz fought a radical battle against the politicians on every front: preaching the gospel, visiting congregations, and encouraging Christians.

For theological reasons, Giertz wanted to maintain the church's unity at almost any cost, which is in line with his thoughts from 1939, as expressed in *Christ's Church*. Reluctant to be involved in an exodus from the Church of Sweden, he did whatever he could to avoid causing a break without violating his conscience, hoping that God would intervene. However, as I understand it, he did not recognize until it was too late that he had been deceived. He also made some personal misjudgments. This is important to know when asking why he did not lead an exodus in 1960.

To begin with, Giertz was misled or deceived by politicians and other church leaders. The Minister for Church Affairs promised solemnly in 1958, before the decision was made to begin ordaining women, that the

¹⁴ Today, almost all pastors within the Church of Sweden are trained mainly in the now-secular universities.

position of the minority would be respected (by way of a “samvetsklausul,” a conscience clause). The politicians believed that the minority, which opposed the ordination of women, would eventually give up or die out. When that did not happen, they removed the conscience clause in 1981 by abolishing the law that Parliament had made in 1958.¹⁵ From that point on, the standing of the minority was legally undermined, and pastors and laymen from the conservative Lutheran side could be accused of sexual discrimination for opposing the ordination of women. Later, in October 1993, after the last confessional bishop retired, the bishops decided not to ordain any male candidates who would not accept the ordination of women.¹⁶ The compromise that Bo Giertz had been involved in creating lasted barely three decades. Given how events unfolded, certain passages in *Christ's Church* look rather naïve when read today.¹⁷

History shows that this misjudgment on the part of Giertz had radical consequences. Biblically speaking, he forgot to a certain extent the teaching of St. Paul in Ephesians 6, namely, that Christians fight a battle against spiritual powers. Simply being a good swimmer does not guarantee success; if the current is too strong, even the good swimmer goes under. Giertz did not understand, in this case, to what extent the developments in society would influence the church. He also made a mistake on a more personal level, believing that his friends on the other side of the debate had the same ethical integrity as he. As time went on, a number of them changed their opinion, gave up the fight, became silent, or simply went into retirement, and the men filling their shoes did not respect the compromises that had been made with the confessional minority. Giertz's tragic mistake was that he trusted his adversaries and failed to take the skepticism among his advisors seriously. In his later years, he could only with sorrow recognize his mistake.¹⁸

¹⁵ This strategy was even disclosed publicly before it took place in the Swedish Government Official Reports of 1981. *Statens offentliga utredningar 1981*, 20: 12.

¹⁶ Concerning the 1993 events, see Rune Imberg, “Från Stockholm 1911 till Göteborg 2005 via Kenya,” in Beijer, Birgersson, and Okkels, ed., *Lyda Gud mer än människor: Festskrift till Arne Olsson* (Göteborg, Missionsprovinsen i Sverige och Finland, 2010), 37–38.

¹⁷ See Giertz, *Christ's Church*, 84–86; see also Dag Sandahl, “Bo Giertz och kampen om kyrkan,” in Imberg, *Talet om korset*, 355–367.

¹⁸ See interview by Fredrik Sidenvall with Bo Giertz in Eric R. Andrae, *A Hammer for God: Bo Giertz: Lectures from the Centennial Symposia, and Selected Essays by the Bishop* (Fort Wayne: Lutheran Legacy, 2010), 324–327.

By the time of his retirement as bishop, Giertz understood the direction in which the Church of Sweden was headed. Politicians, with support of liberal church leaders, had taken control of the church.¹⁹ He had been fighting a battle that, humanly speaking, was already lost.

So what did Giertz do? He wrote his third and final novel, *The Knights of Rhodes*.²⁰ This book, which describes the battle in the 1520s between Christian knights and the Muslim Sultan Suleiman, ends with a total defeat of the Christians. The book is interesting from a number of perspectives, but one of the lessons, in the context of this discussion, is that a lost battle is not fought in vain if, while fighting, one remains faithful to the Lord's call and to his commands.

To summarize the novel, the Knights lost Rhodes to a Muslim ruler, but through their fight a forthcoming Turkish invasion was delayed, which meant that southern Europe was saved. Many of the defenders were faithful to their assignments, even if it meant dying at their posts, something which often happens in wars. Some soldiers die, but because of their fight, a number of other soldiers and civilians survive. Thus, one may lose the battle and yet assist others in winning the war.

III. Why Not Just Leave the Church of Sweden?

Confessional Lutherans in Sweden today have, humanly speaking, lost most of their battles. They are marginalized. Their theologians cannot be ordained, and their pastors cannot become bishops or even senior pastors. Moreover, the spiritual life in many congregations is often in terrible shape.

But though they are few, they still carry the torch from the past, often a quite glorious past. Their spiritual forefathers preached the gospel handed down from the apostles and led people to Christ. In a number of ways they proclaimed the truth like the prophets of the Old Testament, even when

¹⁹ For a general description of these events, cf. Per-Olof Sjögren, *Kyrkans politisering* (Uppsala: 1975); Bernt Ralfnert, *Kvinnoprästdebatten i Svenska kyrkan i perspektivet kyrkostat* (Malmö: Ralfnert: 1988); Rune Imberg, *Biskops- och domprostutnämningar i Svenska Kyrkan 1866–1989* (Lund: Lund University Press, 1991); Daniel Alvunger, *Nytt vin i gamla läglar. Socialdemokratisk kyrkopolitik under perioden 1944–1973* (Göteborg: Församlingsförl., 2006); and Ingmar Brohed, *Religionsfrihetens och ekumenikens tid, Sveriges kyrkohistoria 8* (Stockholm: Verbum, 2005).

²⁰ Bo Giertz, *The Knights of Rhodes*, trans. Bror Erickson (Eugene, Oreg.: Resource Publications, 2010). Originally published as *Riddarna på Rhodos* (Stockholm: Askild & Kärnekull, 1972).

they could see the destruction coming. Thus, they have an obligation to keep this Lutheran heritage alive.

But, one might ask, would not leaving the Church of Sweden be the best way to carry out this obligation? Perhaps it would be, but when one studies the history of the Swedish church, a strange pattern may be observed. A number of Christians, both Lutherans and non-Lutherans, have indeed left the Church of Sweden, and the results, in general, have not been very encouraging. Quite often they resemble the Israelites who tried to force Jeremiah to go to Egypt (Jeremiah 42–44). Perhaps Giertz saw this, both concerning his own time and the years to come.

The first ones to leave were the Baptists in the 1850s and Mission Covenant Christians in the 1870s. These Christians wanted to live pure Christian lives in accordance with New Testament directives. Yet today, many of the most liberal Christians in Sweden belong to these two denominations.

In the early 1970s a number of confessional Lutherans also began to leave the Church of Sweden. According to them, Bo Giertz was too liberal and too compromising. Their solution was found rather in the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod. Today they are, at most, a few hundred persons. They are divided into several groups and have a number of congregations with only a few dozen members in each.

IV. Two New Lights Appear in the Darkness

As described earlier, the situation for confessional Lutherans in the Church of Sweden grew quite dire by the end of 1993. Nevertheless, just a few weeks before the decision of the bishops to cease ordaining conservative male candidates, a new theological institution in Gothenburg began its work. While the darkness increased, a new light could be seen: the Lutheran School of Theology. Two decades later, this light continues to grow in importance. Theological training is ongoing, with students now able to receive theological training that is recognized as being equivalent to a bachelor's degree in theology. God is doing wonders!

In 1998, Bishop emeritus Bertil E. Gärtner, Giertz's successor as bishop, assisted two African Church leaders in ordaining two Swedish missionaries in Gothenburg. The official reaction from the Church of Sweden was aggressive as it threatened to defrock Gärtner. Had he continued ordaining confessional Lutheran men, such would definitely have been the outcome, but in that case many Christians would have followed him into exile. He was, however, not ready to take this step, although it is clear that such

ordinations are in accordance with the Lutheran confessional documents (Tr 66). Thus, there was neither an exodus in the early 1960s led by Bo Giertz nor one in the late 1990s led by Bishop Gärtner.

Something very unexpected happened, however, only a few years later. Though there was no organized exodus, a radically new structure began its existence in 2003. In order for conservative candidates to be ordained as pastors, a number of pastors and laymen formed the Mission Province. The first bishop was consecrated in 2005, and others have followed him. To date, some ten pastors have been ordained in the Mission Province for service in Sweden and some twenty within the sister organization in Finland. In Sweden the Mission Province is growing slowly, in Finland rapidly. Most of the members within the Mission Province still belong to the Church of Sweden, while others belong only to the Mission Province. That these pastors have been sent out and are doing their work is also a wonder of God.

V. The Future

Thus far, no organized exodus of confessional Lutherans from the Church of Sweden has taken place. Meanwhile, the national church seems to be approaching its collapse, unless God works a miracle. But some confessional voices are still heard within the Church of Sweden and others within the Mission Province. As long as God allows us to work, we will continue to proclaim the gospel and the victory of Christ in whatever capacity we are able.

The structure of the Mission Province is surprising to many people while a provocation to others. Living as it does in strange times, the church must sometimes resort to unorthodox solutions. When Dr. Torbjörn Johansson, a faculty member of the Lutheran School of Theology in Gothenburg, read this manuscript, he pointed out an interesting parallel to the Swedish situation. It concerns Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a Lutheran pastor who was born a few months after Giertz and who faced similar problems of a secular society that wanted to take over the church.²¹ In Bonhoeffer's case, the increasing Nazification of the church in Germany impelled him to join the Confessing Church (*Bekennende Kirche*), which grew out of the Barmen Declaration. This was a movement within the national church (*die Deutsche Evangelische Kirche*) that protested against and tried to hinder the adjust-

²¹ For more on the remarkable similarities between Giertz and Bonhoeffer, see Rune Imberg, "Bo Giertz och Dietrich Bonhoeffer—en 'parallellbiografi,'" in Imberg, *Talet om korset*, 28ff.

ment of the church to National Socialism. Consequently, it was not an independent church standing at the side of the “Reichskirche” (Nazi Church). Bonhoeffer wrote about this in a letter to Henry Louis Henriad, dated July 12, 1934:

There is not the claim or even the wish to be a Free Church beside the Reichskirche, but there is the claim to be the only theologically and legally legitimate evangelical church in Germany, and accordingly you cannot expect this church to set up a new constitution, since it is based on the very constitution, which the Reichskirche has neglected.²²

In many ways, the Mission Province resembles the Confessing Church at the time of Bonhoeffer.

Concerning the Church of Sweden, one can say that she has in many ways a glorious past. We are proud of all the good that is found in the church where God called us to serve. Perhaps an exodus should have taken place some fifty or fifteen years ago. But it did not, and the important thing today is not to rely on hindsight in order to place blame.

Confessional Swedish Lutherans are like the biblical remnant. Our task, then, is to continue to fight the good fight (1 Tim 6:12, 2 Tim 4:7), taking care of the inheritance that has been given to the saints (Jude 3), even if many “Christians” want to hinder us and drive us out of our church (3 John 10). We must do this work in season and out of season (2 Tim 4:2).

Perhaps I will one day be defrocked by the Church of Sweden, like many of my colleagues within the Mission Province, or perhaps I will one day recognize that I finally have to leave the church in which I was baptized and ordained. But until that day comes, I will continue to fight for the truth, both within the Church of Sweden and in the Mission Province. Many others are like-minded. We confessional Lutherans in Sweden are not many, but we know that we live by the victory of Christ.

While we wait for his return in glory, we continue to train theologians at the Lutheran School of Theology in Gothenburg, ordaining and sending out pastors through the Mission Province in Sweden to proclaim the

²² Dietrich Bonhoeffer to Henry Louis Henriad, July 12, 1934, in *Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works, Vol. 13: London, 1933–1935*, ed. Keith Clements, trans. Isabel Best (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2007), 179.

saving gospel. Daily we do the work of the Lord, acknowledging that the church of Christ will never be defeated. It lives daily by the victory of Christ. And we know one more thing: we confessional Lutherans are the true Church of Sweden. We who stand firmly on the ground of the biblical and apostolic teaching and the Evangelical Lutheran confessions are the true Church of Sweden, and our call is still to be a light shining in the dark.

So yes, a confessional Lutheran voice will still be heard in the Church of Sweden. How long, only God knows. But though we are a small remnant, we say with St. John: "This is the victory that has overcome the world—our faith. Who is it that overcomes the world except the one who believes that Jesus is the Son of God?" (1 John 5:4-5).