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Baptists in Sweden

BAPTIST ideas concerning Believer's Baptism were to be found in Sweden in Pietistic circles in the seventeen-thirties, but the organised Swedish Baptist movement is 100 years younger. Its origin is both Anglo-American and German. George Scott was an English Methodist preacher working in Stockholm from 1830 to 1842. His was a deep influence on many listeners in the Swedish capital. One of those who were influenced by him was Rev. Anders Wiberg, a Lutheran clergyman who was to become the most important pioneer of the Swedish Baptist movement. He was the author of the first Swedish book on Believers' Baptism, *Hvilkén bör döpas? och Hvaruti består dopet?* (Who Should be Baptized? and What is the Meaning of Baptism?).

From the eighteen-forties and onwards thousands of Swedes emigrated to America. Some of these emigrants turned Baptist, among them a sailor named F. O. Nilsson, who went to America as early as 1830 and was converted in New York in 1834. With an inner call to testify to his Lord he returned to Sweden and, aided by Scott, Nilsson received an invitation from The Seamen's Friend Society in New York to become a sailors' missionary in Göteborg (Gothenburgh). Later on Nilsson was also connected with the British and Foreign Bible Society. In 1847 he came to Hamburg and was baptized by Oncken in the Elbe. He returned to Sweden, and in 1848 the first five men and women were baptized in Vällersvik, a place to the south of Göteborg, and formed "the Swedish Baptist Church." Mr. Nilsson was later on ordained in Hamburg as a Baptist minister and became leader of the Swedish church.

In 1858 both English and German Baptist leaders took part in the second Assembly. The most important subject of discussion was open or closed Communion. Dr. Edward Steane and Rev. Howard Hinton — the two Englishmen present — were keen defenders of the principle of open Communion, while the Germans, Rev. J. G. Oncken and Rev. Julius Köbner, were as anxious to defend closed Communion. The Assembly came to a very Baptist conclusion: the matter could not be settled by the assembly but should be referred to the separate churches. In practice most Swedish Baptist churches have kept to closed Communion. In recent years, however, there has been an increase in the number of churches with an open Communion table. (There have never been any serious disputes on baptism. All Swedish Baptist churches have closed membership).

During the first few decades Swedish Baptists had to endure

hard persecution for their faith from the mob as well as from intolerant civic and ecclesiastical authorities. Sweden has since the Reformation had a state-established Lutheran Church, which of course regarded the increasing Baptist movement as a danger to the unity of the Church and therefore persecuted the Baptists, assisted by civic authorities acting on obsolete laws. Compulsory infant baptisms were not unusual. Lutheran clergymen refused to publish the banns of marriage. Many Baptist teachers had to leave their posts. F. O. Nilsson was banished from the country and could come back only by the help of the British branch of the Evangelical Alliance, which intervened on his behalf with the Swedish Government. Other Baptists were forced to emigrate to America to be able to worship God in liberty. These instances of persecution stimulated by Lutheran church authorities have been mentioned not to give the glory of martyrdom to the fathers of the Swedish Baptists but to intimate one of the reasons—unconscious perhaps, but nevertheless real to many—for the unwillingness of many Swedish Baptists to enter the ecumenical movement with enthusiasm.

The visit of Dr. Steane and Rev. H. Hinton to Sweden in 1858 was of importance also for the sake of religious liberty. Their conversations with the Attorney-General, the Foreign Secretary, the Archbishop and others were encouraging, and in October, 1858, the most odious act, the so-called Conventicle Placard, the purpose of which had been to prevent the holding of all sorts of services in private houses, was cancelled. A law for Dissenters was passed in 1860, but as its guiding principle was more to safeguard the Established Church than to meet just claims for religious liberty, the Baptists could not avail themselves of it but remained within the Established Church. Both the Board of the British branch of the Evangelical Alliance and the General Synod of the Scottish Free Church submitted a petition to the Swedish King for an improved act of religious liberty in Sweden (see *Evangelical Christendom*, 1860 and *The Home and Foreign Record*, Jan. 2, 1860). In 1873 a new act for Dissenters was passed which was an improvement from certain points of view. It introduced civil marriage beside the former religious marriage (officiated according to the Lutheran rite). Not until Jan. 1, 1952, however, was it possible for a Swedish Baptist to leave the Lutheran Church without loss of civic rights. From that date it has also been possible for a Baptist minister to officiate at a legally valid marriage. Up till the end of 1952 only a small minority of Swedish Baptists, certainly not more than 10%, have availed themselves of this new law.

The dangers for the growing Baptist movement came both from without and from within. In the eighteen-sixties a doctrine

of freedom from sin was spread by a certain August Sjödin, who was expelled from his church because of this. In spite of that he succeeded in gaining adherents in different parts of the country, and whole Baptist churches had to leave the Baptist fellowship. Before this fight ended a new schism broke out in the young Baptist Union, which resulted in a new denomination, the Free Baptists (1872), who held views of reconciliation, justification and sanctification different from those generally accepted and who refused to have any training of their ministers.

In 1907 Sweden was reached by a new religious movement of ecstatic type, which was called "the New Movement." Later on it was called the Pentecostal movement. In 1910 a church was formed in Stockholm which accepted the ideas of this movement but nevertheless entered the Stockholm Association of the Baptist Union. Within a short time Rev. Lewi Pethrus became the leader of this "Filadelfiachurch," which strongly stressed the importance of speaking in tongues, prophecies, etc., and regarded all other forms of religion as "resistance against the Holy Spirit." In 1913 this church was expelled from the Association.

The Pentecostal ideas survived, however, also in certain churches in the Baptist Union. Rev. John Ongman was the leader of this movement. Orebro, an industrial town in the middle of Sweden, gradually became the centre of the mission society, which he started for promoting evangelistic work. As long as John Ongman lived the so-called Orebro-movement remained loyal within the Baptist Union, but after his death (1931), when other leaders came into power, the tendency to "go out into liberty" was strengthened, the given reasons being that the Baptist Union did not accept the Pentecostal revival and that some of its leaders took an active part in the Ecumenical movement. In 1936 the Filadelfiachurch in Orebro, which was the most important church of this movement, left the Baptist Union and others followed. It is only fair to state that in recent years an increasing number of Baptists and of members of the Orebro Movement have become aware of the fact that it is a tragedy that the Baptist denomination of this country should be split up into two groups, and they hope for the day of reunion, even if nobody can tell when it will dawn.

The relation between the Baptists and other Free churches of Sweden have been deepened, especially in this century through Free Church conferences, Alliance meetings, and the creation of the Free Church Council (1918). For the present a project of a still closer co-operation is being discussed. In the Swedish branch of the Evangelical Alliance, the Swedish Ecumenical Council and the Swedish Missionary Council, the Swedish Baptist Union has contact with all Christians of this country.

The Baptist work in this country as in others started in local

Baptist churches. It did not last long, however, until these churches found out that independency had to be balanced by co-operation. The first Assembly for all Swedish Baptists was held in 1857. In this Assembly there was elected a "managing committee," which should act on behalf of "the United Baptist Churches." Today the Baptist Union is the central organisation of all Swedish Baptist work, including foreign missions. Its president is Rev. Ruben Swedberg, M.P., Dr. Erik Rudén is General Secretary and Rev. Erik Strutz is Secretary of Foreign Missions. Through the Superannuation and the Sustentation funds the Baptist Union can help Baptist ministers and smaller churches.

As early as in 1856 a course was arranged for itinerant preachers, and during the following years other similar courses were arranged. When Anders Wiberg returned from a visit to America in 1866, he was able to present a more permanent solution of the training problem. The American Baptist Missionary Union had promised to finance a seminary in Stockholm, and K. O. Broady, a former Swedish emigrant and a colonel in the American Army, had promised to become the leader of the seminary. Colonel Broady was the famous and successful leader of the Stockholm seminary—Betelseminariet—until 1906. He was succeeded by Dr. C. E. Benander, who was Principal until 1927, when Dr. N. J. Nordström was elected Principal. At Dr. Nordström's death in 1943, Principal Fredrik Hedvall succeeded him. For many years Professor Gunnar Westin, famous church historian at the University of Uppsalla and one of the Vice-Presidents of the B.W.A., has belonged to the faculty. About 1,100 Baptist ministers and missionaries have had a four-years' training at the Betelseminariet since its foundation.

In the second Assembly mentioned above the delegates also discussed the appointment of deaconesses. This fact indicates an awakening of social interest, which has expressed itself in many ways since then. In 1922 a Society of Baptist Nurses and Deaconesses was formed. Its leader was Dr. Gottfrid Thorell (died in 1952). In 1932 an orphanage for boys of 7-16 years of age was opened. It is beautifully situated in Kungsängen, not far from Stockholm. In 1951 a hostel for young men was opened nearby. During and after the second World War Swedish Baptists have taken part in relief work in Poland, Germany, Austria, Jugo-Slavia and among Baltic refugees in Sweden.

In 1921 a people's high school was opened in Sjövik. (This is a Scandinavian type of adult continuation school for young people who, after a few years of practical work, want to brush up and improve their elementary school knowledge). The leader of this school is Principal Olof Hammar, M.P. This school has about 130 students a year.

In spite of the numerical decrease in the last decades owing to the above-mentioned dissensions, the Swedish Baptist Union has thus been able to build up a many-sided work. In 1952 there were 536 Baptist churches with 36,314 members. 368 full-time ministers were at work at home and 61 missionaries abroad (Belgian Congo, India, Japan). There were 890 Sunday schools with 40,000 pupils and 750 young people's organisations for different ages with 18,000 members.

We began with an acknowledgement of some early British influences on Swedish Baptist work. It is only right to finish on the same note. In recent years British Baptist leaders like the late Dr. J. H. Rushbrooke, Dr. Townley Lord, the Rt. Hon. Ernest Brown, Dr. Ernest A. Payne, Dr. T. G. Dunning and Rev. W. T. Cowlan, have paid very valuable and inspiring visits to our country. Swedish Baptists are aware of the fact that they belong to a world-wide Baptist fellowship. They are grateful for it, and they are willing to strengthen these ties not only for their own sake but for the sake of the Baptist cause which, they are convinced, has a future before it.

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NILS SUNDHOLM.

Leigh-on-Sea Baptists, by Ernest Walling. (Carey Kingsgate Press.)

Mr. Walling has written an interesting account of the sixty years' history of the church he has served for nearly half a century. It is an inspiring story of faith and generosity, of missionary activity at home and abroad, of difficulties overcome, and of courage in the dark days of war.

F. BUFFARD.