CHAPTER 3

Lewi Pethrus’ Ecclesiological Thought 1911–1933: The Church as the Spiritual Community

3.1 Contextual Narrative

At the turn of the 20th century, Sweden was a country in rapid upward mobility. The nation went from being an agricultural society in the middle of the 19th century to a modern industrial state before the outbreak of World War I.1 The increase of wealth that the steel and wood industries generated, combined with the modernisation of farms and an improved infrastructure, encouraged urbanisation of unprecedented proportions.2 Unfortunately, the hope of a better life in the city did not materialise for many people. The modernisation of the industry rendered their services redundant. Rather than trying to fulfil their hopes in Sweden, a significant proportion of the population set their hopes on a better life in America. More than a million people left the Swedish shores from 1870 to 1915. The modernisation of society brought an increase of wealth for the privileged, but it also contributed to stratification between the employers and the employees. Exploitation of the labour force was common; poor working conditions were rampant; health care was inadequate; and the rights of workers were almost non-existent. The situation of the workers led to the establishment of labour unions that insisted on social reforms. Although changes were slow, the new social relationships between employers and employees that developed after the 1880s, and the ‘introduction of political, administrative, and legal institutions,’ laid the foundation for the Swedish welfare system in the middle of the 20th century.3

Pethrus was born on 11 March 1884, right in the midst of these turbulent times. Being raised by parents of the working class, he experienced first-hand the difficulties that accompany the underprivileged. His memoirs describe

how his father unsuccessfully attempted to leave agricultural work for a job in the factories. To overcome the bitterness of failing to acquire a better-paid job he, like so many other workers, sought comfort in alcohol. Even if his father stopped drinking after having being converted, his parents’ financial situation improved very little. The harsh financial realities forced Pethrus to take up his first employment at a shoe factory in Vänersborg at the age of fifteen. Moving from his parents’ home in Västra Tunhem to Vänersborg not only provided insights into the conditions of the working class, but it also coincided with a deep spiritual hunger that brought him to a conversion experience. Time would soon reveal that the pleas of the poor and the spiritual plea of his own heart would leave a permanent imprint on his religious values and change the course of his life. From this time on, ‘loving Christ’ and ‘loving neighbour’ became the source from which the motivation of his actions flowed.

Deciding to resign his job in Vänersborg and move to Norway in the summer of 1900 turned out to be a decisive step in his life. He discovered that Norway was a more conducive context for his newfound passion for Christ and political activity. The services in Fredrikshald provided further impetus to his spiritual life, and a later appointment at another shoe factory in Kristiania (Oslo) in 1901 exposed him to the concerns of the labour unions. As opposed to some Christians in Sweden, who viewed social democracy as ‘anti-Christian,’ he never considered the two as contradictory, but he ‘had an intuitive impression that Christianity and social justice were intimately related.’ Since he considered himself a person of the working class, he actively participated in the political meetings of the Norwegian labour unions. Although his concerns for politics never disappeared, some turn of events directed his path away from politics to ‘the way of the cross and the Pentecostal movement.’ His political activity only significantly resurfaced in 1941.

The years between his move to Norway and the beginning of the Pentecostal movement in 1907 witnessed great changes in Pethrus’ life. His passion for the Lord was recognised by the Baptist pastor Adolf Milde, who allowed him to gain his first ministerial experience by preaching in local Baptist churches in

4 Pethrus, Den anständiga sanningen, 1953, 156.
6 Pethrus, Den anständiga sanningen, 1953, 197–199.
8 Pethrus, Medan du stjärnorna räknar, 1953, 71–75.
9 Pethrus, Ett sagolikt liv, 1976, 37.
10 Pethrus, Den anständiga sanningen, 1953, 288.
12 Pethrus, Den anständiga sanningen, 1953, 289.