

Parallel Paths: The Augustana Synod and the Covenant Church, 1920-1945

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After the formation of the Swedish Mission Covenant in the United States in 1885, this group and the Augustana Synod went in different directions. Augustana, minus its Waldenströmian wing, moved more consciously toward confessional Lutheranism, while the Mission Covenant moved away from a formal Lutheran identity and towards American Congregationalism and the free-church tradition.¹ In another way, however, these two denominations moved in parallel courses: as immigrant denominations they faced a similar process of Americanization and adaptation to the American religious culture. They also faced the same issues of the first and second generation and inhabited the same territory, in the tight-knit world of Swedish America. But there seemed to be little formal contact between the two churches between 1885 and 1915, as the traumas of the divide were strong and painful in many minds.

Changes to these two denominations came with the First World War and after (1920s and '30s): dramatic and drastic changes in social location, including the rapid transition to English; the social and religious turmoil within larger American culture; and conflicts within each denomination.² The Augustana Synod moved into a complicated world of inter-Lutheran merger negotiations and cooperative work with other Lutherans. The Swedish Covenant entered into a period of dramatic internal discord, with the influence of fundamentalism conflicting against more moderate, traditional Pietism. In the midst of these changes and internal controversies, there were a series of bilateral contacts between the Augustana Synod and the Mission Covenant during the 1920s and '30s. These were mid-level contacts, not really dramatic, as they involved a search for cooperation on common work and mutual needs. Furthermore, one can get a sense that some in each denomination (perhaps moderates) had lingering sympathies for the other, and perhaps were searching for

allies against internal forces of opposition. Most of the contacts were pragmatic and driven by material needs, but at times one gets a glimpse into the deeper commitments of some of these participants.

The situation in the 1920s saw both denominations making a rapid and dramatic transition to the English language, and also encountering an American Protestant world that was becoming increasingly divided over approaches to a modernity that was looking increasingly hostile to traditional Protestant ideas and mores. Augustana was in the middle of movements toward Lutheran cooperation, union, and merger, which resulted in it eventually merging out of existence in 1962. But Lutheran merger currents were complicated. Should the synod adopt the more open Lutheranism of the United Lutheran Church in America, or the stricter Lutheran confessionalism of groups like the Lutheran Church Missouri Synod? Augustana was a part of a group of centrist Lutherans being pulled in two different directions. When it had contacts with outside groups, such as the Mission Covenant, there were always other conservative Lutherans watching to condemn them for “unionism,” or ecumenical relations without doctrinal agreement. In the 1920s the Mission Covenant was moving away from its traditional partnership with the American Congregationalists, worried about their growing liberalism. There were really no Liberals or “modernists” in the Mission Covenant at the time, but there were some who maintained a traditional Covenant irenicism and willingness to cooperate. But the forces of Fundamentalism were making inroads into the Mission Covenant, seeking to influence the direction of the denomination, and sharp conflict developed within the denomination, most notably the conflict between David Nyvall and Gustaf F. Johnson. So, even pragmatic movements toward cooperation on some basic levels between Augustana and the Covenant had overtones, and there were always those ready to see these contacts as pulling the denomination in the wrong direction.

Nevertheless, there were a series of contacts between Augustana and the Covenant during the 1920s and 1930s. The two most important figures in these contacts were Nathaniel Franklin of the Covenant and G. A. Brandelle of Augustana. Franklin was a Covenant moderate, ally of Nyvall and President C. V. Bowman, who was elected Covenant Sunday School Secretary in 1919, a position he

continued to hold through the 1940s. Gustav Brandelle was the Augustana Synod president from 1918 to 1935, an irenic and centrist moderate interested in closer work with the Covenant and moderate Lutherans. Both had opponents in the more conservative wings of their respective denomination who watched them suspiciously.

EDUCATIONAL CONTACTS BETWEEN AUGUSTANA AND THE COVENANT, 1920-1940

As early as 1921, Franklin was in contact with his counterparts in Augustana about cooperation between the two denominations in the publication of Sunday school materials. This was a period of difficulties for both denominations; in the middle of the language transition to English each was forced to develop new educational materials in English, while continuing to publish as well a parallel series of materials in Swedish. In 1921, as head of the Covenant Sunday School department, Franklin wrote his counterpart in Augustana, Rev. G. A. Fahlund, with a proposal for cooperative work. On 23 December 1921 Franklin wrote, saying that the “Swedish Baptists, the Free Church, and we are approaching each other on cooperating on a common curriculum,” and asked Fahlund, “Would not your denomination desire to help themselves and help us, by joining [together]?”³ But Fahlund wrote back on 19 January 1922, politely declining; Augustana, to his mind, had no interest in this.

In 1926, Franklin began to organize a more formal mechanism to engender cooperation, not just between the Covenant and Augustana, but also the other Swedish-American denominations—the Swedish Free Church, the Swedish Baptists, and the Swedish Methodists. In a letter to Brandelle dated 13 February 1926, Franklin mentioned a meeting of representatives of the Swedish-American denominations, to be held the next month.⁴ Something positive must have come out of this meeting, because this time Augustana seemed to have participated. In February 1927 Brandelle wrote to Franklin that Augustana had formally decided to participate further in this process. Brandelle quoted the authorization language:

That we as a Synod cooperate in this Committee on Confer-

ence made up of representatives from the Swedish Baptists, the Swedish Free Church, the Swedish Evangelical Mission Covenant Church, the Swedish Methodist Church, and the Augustana Synod.⁵

Brandelle would be one of the representatives to this meeting. In a joint letter of 3 March 1927 Brandelle and Franklin suggested the topics for discussion:

1. Closer cooperation in matters of public welfare.
2. How shall we avoid overlapping and undue competition in weaker fields?
3. The problems of the Swedish religious press in this country.
4. Cooperation in meeting the problems of the Week-Day Bible School.⁶

Note that this is a much broader and more aggressive agenda than Franklin had proposed to Fahlund in 1921-22, with the second point seeming to be especially expansive. The group elected a Committee on Conference and various sub-committees, which met in the winter of 1927 and spring of 1928. Brandelle was elected chairman and Franklin secretary; minutes show the evidence of close cooperation between these two, who were clearly the driving forces behind this committee. But the presidents of all five denominations were included, keeping this contact at a very high level; Covenant president C. V. Bowman was also a prominent member of the committee.

This committee met several times in 1927 and 1928, with quite an apparent interest in the task, if Secretary Franklin's minutes can be believed. On 7 March 1928 the entire committee met, and the focus was primarily on cooperation between the five denominations in developing educational materials. At this meeting, recommendations were approved urging the denominations to cooperate in this process. In a letter of 2 April 1929 Franklin contacted the heads of the five denominational publishing houses to report a motion adopted by the committee that the representatives of the publishing boards meet for discussion. Franklin reported: "The thought was expressed that much matter used by one denomination for a certain age-group

could be syndicated and used by several or all thus greatly reducing the labor and cost to all thus cooperating.”⁷

But on 17 September 1929 Brandelle was forced to write Franklin a very painful letter:

I regret to be obliged to send you the following resolution which was passed by the Augustana Synod at its late meeting held in Rockford, Illinois, towit:

Whereas, the Augustana Synod recognizes that certain social benefits may be derived from membership in the conference of Swedish churches, but also realizes that such membership will be construed in certain quarters as not in harmony with its historic stand on the questions of church union, towit: that unity in faith is the only valid bond of union; and,

Whereas, the Augustana Synod desires to draw into closer contact with other Lutheran bodies and has already taken steps in that direction; therefore, be it

Resolved, that the Augustana Synod withdraws from the Conference of Swedish Churches.”⁸

Brandelle continued by stating that he was not present at this discussion and would have argued against the resolution. Further, he said, “It may be true that there is quite a difference in formal matters (between the Lutherans and the Baptists) but the difference between the Mission Friends and the Lutherans theologically is not so great that it cannot be overcome if we have a mind to attempt this.”

There is obvious pain and regret in Brandelle’s letter. So what happened? Other Lutherans, especially the Missouri Synod and the Norwegian Lutheran Church in American, were habitually suspicious of Augustana’s Lutheran credentials. As early as 1919, Norwegian Lutheran Church in America president H. A. Stub wrote to Brandelle to warn him against a “union with Waldenströmians” (i.e., the Covenant) on the China mission field.⁹ Leaders of the Lutheran Church Missouri Synod were also watching Augustana very closely at the time, cataloguing instances of what they saw as “unionism” with other, non-Lutheran groups on the part of Augustana.¹⁰ Scrutiny such as this was most likely behind the actions of Augustana in

withdrawing from the Sunday school process. Franklin replied to Brandelle on 21 September 1929, saying that Brandelle's letter was a "sad surprise" and would greatly weaken the Committee on Conference's work: "we will be bereft not only of your [Brandelle's] counsel, but the inspiration of your presence and fellowship."¹¹

Franklin could, no doubt, sympathize with Brandelle's sense of being besieged within his own denomination, as at this time Franklin was equally under fire from conservatives in the Covenant. During the late 1920s the internal theological and biblical battles within the Covenant were reaching their peak, and he was deeply involved as a moderate partisan. Franklin had to defend a younger colleague, Olga Lindborg, in 1929, who had published some thoughts about "the movies" that were at least open to their religious use, infuriating conservatives.¹²

Franklin and the Sunday school committee (the Committee on Conference) continued to meet for several more years, through at least 1933. Their focus seems to have broadened from just education to include relief work, home missions, and evangelism. The group changed its name to the Swedish American Free Church Federation, but seems to have faded out of existence after the mid-1930s.

Franklin was not done yet with the Augustana, however. In 1933 he resumed bilateral contacts with the Augustana Synod, once more about joint educational materials. Franklin wrote on 19 January 1933, to Augustana Publishing House leader Otto Leonardson:

And I am mindful of several facts in this connection: both you and we have two languages used in our constituency; both have a Swedish evangelical background; both have the same problems of adapting our methods to the present-hour needs of growing America. . . . [Can] we as evangelical Christian people learn the lesson of cooperation? Certainly much Biblical material is common to us both.¹³

This time the initiative bore fruit, as Franklin connected with his counterpart, the Augustana Sunday School Secretary J. V. Nordgren. There was at least one meeting in the spring of 1933 between representatives of the two denominations about cooperative materials.

After this meeting, Nordgren wrote to Franklin on 23 June 1933, endorsing the idea of cooperative Sunday school materials. Seemingly, some of the Augustana materials were too Lutheran for the Covenant people, as Nordgren acknowledges: "As far as objections to the section on dramatization and the statement about baptism are concerned, I can assure you that these could be easily omitted from your edition."¹⁴

Nordgren replied later, hoping this arrangement could be fostered: "It may be the beginning of a movement that shall have blessed results among the people of Swedish background in America."¹⁵

Now it was the turn of the Covenant to withdraw from the project, however, this time for financial reasons. The terms that Augustana gave for the common materials were simply beyond the resources of the Covenant's Sunday School board, as Franklin was forced to admit in a letter of 13 October 1933.¹⁶ This, however, did not end the matter; in 1938 and 1939 Franklin contacted the head of Young People's work in the Augustana Synod, Wilton Bergstrand, again suggesting common materials. Even as late as 1943 and 1944, there were letters exchanged between Franklin and Nordgren concerning educational materials for Sunday school, youth, and vacation Bible school. Nothing, however, seemed to result from these contacts, either.

Certainly these contacts are important in and of themselves; they are significant interactions, even though they did not finally have positive results. But further, the correspondence between the principals themselves shows a relational attitude that is even more important. For a significant group of the leadership in both Augustana and the Covenant, there were perceived ties, not only of ethnicity, but also of a common Swedish evangelical heritage that they recognized and valued. Perhaps, these individuals thought, the two denominations were not that far apart and they might even grow closer together. These were hopes and dreams that never really came true, but which were important anyway.

PRESIDENTIAL CONTACTS

At the time of the Committee on Conference in 1927, E. G. Hjerpe was president of the Covenant Church (1910-1927). Hjerpe and Augustana president Brandelle (1918-1935) seemed to work

together well on the Committee, but Hjerpe retired in 1927. The Covenant elected a new president, C. V. Bowman (1927-1932), during the period of bitter internal conflict. Bowman was counted on the moderate side, but was ineffective because of illness. Theodore W. Anderson became Covenant president in 1932, with the denomination in great financial and organizational distress, and he is credited with reversing this and strengthening the denomination.

Anderson wrote to Brandelle in September 1933 with a rather prosaic request, to obtain copies of organizational forms that were used in Augustana for congregational record-keeping. He added: "My new office involves a great deal of traveling, and not infrequently brings me in touch with some of your pastors and lay-men. I rejoice over the growing spirit of fellowship and confidence between the people we represent."¹⁷

Brandelle responded with a long letter the next day, only the first line of which dealt with the request for forms. He jumped on Anderson's remark about the "growing spirit of fellowship and confidence" between the two denominations, saying that he had worked for years for closer relations between the two groups. But then, Brandelle says, he gave it up because informal conversations with some in the Covenant convinced him that at least a section of the Covenant still held to the "Socinian" or Waldenströmian doctrine of the atonement. He was "sure that the Augustana Synod would never consent to union with anyone that denied the sufferings and efficacy of the matter of the securing of the forgiveness of sin." Commenting on the nineteenth-century controversy, Brandelle ended the letter by saying:

Both sides were no doubt to blame. Neither one had clean hands in the early days. To my notion there is neither need nor sense in prolonging this struggle any longer. I can not conceive of the Lord saying to himself, "I am glad those people are still hunting for a chance of keeping up the old feud." Can you?¹⁸

This is a strange letter. To Anderson's simple letter of inquiry and pleasantries, Brandelle responded with a long and convoluted reply. He seems to suggest at the end an overture for closer relations, but

the references in the middle of the letter to the Covenant's theology (especially the reference to "Socinians") seem almost deliberately provocative.

Anderson himself was apparently taken aback by the letter, and was initially unsure how to reply: "I have read and reread your letter with keen interest. You seem to have interpreted my earlier letter virtually as an application for the admission of the Covenant into the Augustana Synod. That certainly was not the purpose of my communication." Anderson defended the Covenant on the doctrine of the atonement, saying that no one in the Covenant denied the efficacy of Christ's sufferings for the forgiveness of sins. Furthermore, "Our people, however, quite generally believe that no church or denomination has a monopoly on the truth of Calvary. . . placing the Bible above every human creed."¹⁹ Now it was Anderson's turn to misconstrue Brandelle, for however one reads the latter's letter, he was not even hinting of an admission of the Covenant into Augustana. Brandelle replied in December 1933. He explained that he was not for the moment suggesting any possible union between the two. Further, he disputed the inference in Anderson's letter that Augustana placed any human creed above the Bible. He wrote, "The great question is: what does the Bible teach? Every answer to that question partakes of the nature of a human document and becomes a confession." To the question of closer relations between Augustana and the Covenant, he continued:

I had not thought of suggesting united action on the part of our Synod and the Mission Covenant. That may come in the future, but I will not live to see it. But I did harbor the thought that it might be possible for some of us to just get together and talk over some matters that do not seem to be just right.²⁰

Brandelle suggested, however, possible coordination in home mission efforts, for example.

There is no record of further correspondence in either man's files. In 1934 Brandelle wrote to an Augustana pastor a letter of thanks for pointing Anderson out to him in the audience at a synodical con-

vention, but lamented that by the time he had gotten around to seeking him out, Anderson had left. (Obviously the two presidents had never met, though Brandelle seemed keen to do so.) Brandelle wrote: “The Augustana Synod and the Mission Covenant ought to be united. I have felt that way for many years. If I have sensed the animus within the Covenant today aright, I fear very much that there is no hope for any concerted efforts.”²¹

It seems fairly obvious that neither Brandelle nor Anderson was actually very well informed about the other’s denomination. This exchange of letters shows misunderstandings of one another’s positions, even parroting old lines from the nineteenth century (“Socinians,” “creeds above scripture”) that were caricatures even back then, and which had no real sense of the contemporary theological fault lines in the other’s denomination.

Brandelle’s unrealized hope of a union between Augustana and the Covenant is, however, still very apparent in his letter. There is no sense of Anderson’s position on this, except through inference. Anderson remained as Covenant president from 1932 until 1959, credited with rebuilding the denomination after the traumas of doctrinal disputes and the Depression. Brandelle was defeated for reelection as Augustana president in 1935, after seventeen years in office. His successor, P. O. Bersell, was, like Anderson, credited with growing and greatly strengthening Augustana; both fostered a strong institutional growth of their respective denominations, yet neither seemed to have the vision of closer relations to the other.

In 1948, Bersell was alerted by retired Augustana Seminary professor S. J. Sebelius to an article in the independent yet Covenant-related publication *Missionsvännen*, in which the author claimed that many of the leading Swedish theologians, as well as the president of Augustana (Bersell) were “Waldenströmian” in their theology. Sebelius suggested to Bersell that he might want to respond.²² Bersell wrote back to Sebelius and stated, “I seldom read *Missionsvännen* and therefore I do not know anything about the article.”²³ Seemingly, Bersell did not care enough to respond, and, by inference, was not all that interested in what was being said about him in a quasi-Covenant publication. It seems that both Anderson and Bersell were rather more interested in growing their own

denominations than in developing closer relations between the two of them.

CONCLUSION

It appears that in the 1920s and '30s there were some in both Augustana and the Covenant who were interested in cooperation between the two denominations, and even perhaps had a fleeting idea of union between the two. These hopes seemed to be based on their common heritage in "Swedish evangelicalism" and ethnicity, almost a romantic reinterpretation of their past history. Despite the separate trajectories of the two groups, they shared both a common past and some contemporary difficulties that might have led to closer cooperation. These movements toward closer ties were possibly, one might suggest, also a search for common allies or reinforcements against opponents within their respective denominations. This is fairly obvious with Franklin, for example, and also perhaps for Brandelle. But these tentative movements toward cooperation were stymied by the pressure of others, by some in Augustana who worried about what other Lutherans might think about it, and by some more conservative elements of the Covenant who seemingly still carried a grudge against Augustana or thought it too liberal. What is also striking is that leaders of Augustana and the Covenant—even those who might have sought closer cooperation—still seemed woefully ignorant of what was occurring in the other denomination. Brandelle's comment about "Socinians" and "Waldenströmians," for example, and Anderson's misunderstanding the relation of Bible, creeds, and confessions in Augustana, are close to caricatures of the other. Despite lingering good will and some definite ministry needs, the two denominations were on parallel paths, ones that were to some extent diverging from each other. Contacts and cooperation ultimately did not bear fruit. These denominational bodies would remain separate, and each increasingly would come to exist in very different spheres of American Protestantism.

ENDNOTES

1. On the history of the Augustana Synod, see G. Everett Arden, *Augustana Heritage* (Rock Island, IL: Augustana Book Concern, 1963); and Maria Erling and Mark Granquist, *The Augustana Story: Shaping Lutheran Identity in North America* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2008). On the Covenant, see Karl Olsson, *By One Spirit* (Chicago: Covenant Press, 1962); and Philip J. Anderson, *A Precious Heritage: A Century of Mission in the Northwest* (Minneapolis: Northwest Conference of the Evangelical Covenant Church, 1984).
2. On the religious developments for this period, see Sture Lindmark, *Swedish America 1914-1932: Studies in Ethnicity with Emphasis on Minnesota and Illinois*, *Studia Historica Upsaliensia* 37 (Stockholm: Läromedelsförlagen, 1971); and Karl A. Olsson, *Into One Body . . . by the Cross*, v. 1 (Chicago: Covenant Publications, 1985).
3. Nathaniel Franklin to G. A. Fahlund, 23 Dec 1921, Covenant Archives and Historical Library (CAHL), Brandel Library, North Park University, Chicago.
4. Nathaniel Franklin to G. A. Brandelle, 13 Feb 1926, CAHL.
5. G. A. Brandelle to Nathaniel Franklin, 29 Jan 1927, in G. A. Brandelle Presidential Papers, Archives of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (AELCA), Elk Grove Village, Illinois.
6. G. A. Brandelle and Nathaniel Franklin, to the Committee on Conference, 3 Mar 1927, CAHL.
7. Nathaniel Franklin to J. G. Youngquist, 2 Apr 1929, CAHL.
8. G. A. Brandelle to Nathaniel Franklin, 17 Sep 1929, in G. A. Brandelle Presidential Papers, AELCA.
9. H. A. Stub to G. A. Brandelle, 21 Feb 1919, in G. A. Brandelle Presidential Papers, AELCA.
10. See Mark A. Granquist, "The Augustana Synod and the Missouri Synod," *Lutheran Quarterly* 24 (2010): 42-60.
11. Nathaniel Franklin to G. A. Brandelle, 21 Sep 1929, CAHL.
12. Olsson, *By One Spirit*, 547f.
13. Nathaniel Franklin to Otto Leonardson, 19 Jan 1933, CAHL.
14. J. V. Nordgren to Nathaniel Franklin, 28 Apr 1933, CAHL.
15. J. V. Nordgren to Nathaniel Franklin, 23 Jun 1933, CAHL.
16. Nathaniel Franklin to J. V. Nordgren, 13 Oct 1933, CAHL.
17. Theodore W. Anderson to G. A. Brandelle, 16 Sep 1933, Theodore Anderson Presidential Papers, CAHL.
18. G. A. Brandelle to Theodore W. Anderson, 17 Sep 1933, in G. A. Brandelle Presidential Papers, AELCA.
19. Theodore W. Anderson to G. A. Brandelle, 1 Nov 1933, Theodore

Anderson Presidential Papers, CAHL.

20. G. A. Brandelle to Theodore W. Anderson, 2 Dec 1933, in G. A. Brandelle Presidential Papers, AELCA.

21. G. A. Brandelle to J. W. Johnson, 19 Jun 1934, in G. A. Brandelle Presidential Papers, AELCA.

22. S. J. Sebelius to P. O. Bersell, 29 Apr 1948, in P. O. Bersell Presidential Papers, AELCA.

23. Ibid.