

# THE KING'S CENTRAL ROLE IN THE NARRATIVE OF THE REFORMATION

The Reformation Bicentenary in Sweden in 1721

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The professor of theology, bishop and later archbishop, Erik Benzelius jun. (1675–1743), received a letter in September of 1717 from the Gotha church counselor and library director Ernst Salomon Cyprian (1673–1745). Cyprian informed his Swedish colleague about the arrangements for the Reformation jubilee in England, Bohemia and Denmark. It was Cyprian's expressed wish that Sweden would join the other evangelical churches in the celebrations. He added that it might be difficult to organize a jubilee "in the midst of warfare", but emphasized that "the glory of the king would increase dramatically" through such festivities.<sup>1</sup> Although the correspondence between the archbishop of Uppsala and Benzelius reveal that the Church of Sweden truly did consider celebrating in 1717, in the end the king chose to pursue the same course laid down for the centenary, namely to celebrate a bicentenary four years later. In 1521, Gustav I Vasa (1496–1560) had been recognized as commander (*hövitsman*) by the representatives of the Swedish province of Dalarna (Ill. 1). Gustav Vasa's rise to power was closely connected to the revolt against the Danish king, Christian II (1481–1559), and the course of events leading to Swedish independence from Denmark and the Calmar Union.

When Gustav II Adolf (1594–1632) declared January 21, 1621, as the date of the centenary celebration in an edict from December 1620, he did not refer to Luther's trial at the diet of Worms, but rather to his forefather's rise to power. God did not merely reveal his love to the Swedish fatherland (*patria*) through the true proclamation of the Gospel, the edict stated, but God also upheld the political order in the midst of hostile repression.<sup>2</sup> This was a reference to the reign of Christian II and the infamous bloodbath of Stockholm in 1520. The historical narrative of the edict made the *person* of Gustav Vasa the central Reformation figure, long before the actual introduction of church reforms. After the Roman pope had muddled the heavenly doctrine, Satan stirred up the political order (*turbas in Regimine*) and introduced foreign kings to Sweden. These foreign kings misused the powers and privileges of the crown, the edict proclaimed. The tyrant Christian II emerged from them, whose deplorable acts the edict could find words for.

1 Cf. Carl Axel Aurelius: *Luther i Sverige. Den svenska Lutherbilden under fyra sekler*. Skellefteå 2015, p. 85.

2 Cf. Johannes Baazius: *Inventarium Ecclesiae Sveo-Gothorum [...]*. Linköping 1642, p. 705.



Ill. 1: Copperplate of the Swedish kings Eric IX and Gustav I  
(FB Gotha, Hist. 8° 238/2 (109), frontispiece)

In this dire situation of our fatherland, God aroused our grandfather, the hero of holy memory, Gustav I, the king of the Swedes, who boldly and successfully started on January 21, 1521, to liberate the oppressed fatherland and chase away the tyrant, king Christian II. God used our aforementioned grandfather as an instrument to cleanse the fatherland from the Papal darkness and to illuminate patriots so that they could see the light of the Gospel, in which we are walking unified on the path of revealed truth.<sup>3</sup>

In many ways, the same sentiments were expressed in 1721, in spite of Sweden's losses in the Great Northern War. Their militarily talented and absolutist king, Charles XII (1682–1718), had died in 1718, and Russia was emerging as a great power in the North. Although the national situation did not allow for the same spirit of triumphalism prevalent in 1621, there was still an optimistic sentiment in Sweden in the first years of the so-called Age of Liberty. The celebrations commenced on March 17, 1721. The Uppsala and Lund Universities held orations commemorating the jubilee.

3 Baazius: Inventarium, p. 706. See also the Swedish translation in: Aurelius: Luther, p. 22.

In his invitation to the bicentenary, the chancellor of the University of Uppsala, Petrus Schyllberg (1669–1743), added an accentuated rendering of the doctrine of justification by faith alone.<sup>4</sup> Although the celebration took place four years later than in other Lutheran areas of Europe, Schyllberg referred extensively to the 95 Theses and the controversy over indulgences. However, when Schyllberg stated that “this is the year of our beloved fatherland’s liberation from the Papal darkness and from the tyrant of the Swedes, Christian II”, he did not refer directly to Gustav I Vasa.<sup>5</sup> Perhaps this was due to the king’s fading status. When Frederick I (1676–1730) had ascended the throne in 1720, royal authority declined significantly.

The invitation to the festivities at the University of Lund was issued by the chancellor Carolus Schultén (1677–1730). He discussed the inclusion of Scandinavia in the Christian oikoumenē. In spite of the many wars that hindered the church’s mission, it nevertheless continued to flourish. One of the most serious obstacles had been posed by the Roman pontiff’s efforts to introduce traditions into the church in order to teach people faith on the basis of his mandates, thereby contaminating the purity of doctrine. However, at this time of despair, Gustav I Vasa, according to Schultén then in hiding in Lübeck, heard about the Reformation and its progress in Germany and was “inspired by the divine spirit and inflamed by the love of the truth.” He found the two pious preachers of God’s Word, Laurentius (1499–1573) and Olaus Petri (1493–1552), both students of Luther, and appointed them archbishop and pastor of the basilica of Stockholm so that they could “reform and defend the church of the fatherland.”<sup>6</sup> For Schultén and his Swedish contemporaries, the bicentenary was thus a “pious recollection” of the restoration of divine grace and political order.<sup>7</sup>

4 Cf. Aurelius: Luther, p. 87.

5 Aurelius: Luther, p. 88.

6 Carolus Schultén: [...] Jubilaeum Festum [...]. Lund 1721, fol. A2r. Cf. Aurelius: Luther, pp. 89f.

7 Schultén: Festum, fol. B1r.