

THE SONG OF MESSIAH PEALS FORTH FROM THE PRAIRIE

Olof Olsson considered the immigration to America to be similar to that of heirs who by inheritance become independent persons. He compared the new situation to circumstances in the homeland where the estate might be willed to one of the sons as sole owner, or where the estate might be divided into parcels of land, depending upon the number of sons who needed their own share of the land.

In a sermon in 1891, using Acts 17:24–28 as his text, Olof spoke about the immigration to North America. He affirmed that just as God had given the promised land to Abraham he had given North America to His own children of the new covenant.

“According to our text we must believe that we would not have come to this land if it were not that God so decided and provided for us. God has staked out the boundaries for our new homeland from the Atlantic to the Pacific.

“If God has given this land to the Anglo-Saxons, he has also given it to the Scandinavians. We are all of the same tribal family. It is not our fault that our Anglo-Saxon siblings have mixed a great deal of Latin into their language and have thus made themselves somewhat different from their friends of Scandinavian lineage. We also cling to the ancient northern freedom. In it we have inherited our true and noblest birthright to the land of freedom.”

In June 1869 Olof Olsson, aged 28, his family and his fellow travelers reached the Kansas Territory. There Olof would build his home and there he would continue his care of human souls.

Olof remained a citizen of Sweden for the first seven years of his residence in America, but he became a citizen of the United States on May 3, 1876 and remained an American citizen for the rest of his life.

At the time of Olof’s arrival in Kansas there were only small, scattered groups of Swedish immigrants. But a colony was soon to be developed. Olof Olsson founded the little town of Lindsborg. Consequently, he became the first pastor there as well as its first organist.

The territory in which Lindsborg was located had been, according to Olof’s description, “a haunt of buffaloes and Indians” up until the middle of the 19th century. The state of

Kansas had secured its territorial constitution in 1854 and was received into statehood in 1861. During the reconstruction period following the Civil War much interest was focused on Kansas and immigrants began to settle there.

In April of 1866 eight young Swedish men sought for a suitable area for settlement in Kansas.

Olof Olsson was not afraid of hard work. He became a farmer in America.

On January 6, 1869 he wrote a letter to T. N. Hasselquist: "An agricultural company of Christians with whom I am acquainted has already been established near Salina. I also intend to acquire a share in this company in order to provide for the security of my family."

On December 11, 1869, Olof, having after a couple of months become somewhat acquainted with the new land, sent his impressions to a good friend in Sweden:

"As soon as we left New York I began to breathe more peacefully. The further west we traveled the more pleasant it became for me. The west is indeed the best place for one who seeks a home. The large cities of the east provide rich opportunities for those who are greedy for money. The west, with its large stretches of rich uncultivated land, provides a splendid opportunity for the industrious farmer who does not fear facing hard work and difficulties during the first years. You should see our settlement out here. It is a remarkable sight - grass prairies and more grass prairies. Here and there a stripe of green trees on both sides of the Smoky Hill River or along the small valleys where rain water seeks an outlet. At first the sight of these vast grassy plains is wearisome.

"I stood one day and looked at the land which my brother is now plowing for the second time (it was first plowed during May and June). It looks like a well-cultivated field of black coal. Here houses are being built as rapidly as possible and we rejoice greatly to see each new neighbor's cottage. So we toil each one in his own way, meet often and encourage one another with God's word and by giving advice about many practical matters. We do not cut pieces of gold with our jack knives, and we do not expect to be rolling in money in a few days or even in a few years, but we do expect with God's blessing to procure our own home where each one has his own private estate which will provide for him and his family the sustenance which they need.

"We resemble the old Swedish yeomen in our love for freedom and independence even with regard to dwellings and household utensils. The offer which America makes is not to promise everyone instant wealth without toil and hardship, yes not at once even with hardship, but the promise is given to a poor man who is willing and able to work to acquire a little bit at a time and he will, after a number of years, become the owner of an estate, which when one includes the cost of the labor and the annual returns, compares favorably with a great estate in Sweden. The hardships at first are so great that not every man has courage to face them by himself. It works best when several friends form a partnership and work an area together. They can then help and encourage one another. That is how it is here. That is why I also thrive in this place. As far as the Indians are concerned, we do not fear them. It is, of course, possible that they might attack us, but if God is protecting us we are not in danger. Since our settlement is so large and we are surrounded on all sides by

settlers, the Indians really would not dare to attack and especially since there is very little forest where they might hide after such an attack.”

Olof became a witness of religious chaos. He had supposed that “all Swedes even in this country would remain faithful to our unforgettable evangelical faith and doctrine,” but he discovered that some of the pioneers remained faithful to the church in which they had been reared while others converted to some other church which became a spiritual home for their special type of piety, which was not unusual, or they completely deserted both religion and the church.

No church body in America had acquired enough influence to be a national church able to provide spiritual care for all of its citizens. The Roman Catholic Church was the oldest and largest denomination.

Among the Swedes the Augustana Synod became incomparably the largest church body. The Augustana Evangelical Lutheran Church was officially organized in 1860, and the Augustana Synod became the unifying center for the scattered Scandinavians until 1870 when it became such for the Swedish pioneers in particular.

In 1860 the church had 32 pastors, 60 congregations, 34 church buildings and 8 parsonages. The shortage of pastors necessitated the founding of two educational institutions, Augustana College and Augustana Theological Seminary in 1860.

Requests had been sent to Sweden for more pastors but with little success. When Olof Olsson came to North America in 1869 there were 17 Swedish pastors, 36 congregations and 3,000 communicant members within the church. One year later the number of confirmed members had increased to 19,355 and by 1880 the number had grown to 41,976. By 1890 there were 325 pastors, 637 congregations and 84,583 confirmed members.

In 1900, the year of Olof’s death, the membership was 121,446.

The name Augustana is a reminder of the Augsburg Confession of Faith.

“Yes, we may clearly state that our church’s present well-being and its future depends next to God upon our pastors. Think about it. We have God’s church in our hands! There is, therefore, significant truth in what someone has said: Success will be achieved by the church which has the best preachers.”

– Addresses and Lectures (Are we in danger of having too many ministers? An address given at Augustana College, 1884)

When Olof came to Kansas he could in a sense regard all of Kansas as his parish. He was a pioneer pastor without a church building and a recorded list of members. But he arranged a place for services as well as he could and the need for a church building became more evident at every service.

On his way to Lindsborg in June, 1869, Olof had his first direct contact with the Augustana Synod which was holding its annual convention at Moline, Illinois. As leader of the Bethany Church which he would organize in Lindsborg, Olof proceeded cautiously at first as he became acquainted with the Synod and its leaders. Until certain guidelines had

been clearly defined and understood by Olof, the Bethany congregation developed and functioned as an independent congregation.

Olof himself worked for and desired a “pure congregation,” a congregation of true believers. He wished to have pure doctrine and evidence of genuine Christian faith life in the congregation. As a consequence, both the congregation and its leader soon attracted public attention.

When Olof Olsson and the Bethany Congregation applied for admission into the Augustana Evangelical Lutheran Church, the incumbent president of the synod considered it necessary to carefully investigate what constitution the congregation had adopted and what confessional position it had taken.¹

The Synod carefully avoided the risk of accepting a congregation which ignored the confessions of the Lutheran Church. Olof was able to provide information which dispelled any doubts and he set a definite time for action.

The Bethany congregation in Lindsborg was organized on August 19, 1869. The complete name was the Swedish Evangelical Lutheran Bethany Church.

There were twelve men together with Olof Olsson who agreed on the requirements for church membership. They wished to hold fast to the Evangelical Lutheran confession and at the same time to have cordial relationships with Christians of other denominations. The communicant member was required to clearly understand the holy sacraments. The pastor and deacons examined the prospective member as to the faithfulness and reality of his Christian profession. Even Olof’s wife, Anna, was required to undergo examination before she was received as a member of the congregation.

They built a church building with their available materials. It was a church with stone walls, a thatched roof and a dirt floor. The first service was held in the new building on New Year’s Day, 1870. Olof was able at that time to present a choir which he himself had trained. The only instrument he had was a tuning fork.



The first church, near Lindsborg.

The church was as Olof described it “open to visitors both day and night because we had no key other than a little rock which we placed against the door. Yes, even a skunk visited the church in broad daylight and took his position below the pulpit during the service on Pentecost Sunday. Many churches like ours are found in the pioneer settlements.”

The cash salary for the pastor was less than 500 dollars per year. It could happen that the congregation found it necessary to borrow money in order to pay the pastor. In 1871 the congregation provided the pastor with a parsonage. The first one was built the first year in 1869. Three years later a parsonage with six rooms was provided.

Olof Olsson was familiar with the pastor’s responsibility to keep membership records and statistics and he interpreted it thus:

“The pastor who has been called by God and who therefore wishes to serve in this office according to God’s will is not concerned about any other statistics than those which tell him how many lost sinners on earth are still unreached by the gospel.”

– Lectures and Addresses (Are we in danger of getting too many pastors? An address given at Augustana College in 1884)

The Bethany congregation had 259 members in 1872. The idyllic Christian concept of a perfect congregation, free and harmonious, lasted only for a short time.

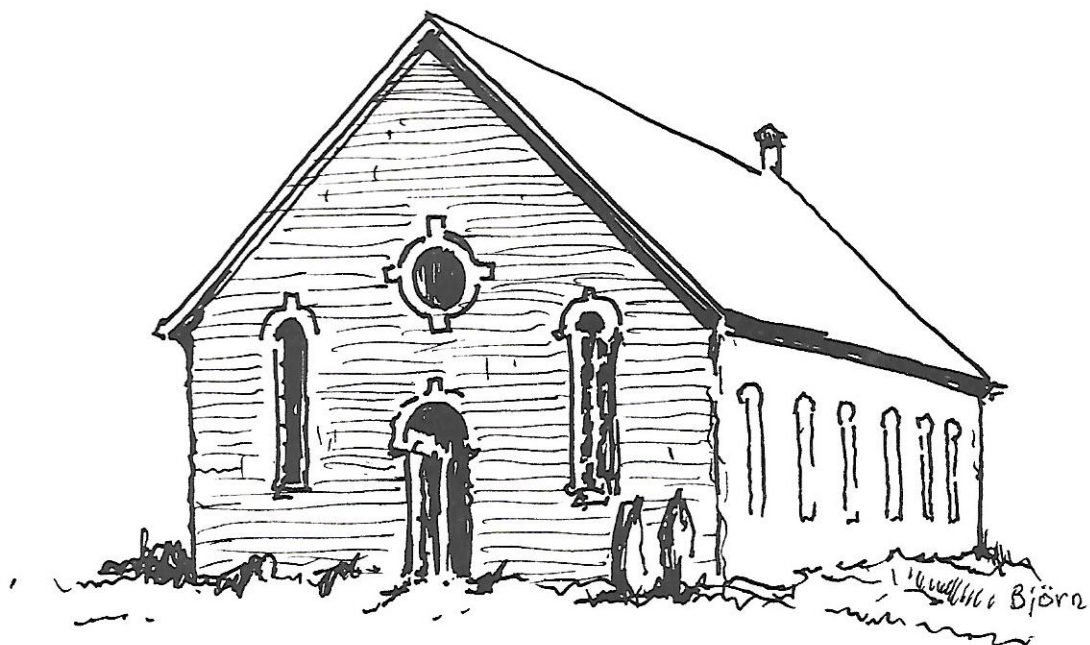
Joining the Augustana Synod created unrest among some members. There were those who were unable to agree with Olof’s method in dealing with this issue. Among these were old friends including Carl Johan Nyvall. Olof discovered that he was no longer the only authority. A man, for example, by the name of Bloom, came forward with a proclamation which compelled Olof to warn against his errors. He also found it necessary to keep a watchful eye on those who were followers of Waldenström.

In 1872 he decided that the time had come when he must give a public warning. The battle was joined and confrontation became inevitable. The most immediate and outward expression of the controversy was that 16 members withdrew from the congregation on Good Friday, 1874.

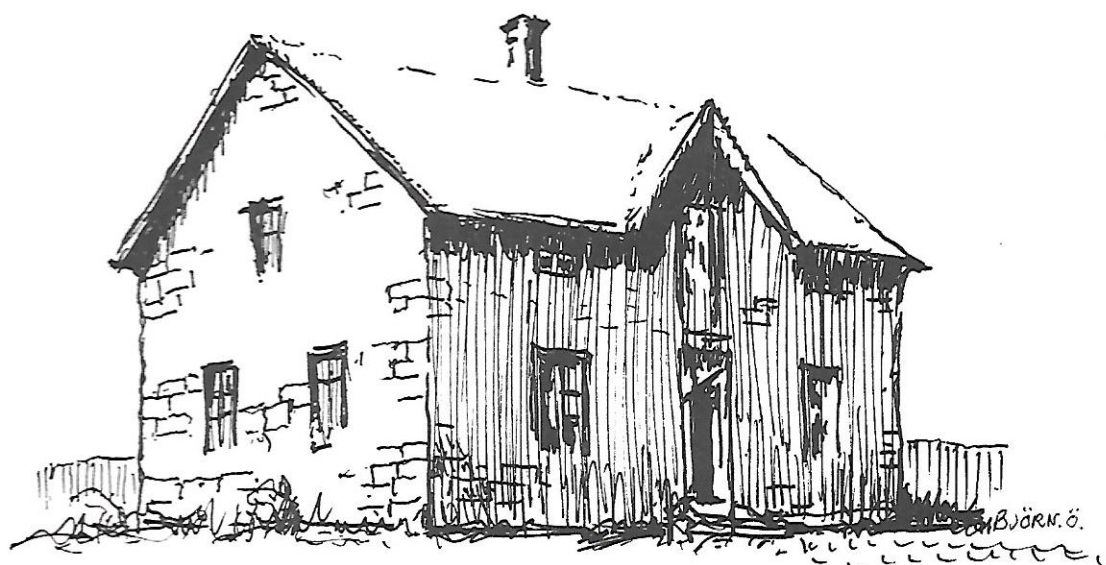
Several others followed them later. During the critical years of 1873–1876 the total number of members who left was 43 and two new congregations were started by people from this group. Consequently the majority of members remained loyal to the Bethany congregation.

During the same period 155 new members were added, so that at the end of 1873 there were 300 members of the congregation. In 1874, four years after the first church was built, the members were ready to go into a second church building program and this time there were greater resources available.

The Swedish Evangelical Lutheran Church prospered on the generous Kansas soil. In 1877 there were 544 members.



The second church in Lindsborg. The building has over the years been restored and enlarged. It is the first unit of the present church.



The parsonage in Lindsborg, "Olof Olsson's homestead."

Concerning his predecessor in the Augustana Synod Olof Olsson wrote:

“A church leader in America must often engage in polemics. In other words he must defend his home. This does not mean that he must try to destroy the home of others. Dr. Hasselquist never condemned nor tried to destroy another denomination.”

– Greetings from Afar.

Olof followed the same course of action in the battle which arose as a result of Bethany Church’s decision to join the Augustana Synod. The Mission Covenant group, earlier referred to as Waldenströmians, was a reality and thus became the cause for separation between the Lutherans and the Covenant people.

It became Olof’s responsibility to provide an amicable resolution:

“Why is it necessary for the shepherds to quarrel with one another? But I still must say that my spirit and that of every true Christian is greatly disturbed when those who call themselves Christians go into a congregation where the word of God is already proclaimed and try to gain proselytes. In such cases one can never be too stern. Then one must shout loudly: ‘Get out of here, Satan! You are a hindrance to me because you are not concerned about that which pertains to God but to that which pertains to man.’ Yes, the Lord himself shouts the same rebuke to the proselytes.”

– Greetings from Afar.

Olof was able to attack. But he never attacked those who were defenseless. It required a person who was knowledgeable in the Bible and Christian experience to dare to engage in combat with the Waldenströmian atonement doctrine. The embattled preacher, P. P. Waldenström, had certainly not allowed his Bible to gather dust on the shelf. He was an intelligent, well-educated and experienced preacher.

Faithful to his custom Olof applied himself to what was relevant to the controversy. He wrote about this several years later in *A Preface to Facets of the Reformation and Socinianism*.

*“It seems to me that it should not be regarded as improper or unchristian to ascertain how a teaching which is thought to be new in our time has actually been formulated and proclaimed in previous centuries. It seems to me to be the brotherly responsibility of every Christian who is being pressured to accept a new teaching, which is really an ancient teaching, to do some research and find out how it was previously proclaimed and what it previously accomplished among Christian people. As soon as I learned of the so-called new interpretation of the atonement in P. P. Waldenström’s *The Pietist*, I immediately became interested in finding out whether this doctrine had been taught before. It was neither out of curiosity or a desire for argument that I felt that I should make such a search, but I considered it a matter of conscience and still do for a teacher and every listener in the congregation to know what the issue is in such an important matter.”*

For Olof it was apparent that Christendom and Lutheranism had been attacked at the very center of its heart. He feared that the most important part of the gospel message would be concealed and lost. He saw in Waldenström’s doctrine the return of a previously existing

religious movement, known as Socinianism. A man named Fausto Sozzini had in the middle of the 16th century created a new unitarian religion which taught that man could possess a critical rational religion based on supernatural revelation, which questioned the doctrines of the Trinity and the deity of Christ.

To Olof Olsson who said he was unable to surrender or even wish to surrender “a single iota of the Lutheran doctrine,” the deity of Christ was of overwhelming importance.

Olof taught that man is given heaven as a free gift of God’s grace and that God’s goodness is greater than all the sins of the world.

“We would beyond the power of expression wish to see an earthly congregation that is a true image of heaven. My friend, that is impossible to find even if we traveled all around the world. Heaven can be mirrored in a small circle of Christians for a short time, but suddenly the mirror is stained by sin and weakness and then the heavenly image no longer exists.”

– The Christian Hope

However, nothing could diminish Olof’s regard for Lindsborg as the apple of his eye among all congregations on the earth.

Homesickness, the longing for Sunnemo, followed Olof and his family to America. In a letter from Lindsborg on July 9, 1873, Olof wrote to his “Honored Brother Weinberg” in Sunnemo:

“I often remember Sunnemo. I must also confess that I experience a longing to see my old friends again, but such weaker emotions must be suppressed. Still my heart feels an inner joy when I get news from that place which is so dear to me.”

In one of her letters to the homeland, his wife, Anna, wrote:

“Believe me, I have it very good here and Olle has it even better in one respect especially because there are brighter prospects for him here than in Sweden. But Sweden is still with me in lively remembrance. Beautiful Sweden, its forests, its mountains and valleys. In a word, everything there is more beautiful than here. Only the woman who wishes to dazzle with dresses and put on a show (among women, you understand) thrives better than I do because everyone here is expected to be responsible. Maids do very well here. Our maid is paid \$2.50 per week.

“I should also tell you about our harvest. Olle has 7 acres of fall wheat and 11 acres of spring wheat but we have not threshed yet, so I do not know how much it will yield, but it looks as though it will be very good. We planted only one bushel of rye and we have harvested 25 bushels and there is still some that has not been threshed. We have a lot of vegetables. The corn is now quite tall. The tallest stalks are now at least 4 feet in height.”

Olof was a busy man. “To enumerate my many duties would be just as strange as the public sales announcements which I had the honor of reading from the pulpit in Sweden,” he wrote in a letter to the homeland.

One wonders how he who was quite weak physically and chronically troubled by headaches was able to perform his many miscellaneous tasks. In addition to his duties as pastor

of a new and growing congregation, he was the first public school superintendent of McPherson County and a representative in the Kansas state legislature. The legislature had to deal with both farm problems and labor problems. The majority of those who elected Olof Olsson to be their representative were farmers and laborers. He was elected for two terms, the first in 1871.

Olof introduced two bills that were passed by the senate. The first bill, the Herd Law, was a proposal which prohibited Texas cattle owners from driving their herds across the cultivated fields of the settlers or to trespass through towns without permission. The second related particularly to railroad laborers, their wages and protection for them. Unscrupulous employers could particularly exploit the immigrants, called Greenhorns, who did not understand the language, the currency and circumstances in general and who therefore were often too trusting and vulnerable.

After a few years in North America, Olof received a pastoral call from another congregation. In January 1874 he was called by the Swedish Lutheran Church of Chisago Lake, Minnesota, to be its pastor. The vote was almost unanimous, 210 ayes and 2 nays.

Concerning this situation, congregational resolution #5 stated that "the salary for the future pastor will be \$800.00 which he shall receive from the congregational treasurer in two installments on January 1 and July 1 every year, plus an offering every Christmas Day, when each member, according to his own wishes and ability, may place his gift on the church's altar. The salary also provides free management of the parsonage property which includes a residence and 50 to 60 acres of farm land." Olof answered the call immediately. The contents of a letter which the congregation wrote Olof on February 9th indicate that he had declined the call. The nine men on the church council expressed deep regret that "the pastor could not find it in accordance with God's will to accept the call" and they appealed to him to reconsider his decision.

Olof served his Lindsborg congregation for approximately six years. Within the community and the congregation the people were helpful to one another to the best of their ability.

In a letter to Olof Olsson dated March 23, 1875, S. P. A. Lindahl wrote as follows: "Enclosed find a check for \$60.30 which we collected within our congregation for those whose crops were eaten by grasshoppers and who are consequently in need. The church council voted to send the money to you to be distributed at your discretion. If you consider the disaster to be worse in some other settlement than in yours, you may send the collection to it."

To allow himself to be transplanted from being a rural pastor to being principally a classroom lecturer could not be done without some personal pain. Nevertheless, Olof made that change at the convention of the Augustana Synod in 1875 at Vasa, Minnesota, when he was called to be a theological professor at Augustana College and Theological Seminary.

Olof accepted that position which he held until 1888. At that time he returned to Lindsborg where he became associated with Bethany College as a fund raiser.

Olof now had the opportunity to present from the lecturer's podium his knowledge of church history, exegetics and ethics.

It was possible that some student might underestimate the man from the prairie, thinking that he could play a trick on him, but only one who was unfamiliar with Olof's personality, knowledge and experience would attempt it.

Every day began with morning prayer at the college. A portion of scripture was then read in consecutive order. On one occasion when the lesson to be read was from the Old Testament and it was Olof's turn to conduct the matins, a student thought he would embarrass Olof and render him speechless. Just before the matins were begun this student removed the Bible from the lectern and put a Hebrew Bible in its place.

The matins proceeded as usual. Olof read the selection from the Hebrew as fluently as if he had been reading a translation.

It was said of Olof Olsson that he remained throughout life a superior student who was an example for others. Olof's thorough preparation for his profession also greatly enriched his leisure hours. He probed deeply and continually into the exegesis of the Old and New Testaments in the original Hebrew, Aramaic and Greek. He also expanded his knowledge of history and especially church history, practical theology and music, of which his literary production provides much evidence.

But among people who improperly assumed grand airs and used haughty and aristocratic words and phrases beyond their own abilities, Olof could react with the broadest provincial bluntness: "Learned, haughty and aristocratic airs are most disgusting to me."

The Augustana Synod was confronted frequently by economic problems which were difficult to solve. Olof also had to demonstrate his ability in the difficult assignment of pleading for money. The Augustana Synod had to deal with an indebtedness of \$27,000 in 1878. This debt was incurred because Augustana College and Seminary had been moved from Paxton to Rock Island.

An effort was made to resolve the economic difficulty by collecting an additional 25 cents per member annually. It also became necessary to discontinue the weekly magazine, *Hemlandet* (The Homeland), which had been published since 1855.

In order to ease the economic crunch, the publication of a monthly magazine, *Skolvännan* (The School Friend), was begun. Olof began in this magazine in 1878 to be an advocate for needs which must be met. As a result of his articles in *The School Friend* as well as by personal appearances he was able to report in December of 1879 an income of \$16,790.

On two other occasions the economic problems were such that new fund raising efforts were required in 1883 and in 1887. Olof again made use of *The School Friend* as his mouthpiece as he sought to gain a hearing for the cause.

A trip to Europe in 1879 provided Olof Olsson with many impressions and experiences which enriched his understanding of the worlds of religion, art, science and history.

In the preface to his book, *Greetings from Afar*, written after his return, Olof stated

that the principal reason for his trip was to seek health:

“I had cherished the hope for a long time to be able to take a trip during which time I would be able to rest from preaching, study, interruption and responsibility. My strength was now so impaired that I clearly understood that the Lord wanted to give me a time of rest.”

Olof Olsson entered into all of his travel experiences with enthusiasm from his own Christian perspective that “he wished to see everything with his own eyes and hear everything with his own ears.”

Olof freely expressed his opinions. In London he had the opportunity to hear a rendition of Handel’s Messiah which became an experience of special importance for him “since it is a musical work in which the finest musical art has been used to glorify the cross and blood of our Lord Jesus Christ.”

On Friday, April 4, 1879, Olof went to Exeter Hall hoping that the Lord would strengthen him in body and soul and grant him the joy “to hear already on earth that there shall be indescribably beautiful singing and music in heaven before the throne of the Lamb.”

Olof appreciated the violins playing and was delighted that it was played before a large audience. He rejoiced that the lyrics of the oratorio were “the pure words of the Bible, all of them a song with scriptural words about Christ.” Upon his return Olof considered it his responsibility to introduce and present the Messiah to his own congregation.

Later Olof heard a rendition of Bach’s Passion Oratorio on Good Friday at St. Thomas Church in Leipzig, Germany. He did not find this performance as magnificent as that in Exeter Hall but he did recognize that Bach had composed a Masterpiece. “The sweetness, gentleness, depth and its exquisite charm” in which all of Matthew 26 and 27 were sung literally by alternating soloists made an especially strong impression upon Olof.

During his visit in London Olof attended a worship service in Christ Church and he wrote: “As is often the case where one hears a message that is simple and the living Word of God, this church was located somewhat off the beaten path.”

Olof listened to a sermon by the Rev. Mewman Hall. His report on the sermon reveals something about his own style of preaching: “I must say that it was a sermon that went from heart to heart, from God’s Word to the heart of the preacher and therefore also to the hearer’s heart. This sermon was so biblical and therefore so simple and direct to the heart and life, so intimate and personal that I would describe it as a model sermon.”

To bring “memorized merchandise” to the public was something Olof Olsson would not do.

In Bohemia Olof saw hard working women toiling in fertile fields owned by Prince Clary, “a magnate of immeasurable wealth.” The sight deeply pained him.

“A human being is created for work, and labor is a blessing, but it has never been God’s intention that one woman should toil as a slave in the fields while another struts

about in expensive dresses decorated with gold and precious gems, moving around here and there in the resplendent rooms of a dazzling castle. Can one be surprised that socialism is gaining popularity in Europe? Can one blame the European laborers who are called free but are in reality slaves, if they would like to have just a little bit more of the magnate's immeasurable income? The issue of capital and labor is certain to be the rock upon which modern society will suffer shipwreck."

The labor movement and socialism had stirred people's emotions. Olof asked himself whether he, as a conscientious Lutheran pastor, could support the socialists and gave his own answer.

"Yes, it is beautiful! It is just as beautiful as when Jesus associated with the publicans." He considered it to be his Christian and civic duty to "quietly and seriously" consider what socialism had to say: *"Perhaps there is something to learn from their message even though it may sound peculiar to our ears."*

In Zurich, Switzerland, Olof listened to a socialist sermon. *"The people who are assembled are well-behaved and neat in appearance. There is nothing in their eyes or faces that is indicative of violent revolutionary intentions. The speaker, an editor, is completely calm and composed and displays throughout his lecture a respectable attitude. The presentation indicated good research and a clear understanding of history together with hard common sense."*

In his reflection upon socialism Olof wrote: *"Who are the social democrats or rather who are they regarded to be? They are considered to be the worst enemies of education and civilization and especially of all true Christianity, the worst revolutionaries of the 19th century, these are the social democrats. If socialism thrives the present social order will die and the whole world will be turned upside down. Is it, then, so strange that all honorable people detest socialism? But, dear friends, what is it these strange people want to do? They wish to eliminate the differences between the rich and the poor. They wish to bring all of humanity together as one large united family. All of us are children in the same father's house. All of us, therefore, have the same rights and responsibilities. What the French Revolution placed on its banner one hundred years ago, 'liberty, justice and equality,' is what the socialists now wish to make a reality. What so many Christians have dreamed about, the millennium upon the earth, that is what the social democrats wish to spread throughout the world by an entirely new governmental and social order. Yes, the age of the laborer has arrived, particularly the manual laborer. The clock has now struck the hour when there are no longer master or servants but all are called masters and all are called servants."*

"But the most important fact of all is that there is no private ownership and all have a right to everything. All is held in common, all belongs to the large family which is called humanity."

Without exaggeration one might say that Olof Olsson, even in his study of the labor movement, seemed to discover a very old phenomenon, the battle for basic values.

Even the first Christians were regarded as revolutionaries. But for Olof the truth was

revealed in the gospel of Jesus Christ. He saw his creator's work in all things.

"I believe with the strongest conviction that our greatest duty in this life is to offer our lives in service to one another. But it is Christ, and Christ alone, who can give us the love we need to rightly love one another. It is impossible for me to be satisfied only with this world and this life. To be a person without the God of love and without a heaven of love is unacceptable to me. The earthly heaven of the social democrats and the 1,000 years are no substitute for the true heaven for which I am awaiting. But while I am waiting for my own blessedness in heaven, it is my greatest joy to contribute in my own small way to the highest possible bliss for this earthly life. It is thus that I speak and believe as does every sincere Christian."

Olof returned from Europe stimulated and renewed. On April 12, 1881, Olof presented the Messiah in Moline, the city located near Rock Island. The rendition was greatly appreciated and it was not long until a new auditorium had been secured in Rock Island for the presentations.

On Sunday, March 28, 1882, he brought thirteen members of his orchestra to Lindsborg in order to assist in presenting Handel's Messiah in the Bethany Church. Olof was the organist on that occasion.

At the Augustana Synod's institution of higher learning in 1884 there were several music organizations: the Augustana Cornet Band, the Aeolus Choir and the Oratorio Society, an organization for the promotion of singing and music founded by Olof Olsson.

The annual presentation of Handel's Messiah became a regular part of the organization's program: "The Christians who have good singing voices can be powerful missionaries with this talent if they use it in the right way."

Before his emigration from Sweden Olof's authorship had been limited to sermons, sermon outlines and official records.

After settling in America he found a much more extensive use for his pen. It seems to have begun already in 1870 with the publication of a small magazine which soon proved to be inadequate, followed in 1873 by a short-lived monthly, *Nytt och Gammalt* (New and Old), which continued from time to time until Olof's authorship included a considerable number of writings which the following literary list illustrates:

At the Cross (1878)

Greetings From Afar

– Memories of a journey through England and Germany in 1879

Foreword to Reprints of The Reformation and Socinianism (1880)

Notes 1881–1895, Regarding life after death

Notes April 26, 1886 – Second Day of Easter

The Christian Hope (1887)

To Rome and Home Again (1890)

The Greatest of All Questions; undated notes

We Confess Christ; undated notes

Sermons and Lectures (1903)

Christmas Meditation (1906)

Addresses and Lectures (1912)

In his writings Olof Olsson combined Christian content with rich and vital expression. He expressed his thoughts with direct self-revelation and frank discussion on such subjects as education, insight and emotion.

“If we have the gospel we can be saved in the state church or in the free church under this or that type of church organization, yes even if we have bishops.”

– Greetings From Afar

In his desire to find meaning in all of life’s changes Olof researched in many directions. There is no doubt that he was, from time to time, regarded with mistrust because of his openness to extensive study and research.

Olof professed to be “a Lutheran at heart” and his frequent references to Luther’s “clear and consistent theological positions” confirms it. But he also confessed that “anyone who sincerely believes in Jesus as God’s Son and the Savior of sinners is my brother and friend in Jesus Christ.” He was always ready to extend the hand of friendship to a brother in the faith.

Olof was not a typical representative for a single interpretation. His thinking was not fenced in by “isms.” Throughout his life he constantly sought to deepen his knowledge in relation to the position that “there is only one name and one proclamation and that is Christ.”

But he thought on an idealistic level and consequently his thinking could constantly expose him to attack.

Olof’s wife, Anna, died in 1887. This loss affected him very deeply. The memory of his “beloved Anna, the faithful wife and mother” he preserved so purely for the rest of his life that he interpreted even the suggestion of remarriage as an attack upon his Christian understanding of love and the relationship between husband and wife.

“It is not profitable to dispute with a corrupt person about a pure, true, deep and sweet love in marriage, for when one speaks to him about a mirror clear lake, his thoughts splash with snakes and lizards into a stinking swamp. The one whose heart has been branded by the satanic fire of indecent desires is not strong enough to understand true marital affection and love, because he seeks only the sacrifices of hell which lodge in his unfortunate soul and evil body, and the more numerous such sacrifices the more pleasing it is to the evil spirit within him.”

– Addresses and Lectures (The Secret Fellowship and Christ’s Church)

In memory of his wife Olof wrote a book, *The Christian Hope*. At about the same time he produced some notes entitled *The Greatest of All Questions*, which were originally private notes for his own reflection. These notes deal primarily with the condition of the soul after death and they indicate that he was engaged in a hard battle to hold on to faith and



Olof Olsson and his four children, Anna, Maria, Lydia and Hannes.

reason.

The year 1888 was, like the previous one, a gloomy year for Olof Olsson. He would again be confronted by severe testing.

Concerned about eschatology, Olof was weary from worry over the fate of his deceased wife and what she would face in eternity. He wished at least to find for himself comfort in the hope that on the great day of Judgment she would arise in glory to be with the Lord. Olof now devoted himself to a more intensive study of the nature of God. He was looking for answers about God, man and eternity.

It was clear that Olof thoughtfully considered the doctrine of reincarnation, the idea of the reconciliation of a fallen humanity with God and its final perfection, together with the apocryphal doctrine that all things will be restored including all people, and that even the devil after purification in the kingdom of the dead would be reunited with God. Some, therefore, began to entertain serious doubts about Olof Olsson, the quality of his faith and his loyalty to Lutheran Christianity. Some thought there was sufficient cause to declare that

he was a dangerous heretic and unfit to serve a congregation of the evangelical Lutheran confession.

But in Olof's private notes concerning the conditions of life after death, there were many Bible passages quoted with their references. He always supported his ideas with scripture passages.

In 1889 and 1890 Olof visited Europe a second time after his immigration to America. During this trip he made a careful study of Roman Catholicism. He discovered "that an apostolic inheritance has been preserved by the ancient mother even though it is deeply buried under a stack of human traditions, papal bulls and a large amount of old rubbish."

Olof was not a person who based his conclusions and pronouncements on shallow assumptions. He constantly pressed on to the very heart of every subject in order to compare, learn and experience the truth.

"You should read the history of Rome, at least the history of the Colosseum. You do not know humanity if you do not know Rome.

"In Rome, the city of ruins, you can see remnants of all the kingdoms of this world and their glory. There you can also see the destruction of the first Christian congregation."

– To Rome and Home Again

Olof's deep appreciation of Martin Luther and the Reformation was renewed and strengthened in Rome: "The Reformation was the Resurrection of God's Kingdom."

Olof had a strong attachment for home. During the trip to Rome he took notes and made observations that enabled him to define his thought about home and its meaning.

"The civilization of our time has made it impossible for ordinary laborers to own homes in the large cities. This is really a judgment upon our civilization. A social order which makes home ownership impossible for most of the people has doomed itself to extinction sooner or later. Does one wonder that socialism, anarchy and nihilism attract the laboring class? People have now in general become too well informed to live as cattle. The only proper remedy is to arrange society so that the homeless will be able to secure homes. This would be a great opportunity for the wealthy if they would recognize and accept it. But do they usually show concern for their homeless brothers? So the time will come when the poor will not show concern for the wealthy. The rich build their palaces and villas and depend upon the power of the government to protect them in their luxury and ostentation."

– To Rome and Home Again

"Even a trip to Rome becomes too personal. That is a problem. How then would it be to take a trip through Sweden?"

Olof wrote a short concluding section in his voluminous travelogue, To Rome and Home Again. This section told about his visit to the old homeland: "Just a glimpse of Sweden – that will be all!"

Please understand that I hastily visited certain places in the fatherland which are un-

forgettably precious to me. But you must also understand that I cannot and should not be required to describe these visits. You and others would probably say that I think the home of my spiritual childhood and youth is more wonderful than any other. The memory of a stop at Fredsberg in northern Västergötland, at my Karlskoga and my Sunnemo in Värmland and on to Uppsala and Stockholm will remain unforgettable for life. O, my precious old friends in Västergötland and Värmland, how I wish I could thank you publicly and adequately for your encouraging love and hospitality! But I must refrain. My heart speaks.

– To Rome and Home Again

At the beginning of April, 1891, Olof was called to be president of both Augustana College and the Theological Seminary. As a college president and a professor, Olof had many things to manage and many problems to solve. The flood of letters he received have something to say about this.

A lady from Iowa wrote: “Dear Professor Olsson, Pardon me for taking the liberty of writing a number of lines to you. There is a girl here who wishes to attend school for a time so that she can learn to write. She is unable to write a single word, and besides that she is left-handed. So she is wondering whether she will be able to learn to write.”

Another correspondent wrote on behalf of his brother: “I wish to take the liberty of asking you about instruction and whether it would be possible to get some help from your college in Rock Island. My brother, ever since he was a little boy, has always wanted to attend college but poverty has prevented it.

“He has a good reading ability! So I am certain that if he could only begin, learning would come easily for him.

“It was my intention to help him, so we sent him a ticket and he came to this country in March, but now since these hard times have come upon us and we do not have work, it is impossible for me to help him, and that is why I wish to turn to you and I hope to receive help from you. I am sure that if my brother gets one year of schooling he can be sent to a Swedish congregation to teach elementary school and by that means he will be able to help himself.”

One correspondent who spoke for himself wrote Olof in 1894 and requested information about the “little preacher examination.” He also wished to serve as God’s servant here on earth: “My father died nine years ago and left a tidy sum of money which I soon lost partly by an extravagant life style and partly by speculation so that about two-and-a-half years ago I found myself broke but without debt, so I decided to immigrate to America to begin a new life for myself and become a new and responsible person.”

But Olof himself also had to write letters asking for help and among other things to ask for assistance in helping students find employment.

A pastor in Iowa answered such a letter concluding with these words: “It seems people around here think only about corn and pigs. God help you in your battle, my friend and brother.”

The language question had arisen and during the time of Olof Olsson’s presidency the

institution became a completely American institution. The English language was used almost exclusively.

Olof was, of course, criticized for his contribution toward this result.

Olof Olsson was given two honorary degrees: Doctor of Theology from Augustana College in 1892 and Doctor of Philosophy at Uppsala University in Sweden in 1893.

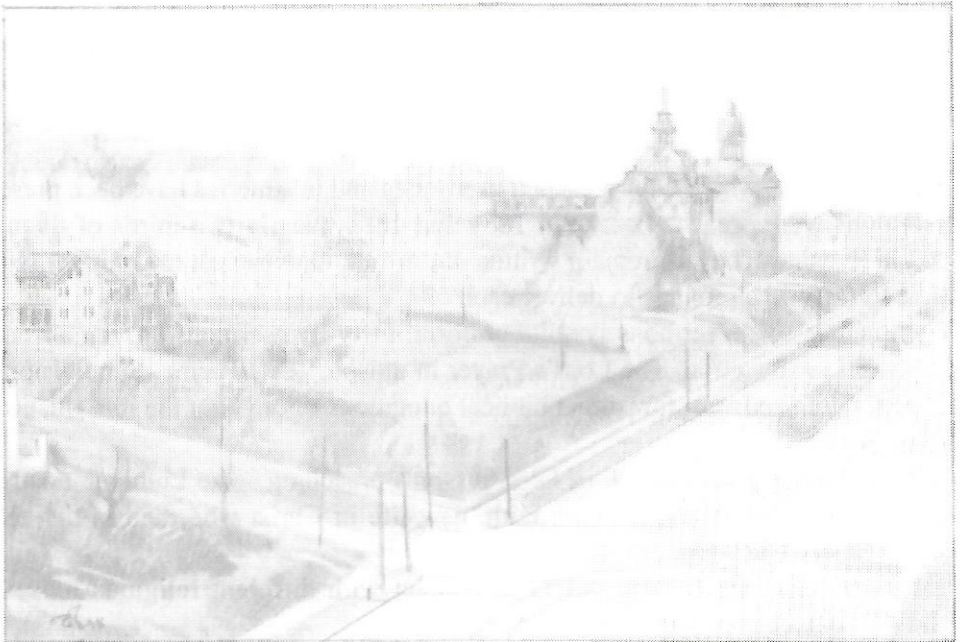
God's Word was for Olof the highest and most unshakable of all truth. But he did not look upon Christianity as an exclusive educational system. He attempted to keep up with the science of his time insofar as it was possible for him. "True faith stands in grateful union with true science and true art."

"No branch of knowledge has been so badly abused by its highest and most famous spokesmen as theology. In spite of these abuses, we do not reject the knowledge of God or the spirit of man.

"When will we be able to pay our debt of gratitude to natural science? This knowledge has grown and has changed our entire physical earthly life in an unbelievable manner. If many people abuse this knowledge so that they deny and ridicule the hope which makes human life worth living, we do not, therefore, reject the marvelous science, but we feel pity for its abusers."

– To Rome and Home Again

Olof asked himself with indignation why true knowledge was often locked up in heavy



First and Second Old Main Buildings, Augustana College.

and obscure presentations. By way of illustration he made a comparison between romance and history.

“Since we have so much true and worthy history, biography and the like, why do we not place these truths, instead of fiction, in the hands of our youth? It is a fact that romance is generally written with simplicity and charm so that the style of writing itself is attractive. History, on the other hand, is often written in a ponderous style that is awkward and tedious. Observe, then, the great damage that is done by sterile scholarship which will not allow the truth to be presented simply and without sophisticated phrases! I despise such scholarship!”

– Greetings From Afar

Olof had his own clear idea of the meaning and boundaries of literature:

“One should read Wallin’s Dödens ängel (The Angel of Death), Topelius’ Till min moder (To My Mother), Tegner’s Till solen (To the Sun) and similar selections from our Swedish poetry. Such poems are true expressions of the noblest emotions of the human heart. They have great meaning and are worth preserving.

“When one wishes to know whether there are any memories preserved in literature that affirm that humanity has been created in God’s image and likeness, one must search through the best poetry and the best literature. The Apostle Paul looked for evidence of such memories of man’s creation in pagan literature, as for example in Acts 17.”

– Addresses and Lectures. (Education and Christianity. Lecture presented in St. Paul, Minnesota, 1884)

Olof Olsson expressed many ideas from his pulpit. He entered the pulpit quietly and respectfully, bowed his head in prayer, looked out over his congregation and began his sermon. He spoke clearly and calmly. No one could detect that the sermon progressed from a written manuscript.

Seventy sermons which Olof preached in Sweden and in America have been preserved. These sermons were preached between 1861 and 1889. Nearly two-thirds of them were preached in Sweden. They all remain written out in full. One can estimate that it required thirty-five to forty-five minutes to deliver each one.

The structure of the sermons is quite uniform. Fifty-five sermons are organized with Invocation and Introduction, The Lord’s Prayer in unison, Text, Theme, Subdivisions and Application. Olof used very few direct biblical quotations throughout the introduction and the sermon itself.

A central theme permeated all of Olof Olsson’s preaching – the Lutheran doctrine of the atonement and justification: living faith, new life in Christ who died in the sinner’s place and true sanctification.

Olof’s sermons also present points of contact with different religious movements which he encountered in his ministry.

Olof’s sermons are similar to Schartau’s in form as well as in content. The main theme always relates to grace and the order of grace. His preaching is pietistic in that the sermon

is an edifying proclamation of the new evangelism and God's complete grace earned through Christ's sacrificial death. He identifies with the Bengelian school in his affirmation that the Bible is the source of ultimate knowledge and truth.

No single sermon can be selected and designated as a religious, pietistic, revival sermon. Olof was able to connect with life situations as they were at that time, and yet he was able to do it in such a way that he did not press them into such a time frame that they became outdated. They therefore still have life and relevance for the modern reader.

Olof Olsson's sermons were not the product of work done late on Saturday evening. He constantly meditated upon his assignment as priest and proclaimer: "It is a glorious, an indescribably glorious, vocation to be a son of consolation and a bringer of consolation."

On July 6, 1895, Olof wrote:

"Quiet reflections in solitude for an hour on Saturday.

"During the course of the years I have found that I am incapable of managing the small troubles. How, then, shall I be able to manage the large ones? I am not able to manage my own concerns and those of my family. How, then, can I be concerned for all of humanity? If I am unable to provide for even a few people in time, how shall I, then, be able to provide for the innumerable host of human beings who have passed on into eternity? Moreover, I cannot save a single soul by my brooding and grieving. Therefore, I completely reject all such speculations which might be implied from previous notes I have written."

– Notes 1881–1895 concerning the Condition after Death

Footnote

1. The Augustana Synod joined a new church body in 1962. It was named the Lutheran Church in America (LCA). Another church merger in 1988 resulted in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) of which the former Augustana Synod is a part.

AT THE CROSS

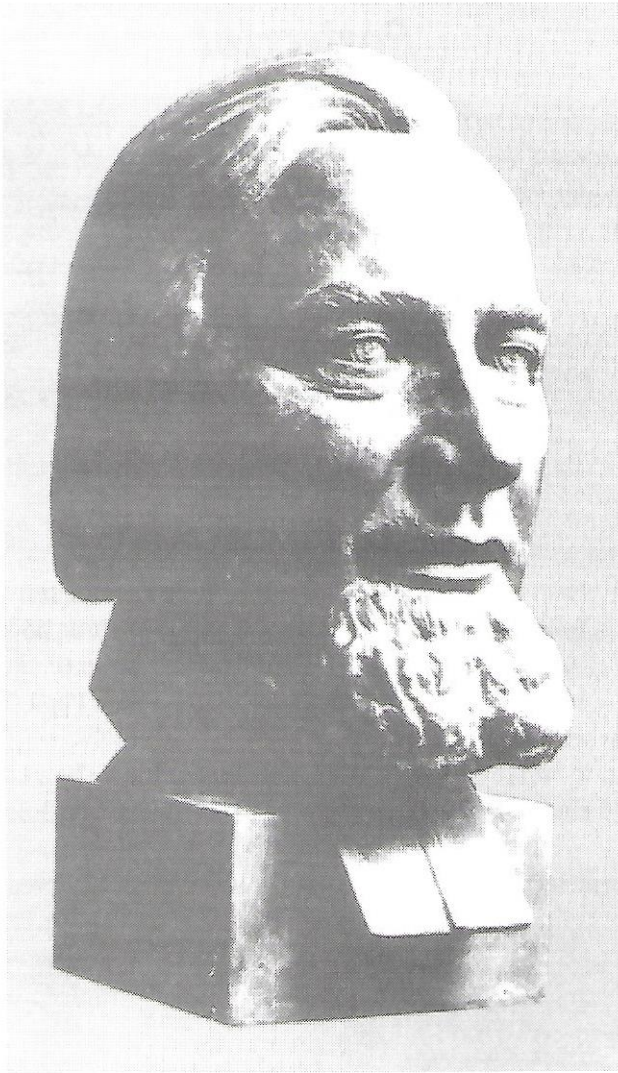
Olof Olsson died May 12, 1900, at the age of 59 years. His grave is located in the Riverside Cemetery in Moline, Illinois, where he was buried on May 16.

The memorial service was held in the Swedish Lutheran Church. Thousands of people attended this service and honored his memory by their presence.

Olof Olsson himself indicated the foundation upon which his life had been built:

“The Scriptures lead you to the cross and keep you there as long as you live on this earth. And when death comes, may it find you at the cross where death has lost its sting. There is the place of eternal life.”

– At The Cross



During the years following his visit to the United States Bror Carlsson raised funds for the purchase of a bust of Olof Olsson. He did this by different means including giving lectures throughout the Karlstad diocese.

This bust, created by the sculptor Arvid Backlund, may be seen in Rock Island, Illinois, in Sunnemo, Sweden, and in Lindsborg, Kansas.