

Reconciliation as Vocation: Waldenström's Challenge for Preaching and Congregational Life

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“**A**tonement” is an English word. “*Försoning*,” meaning, “reconciliation,” is the word used in Swedish for the same concept. The emphasis on the word “reconciliation” in the context of Paul Peter Waldenström’s sermon explains our choice of theme for the symposium “Reconciled and Reconciling: P. P. Waldenström’s Atonement Sermon 150 Years Later,” which took place on April 8, 2022.

Atonement does not exist in a theological vacuum, but has a purpose, indeed many purposes. When Christians affirm that God has reconciled us to God through the work of Jesus Christ, it can be easy to neglect that this reconciliation is for something. We are reconciled *for God’s purposes*. The prophet Isaiah speaks of the word of God, saying:

so is my word that goes out from my mouth:

It will not return to me empty,

but will accomplish what I desire

and achieve the purpose for which I sent it.¹

Waldenström, too, preached that reconciliation was for some purpose.² These purposes are not limited to the past. Instead, as this is the living

¹ Isa 55:10–11 (NIV).

² Echoing Isa 55:11, Donald Frisk emphasized that for Waldenström, “God’s love is a dynamic, powerful, untiring, working love.” See chapter 7, “The Work of Jesus Christ,” in Frisk, *Covenant Affirmations: This We Believe* (Chicago: Covenant Press, 1981), 101.

word of God, we may also approach it as such, and ask what does this historical discussion about reconciliation, about atonement, in the nineteenth century have to do with the history and present-day concerns of the Covenant Church or of American Christianity more generally? The believer is to be reconciled to God, but is also to be reconciled to other people, and to be part of the broader reconciliation work ushering in the kingdom of heaven. “Reconciliation” as a theme for this anniversary year can also be an opportunity for Covenanters and Christians broadly to signal an alternate path to the rancor that has plagued society and the church in recent years.

To me, it has always been poignant that the Covenant Church was born in the midst of earnest discussion and debate about the meaning of being reconciled to God and to one another. This is a profound origin story, I think. As a historian and translator of Waldenström’s writings, I will focus on connecting the 1872 sermon with the rest of his works and providing some historical context for understanding his view of reconciliation. To give this discussion some thematic structure, I have chosen to look at Waldenström’s idea of atonement through the lens of Lutheran understandings of vocation and calling. In this lens, the follower of Christ is called to reconciliation in at least four areas of life: to personal relationships, to the congregation, to work, and to society.

Waldenström’s 1872 Sermon on Reconciliation and Ensuing Responses

The Swedish atonement debate (*försöningsstriden*) was set in motion by a sermon that appeared in June of 1872 in a Swedish devotional journal called *Pietisten* (“The Pietist”).³ The editor, Paul Peter Waldenström, had been in the role for four years, but was still finishing a sermon series left to him by his predecessor, Carl Olof Rosenius. When Rosenius died in 1868, he was in the midst of a massive project to write sermons on each of the assigned texts for the church year (“Sermons on the Church of Sweden’s New Texts for the High Mass”). It had been Rosenius’s widow, Agata Rosenius, who extended the invitation to Waldenström to assume the editorship. The journal was privately owned, and the agreement was that Waldenström would work for a stipend until the series was completed, after which he would assume ownership. Though a private enterprise, the journal was a central organ for the revivalists in the Evangelical

³ Karl A. Olsson, *By One Spirit* (Chicago: Covenant Publications, 1962), 672, note 16. Olsson notes that the sermon was printed in two parts in March and June, with the controversial second half appearing in June.

Homeland Foundation or EFS (Evangeliska Fosterlands-Stiftelsen) within the Church of Sweden, the Lutheran state church. Deference to Lutheran doctrine was taken for granted, as the focus within this mission society was on practice.

By the spring of 1872, Waldenström had arrived at the “Sermon for the Twentieth Sunday after Trinity” on Matthew 13:44–46 and chose this occasion to critique the Lutheran definition of the atonement found in the Augsburg Confession.⁴ His interest in the atonement had begun at least two or three years earlier.⁵ While sitting one day in the city park in Umeå in conversation with two other clergymen, Hellman and Genberg, one of them exclaimed, “Think how marvelous it is that God has been reconciled in Christ.” Waldenström famously blurted out, “where is that written”—“Var står *det* skrivet.”⁶ This launched him on an intensive study of scripture, in which he became increasingly confident that the answer was “nowhere.”⁷

The sermon prompted a firestorm of responses—about 200 in all—both affirming and denouncing Waldenström’s views. Perhaps there was some naiveté on his part, but he was aware that this could provoke controversy. Nevertheless, the response was overwhelming, and became painfully personal. He therefore dug in on his position. As Covenant historian Karl A. Olsson explains, the sermon had struck a fault line between low-church, new evangelical Pietists of the Rosenian type, and the more churchly revivalists, for whom it was essential to defend Rosenius’s line of deference to the Lutheran confessions. Whereas Rosenius had demonstrated a kind of biblicist preaching within the guardrails of confessional orthodoxy, Waldenström’s biblicism was not concerned with defending confessions, and increasingly found them deficient.⁸ The atonement debate quickly spiraled out into other questions of ecclesiology and mission. Those who sympathized with Waldenström’s reading, or with his view of scripture more generally, also found that this sidelined

⁴ Olsson treats the atonement controversy and its background in his *By One Spirit*, 108–18.

⁵ Waldenström was lecturing on the topic of the atonement as early as September 1869. See *Med Gud och hans vänskap: Evangeliska Fosterlands-Stiftelsen genom 100 år*, ed. Allan Hofgren (Stockholm: Evangeliska Fosterlands-Stiftelsens Bokförlag, 1956), 103.

⁶ *Paul Peter Waldenströms minnesanteckningar 1838–1875*, ed. Bernhard Nyrén (Stockholm: Svenska Missionsförbundets Förlag, 1928), 269.

⁷ Olsson, *By One Spirit*, 110.

⁸ Olsson, 109.

them within the EFS.⁹

We should pause here to recognize that in 1872, theological disagreements were *not* prompting reconciliation, but in fact, division. There is a cruel irony in reading Waldenström's sermon against this backdrop, since his message was embedded in a sermon about the kingdom of heaven, the parable of the treasure hidden in the field. The highly confessional climate in Sweden in the 1870s, as well as similar denominational exclusivism in the United States, made faithful dissent on *one* point of *one* article in the Augsburg Confession impossible. This was the point: "That Christ was crucified, died, and buried, that He might *reconcile the Father* unto us, and be a sacrifice, not only for original guilt, but also for all the sins of men."¹⁰

Waldenström's correction was this: "that the change, which occurred with the fall, was a change in man alone" and that the reconciliation that was needed for human salvation was "not an act of atonement which appeases God and presents him as being once again gracious but one which removes man's sin and makes him once again righteous."¹¹ Yet, Waldenström's larger argument was that if an honest reading of scripture found a binding, confessional document to be out of sync with scripture, then the Bible should not rank second. In his mind, a preacher preparing a sermon should not defer to a fixed confessional formula from the sixteenth century, but to the source itself, to scripture, *ad fontes*. Even Luther himself would not have read the Bible this way. It is also telling that the slogan, "where is this written," is borrowed from Luther, as the phrase "Var står det skrivet" is straight from the Swedish translation of Luther's catechism. Dissenting Pietists used this rhetorical strategy for centuries to defend themselves against church authorities who accused them of not being Lutheran enough. The Pietist response was often to explain that they were modeling themselves on what *Luther* said and did.¹²

Waldenström's approach, furthermore, was a rationalist's line of reasoning. He has taken a Rosenian idea to its logical consequence. If God's nature remains constant, and if God is love, then for God to become anything other than love would be to change God's basic nature.

⁹ Olsson, 115–16.

¹⁰ Augsburg Confession, Article III: "Of the Son of God."

¹¹ Paul Peter Waldenström, "Sermon for the Twentieth Sunday after Trinity," in *Covenant Roots: Sources and Affirmations*, ed. Glenn P. Anderson (Chicago: Covenant Press, 1980), 119–20.

¹² Mark Safstrom, "Defining Lutheranism from the Margins: P. P. Waldenström on Being a 'Good Lutheran' in America," *Swedish-American Historical Quarterly* 63.2–3 (April–July 2012), 112–13.

In this he rests heavily on passages like 2 Cor 5:18–19 (e.g., “God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself”). The notion that Christ would somehow be of another nature than God the Father meant that careless preachers, for instance, might end up presenting sermon illustrations that were illogical or ludicrous, such as that a loving Christ shields sinners from the wrath of an angry God. Hymn writer Oscar Ahnfelt conflicted with Waldenström on exactly this point.¹³ Waldenström thought such preaching was unhealthy and cautioned against the idea that the Father is somehow more “severe” than the Son.

But now Christ is the very image of God’s person, or substance, and hence we know that in God there is no attribute which is not found in the Son. What God loves, the Son loves; what God hates, the Son hates. Where God condemns and is angry, there also the Son condemns and is angry. The Father is not more “severe” than the Son, and the Son is not milder or more gentle than the Father. Perhaps you are amazed at such a saying. But quiet yourself before the word of God. It is no jest, but a divine truth, that “he that seeth the Son seeth the Father” [cf. John 14:9].¹⁴

Covenant scholar Arne Fritzson points out that the new evangelical Pietists had long preferred a view of God that was best reflected by the father of the prodigal son, who rushes out to meet his wayward son.¹⁵ Waldenström also preferred this image and even included it in on the cover of later years of *Pietisten* alongside one of Moses and the bronze serpent. God has done everything. All that the believer can and must do is “look up in faith and live.”¹⁶

¹³ Paul Peter Waldenströms minnesanteckningar, 275, 285.

¹⁴ P. P. Waldenström, *The Reconciliation: Who Was to Be Reconciled? God or Man? Or God and Man? Some Chapters on the Biblical View of the Atonement*, trans. and ed. J. G. Princell (Chicago: John Martenson, 1888), 24.

¹⁵ Arne Fritzson, “En Gud som är god och rättfärdig: Betydelsen av gudsbilderna och de teologiska formerna i Paul Petter Waldenströms teologi om den kristna försoningstanken,” in *Liv och rörelse: Svenska Missionskyrkans historia och identitet* (Stockholm: Verbum, 2007), 361; Donald Frisk makes this same point. See Frisk, *Covenant Affirmations*, 100.

¹⁶ Frisk explains Waldenström’s later clarification of his view in 1875, namely, amending his theory “to indicate that the *purpose* of Christ’s coming into the world was to reconcile the world but that such reconciliation is actualized only where there is response in faith.” Frisk, *Covenant Affirmations*, 101.



Figure 1. Cover of *Pietisten*, November 1902, showing Moses and the bronze serpent and the return of the prodigal son.

However, other theologians did (and continue to) argue that there are good reasons not to blur the attributes of the persons of the Trinity or neglect the objective dimension of the atonement.¹⁷ Others charged that Waldenström's theory potentially eliminated the need for salvation, and so they reaffirmed the satisfaction and substitution metaphors that

¹⁷ Lars Lindberg and Arne Fritzson each point out that in Waldenström's day and afterward, critics have often misunderstood his theory due to a simple confusion of the term "subjective." For Waldenström, subjective means that God is the one who acts in atonement as the agent from beginning to end, rather than the one acted upon as an object of Christ's atoning work. Lindberg explains that when critics like Oloph Bexell or Agne Nordlander have dismissed Waldenström's theory as "subjective," it has been due to mistakenly associating it with the subjective or moral influence theory, or an interiorized, subjective Christianity. See Lars Lindberg, "En strid i försoningens ljus: Waldenström omläst och omvärderad," in *En historia berättas—om missionsförbundare*, ed. Rune W. Dahllén and Valborg Lindgärde (Falköping, Sweden: Kimpese, 2004), 52–56. In responding to John Stott among others, Fritzson argues that Waldenström indeed affirmed that the atonement had an objective significance, namely in that it mattered to God and was necessary in removing the sins of humanity. It was not simply an expression of God's love, to which people must individually respond in faith. Note Fritzson, "En Gud som är god och rättfärdig," 362–65.

he rejected.¹⁸ To such criticisms, Waldenström responded:

I would pose this question in return: On what foundation does that doctrine stand most securely—on the foundation that in Christ's death, God was appeased, or on the foundation that in Christ's death the race of Adam was made righteous? On the former foundation, there can be no higher doctrine built than exemption-from-punishment by faith [straffrihet genom tron]; the latter foundation alone is sufficient to support the doctrine: justification by faith—and that is more, infinitely much more.¹⁹

Since Waldenström's theory challenged the Augsburg Confession, this was a non-starter for the Church of Sweden, as it questioned its very ecclesiology. This was also the case for the North American Lutheran churches founded by Swedes, such as the Augustana Synod. Karl Olsson points out that Lutheran leaders like Tufve Nilsson Hasselquist viewed adherence to the confessions as the only way to unite the low-church Rosenian pietists with the more orthodox Lutherans, no easy task in the American Midwest where denominational structures were young, immature, and in constant flux.²⁰ Waldenström's sermon was denounced by Hasselquist and others in the synod as being "hyperevangelical"

¹⁸ Similar themes appear in more recent discussions among those seeking to distance themselves from satisfaction and substitution theories of atonement. Scot McKnight makes a case that all five of the main metaphors for the atonement should be retained in a holistic perspective, while cautioning against overemphasizing any one theory: "The legal element of [the satisfaction theory] can be easily overcooked, and the theory itself often has been burnt on such theorizing. ... When overly judicialized or reified, penal substitution distorts the fullness of the atonement." See McKnight, *A Community Called Atonement* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 2007), 111, 113. Mark Noll goes further in echoing John Stott's assertion (1986) that not only should the substitution theory be retained, but that it is "the key biblical metaphor for the atonement," and that Aulén's view is inadequate on its own, and can only partly be harmonized with the other two major theories, substitution and moral influence. See Noll, *Jesus Christ and the Life of the Mind* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2011), 68. Tony Jones leans in the opposite direction, underscoring the inherent weakness in the idea that a theory that did not emerge until a millennium after Christ can claim to be central to Christian theology. He instead makes a general case against penal substitutionary atonement theory. See Jones, *Did God Kill Jesus? Searching for Love in History's Most Famous Execution* (New York: HarperOne, 2015), 7.

¹⁹ Translated in Mark Safstrom, *The Swedish Pietists: A Reader: Excerpts from the Writings of Carl Olof Rosenius and Paul Peter Waldenström* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2015), 90–91 (from *I ingen annan är frälsning*, 1877).

²⁰ Olsson, *By One Spirit*, 103–05, 194–95.

[*hyperevangelisk*]. The term refers to the Waldenströmians' aspiration to form congregations that were comprised of "only believers," and to their skepticism of any binding confessions that might prevent these congregation from being able to accommodate "all believers."²¹ In this latter sense, even the Rosenian Pietists had been accused of overemphasized grace at the expense of the law.²² The Waldenströmians were depicted as ravenous grasshoppers gnawing, buzzing, and eating everything in sight, a reference to the damage left behind in Augustana congregations that split over this teaching.²³ Waldenström was also accused of being antinomian or Socinian.²⁴



Figure 2. Amy Moberg and Lina Sandell-Berg, from B. Wadström's *Ur minnet och dagboken*, vol I, 159, vol II, 200.

Many revivalists in the EFS such as Amy Moberg and Linda Sandell, found Waldenström's argument scandalous because of its apparent combative spirit. It seemed counter-productive and unnecessary to argue

²¹ Safstrom, "Defining Lutheranism from the Margins," 119–20.

²² Gunnar Westin, *George Scott och hans verksamhet i Sverige* (Stockholm: Svenska Kyrkans Diakonistyrelsens Bokförlag, 1929), 36.

²³ L. O. Hultgren of Jamestown, New York, wrote to T. N. Hasselquist on 20 February 1878: "The Waldenstromians are worse than grasshoppers in Minnesota and Kansas, genuine insects, they buzz, bite, eat, and gnaw wherever they advance." Quoted in O. Fritiof Ander, *T. N. Hasselquist: The Career and Influence of a Swedish-American Clergyman, Journalist and Educator* (Rock Island, IL: Augustana Historical Society, 1931), 166.

²⁴ Karl A. Olsson, "Paul Peter Waldenström and Augustana," in *The Swedish Immigrant Community in Transition: Essays in Honor of Dr. Conrad Bergendoff*, ed. J. Iverne Dowie and Ernest Espelie (Rock Island, IL: Augustana Historical Society, 1963), 111, 115.

a point, which was not in the spirit of Rosenius. Why pick an unnecessary fight that will complicate or disrupt ministry? Amy Moberg had been Rosenius's assistant, and a trusted confidante of Waldenström's. She cautioned him beforehand not to print the sermon. She later sympathized with his viewpoint and lost her job at another EFS-affiliated newspaper.²⁵ Waldenström explained himself to critics, friends, and former friends alike by pointing out that, though Rosenius hadn't challenged the confession, it was from Rosenius that he had gotten these ideas. He didn't think he was departing from Rosenius in spirit, only in deference to the confession. Waldenström writes:

“God so loved the world.” And here we must stop, for to ask what the foundation is for God's love, this is to ask, why God is God. “God loved, because he loved, and therefore he gave his Son,” says Rosenius, quite to the point.”²⁶

From the other perspective, the fierce reaction, or overreaction, of people in positions of power in the Church of Sweden, the EFS, and the Augustana Synod seemed to validate for many people Waldenström's larger and more important claim that the Augsburg Confession shouldn't be weighed more heavily than scripture. Why was *defending* the Confession a fight worth picking if it will complicate or disrupt ministry and, more importantly, hurt individuals who are standing by their consciences?



J. G. PRINCELL

Johan Gustav Princell, from *Missionsförbundets minneskrift 1885–1910*, 20.

²⁵ Olsson, *By One Spirit*, 116.

²⁶ Translated in Safstrom, *The Swedish Pietists*, 87 (from *I ingen annan är frälsning*, 1877).

Johan Gustav Princell is emblematic of this side of the atonement debate. Princell had been a clergyman in the Augustana Synod but was defrocked in 1878 for aligning with Waldenström. By 1875, the synod adhered to the so-called Galesburg Rule: “Lutheran pulpits for Lutheran ministers only, and Lutheran altars for Lutheran communicants only.” There was no space for dissent on the Augsburg Confession in the 1870s. Princell’s experience with what he saw as overreach of church authority led him to be critical of denominations altogether, and he eventually became a leader for the Evangelical Free Church.²⁷

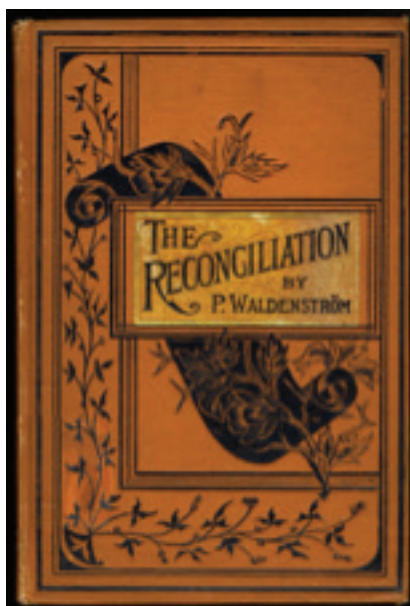


Figure 3. Cover to Princell’s translation of *The Reconciliation*, 1888.

It was also Princell who translated Waldenström’s writings into English. The 1872 sermon was the catalyst for the atonement debate, but Waldenström expanded his ideas in a couple of versions in 1873

²⁷ Josephine Princell, *J. G. Princells levnadsminnen: på uppmaning av Svenska Evangeliska Frikyrkan samlade och utgivna* (Chicago: Martenson, 1916), 41. Princell’s experiences with the Augustana Synod and his defense of Waldenström’s theory, as well as his visit with Waldenström in Gävle, are recounted especially on pages 30–31, 38–49, 89–90. For the development of the Galesburg Rule, see also Mark Granquist, *Lutherans in America: A New History* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2015), 181.

in *Om försoningens betydelse* (“On the Meaning of the Atonement”).²⁸ Princell translated and published this as *The Reconciliation* in 1888.²⁹ That same year, Princell also translated Waldenström’s *The Blood of Jesus* (*Jesu blod*), and *The Lord Is Right* (*Herren är främ*), which also expanded on the atonement.³⁰ When Yale University awarded Waldenström an honorary doctorate in 1889, these were the texts available for English-speakers to evaluate his ideas. This honor came while Waldenström was touring the United States. He would later visit Yale again in 1901 as a guest at its bicentennial. Princell’s translations helped garner particular interest among Congregationalists and make Waldenström’s name known. The Chicago newspapers even heralded Waldenström with the grandiose title “The Martin Luther of Sweden,” when he visited, which gives some sense of how he was viewed at the apex of his international influence.³¹



Figure 4. Waldenström in academic regalia at Yale, 1901, from *Nya färder*, 48.

²⁸ Waldenström, *Om försoningens betydelse* (Stockholm: Pietisten och A. L. Normans Förlagsexpedition, 1873). Karl A. Olsson explains that the printing of 3,000 copies of this booklet in Chicago represents a wide interest, both among supporters as well as critics. See Olsson, “Paul Peter Waldenström and Augustana,” 115.

²⁹ P. P. Waldenström, *The Reconciliation: Who Was to Be Reconciled? God or Man? Or God and Man? Some Chapters on the Biblical View of the Atonement* (Chicago: John Martenson, 1888).

³⁰ Josephine Princell, *J. G. Princells levnadsminnen*, 173; P. P. Waldenström, *The Blood of Jesus: What Is Its Significance? Meditations on All the New Testament Passages in Which the Expression Occurs* (Chicago: John Martenson, 1888); P. P. Waldenström, *The Lord Is Right: Meditations on the Twenty-Fifth Psalm in the Psalter of King David* (Chicago: John Martenson, 1889).

³¹ Mark Safstrom, *The Religious Origins of Democratic Pluralism: Paul Peter Waldenström and the Politics of the Swedish Awakening 1868–1917* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick 2016), 6–7.

Though academic interest in Waldenström's ideas had a brief moment in the sun, this quickly subsided as the twentieth century dawned. By the 1930s, for instance, when another Swede, Gustaf Aulén, published his treatment on the atonement, *Christus Victor*, Waldenström's work was already marginal.³² Even in the Covenant Church in the United States, Mission Covenant president C. V. Bowman would explain later that while most Covenanters certainly tended to support Waldenström's idea, it was by no means universally accepted.³³ Nevertheless, although Waldenström himself is not widely remembered, the theory he advanced has indeed had a long-lasting impact in both contexts.³⁴

Waldenström's View of the Atonement and His Broader Theology

Waldenström continued to regularly apply his atonement ideas to his overall pastoral and congregational concerns, and he weaves this leitmotif throughout the rest of his many devotional writings. Josephine Princell, quoting her husband, comically summed up Waldenström's preaching legacy by saying, "His instrument has only one or two strings, but those strings he plays masterfully."³⁵ This might be a bit reductive, but it rings true that the atonement was a favorite theme that he expounded regularly. In order to understand the significance of his view, we need to go beyond

³² Gustaf Aulén does not mention Waldenström in *Christus Victor*, but in several places does invoke other Pietists and Pietism generally as perpetuating Luther's rediscovery of the classical idea of atonement, particularly in the imagery used in their hymnody and devotional writings. Note Gustaf Aulén, *Christus Victor: An Historical Study of the Three Main Types of the Idea of Atonement*, trans. A. G. Hebert (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2003), 98, 134, 144. Lars Lindberg also points out that in 1977, on the eve of the centennial for the Mission Covenant Church in Sweden, Aulén wrote the following appraisal of Waldenström's theory in the journal *Tro och liv*: "My critique [of the objective satisfaction theory] certainly proceeded in a different manner than the one that prompted the origin of the Mission Covenant. But the very fact that both the Mission Covenant's and my own critique concerned the unbiblical idea that God could have been reconciled instead of that he, according to the Bible, is the one who in Christ reconciled the world with himself (2 Cor 5:19)—this common front naturally gave me a special interest in and understanding for, appreciation of, and sense of affinity with the Mission Covenant. I have also been glad about the fact that this outlook of mine has found a certain resonance there." Lindberg, "En strid i försoningens ljus," 61.

³³ C. V. Bowman, *The Mission Covenant of America* (Chicago: Covenant Book Concern, 1925), 93–99.

³⁴ Lars Lindberg suggests that Aulén's *Christus Victor* was as well received as it was in Sweden *because* it had already been preceded by the popular movement led by Waldenström, and furthermore, that virtually no one in Sweden today argues for the Anselmian view, pointing to a far-reaching residual legacy—"almost everyone seems to be a Waldenströmian." Lindberg, "En strid i försoningens ljus," 60.

³⁵ Josephine Princell, *J. G. Princells levnadsminnen*, 89–90.

the 1872 sermon, and look at the rest of his writing and career.

Though atonement was a rally cry for the Missions Friends, this was soon eclipsed by other questions, such as the significance of Holy Communion and congregational polity. These were far more important to the discussions in 1876 through 1878 that led to the founding of the Mission Covenant in Sweden, and later, to the founding of the Covenant Church in North America.³⁶ For Waldenström, the atonement was never isolated from ecclesiology and missiology, and neither was it individualistic in nature. Below are some examples of how Waldenström's ideas about the atonement are connected with his broader concerns for preaching and congregational life.

I have chosen the Lutheran concept of vocation as a framework to organize my analysis. Vocation is the idea that each Christian has a calling from God, or more specifically, multiple spheres into which they are called. Luther had revolutionized the meaning of Christian vocation. In the Middle Ages, to have a vocation was very specific and meant to be called to a holy order as a priest, monk, or nun. Ordinary laypeople did not have vocations in this sense. Luther, by contrast, held that each person had a vocation, thereby elevating the daily lives and work of laypeople. Working as a cobbler was now holy work and a calling. Managing a household was a calling. Breastfeeding a baby and changing diapers was a calling. There was a calling to the family and personal relationships, to one's work, to the church, and to the state.³⁷ The calling of a Christian was multidirectional. These are the four areas that I have chosen to use when looking at Waldenström's view of reconciliation. Updating the language for today, one can substitute the "state" for "society," and "family" can be broadened to "interpersonal relationships." For Waldenström, the congregation was nothing more than the local manifestation of the global church.

It mattered for Waldenström that preaching on the atonement accurately emphasize that love is the motive for both God the Father and Jesus Christ. Love is the motivating reason for reconciliation, as well as the goal of all preaching. Preaching should move human beings to love and to reconciliation. As he writes:

A higher degree of love cannot be conceived of than this,
that God gives his only begotten Son. But with such a love

³⁶ Olsson, *By One Spirit*, 87–97.

³⁷ Jason Mahn, "Introduction," in *Radical Lutherans/Lutheran Radicals* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2017), 18.

he has loved Cain as well as the virgin Mary, Judas as well as John, Demas as well as Paul. ...he has given Christ for the ungodly just as well as for the godly; and this he has done, not as a help for himself to love them, but that he might help them out of sin, and help them to true love.³⁸

Waldenström explains that God's motives for reconciliation proceed out of love, precisely because the purpose of God's reconciliation is that human beings are to learn to love. If wrath were the emphasis, how exactly does this show humans how to love? God models love, so that humans will love.

In writing about reconciliation, Waldenström uses the language that the Christian is called to be an ambassador:

An ambassador has nothing else to do than to deliver the words of his sender to him whom they concern. ...Now, such was the position of the apostles in their relation to God. ...they were only to deliver to all peoples, both to Jews and to Gentiles, plainly and artlessly the word of God—not to explain or maintain it, but only to proclaim it. It is this that gives their preaching such an extraordinary weight.³⁹

Exactly how Waldenström meant that preaching could be done “artlessly” is vague, yet one important aspect of this is certainly to liberate preaching from the constraints of confessional documents. This would also liberate preachers from being bound to use inherited rhetorical tropes and illustrations that they found to be extra-biblical, and which especially may result in harmful preaching.

In his discussion of how to preach about reconciliation, Waldenström draws an illustration from the prophet Jonah. Jonah's disappointment over the fact that God did not show his wrath to the people of Nineveh exemplifies for Waldenström how the preacher is called to preach but has no control over how the preached word will be received. How the hearer will respond is up to them. More important, the preacher does not know the mind of God. Jonah is disappointed because God did not show God's wrath, which Jonah hoped God would. Waldenström writes:

³⁸ Waldenström, *The Reconciliation*, 13.

³⁹ Waldenström, 110.

The ways and judgments of God are always right. It is our heart that is wrong. ...In Jonah you see the thoughts of man; and as the grace of God came in conflict with them, Jonah became so angry that he wished to die. O how foolish it is to be provoked at God's abounding grace! But such is the darkness of nature. However, God stood by his right, reproved the prophet, judged according to truth, and let Nineveh stand. Think what a blessed lesson. Let us open our hearts fully for the inexpressible mercy of God.⁴⁰

Preaching reconciliation that originates in the *mercy of God*, rather than emphasizing wrath, is at the center of how Waldenström understood both the method and purpose of preaching.

Similarly, Waldenström uses the pattern of God's reconciliation as the model for interpersonal reconciliation. This he grounds in Matthew 5:24, in the context of the Sermon on the Mount, just following the Beatitudes. He writes:

What does it mean for any one to be reconciled to his brother? Does it mean to pacify, to appease, or conciliate, his brother? Not at all. Because it may be so that the brother does not need to be appeased, or conciliated; it may be that his mind and loving relation have not at all been disturbed. But still it is necessary for him who has wronged him to go and be reconciled to him. ...the Lord did not say: "Go, and reconcile thy brother." But this he said, "Go, and be thou reconciled to thy brother."⁴¹

As translator, Princell has pointed out that the word used for "reconcile" is a reflexive verb—if it does not have an object, then it must have a reflexive pronoun: "att försona sig" is to allow oneself to be reconciled.⁴² Just as Waldenström urges us not to think of God as needing to be "appeased," we should also not think of justice between people as being based in appeasing wrath.⁴³ Vengeance or revenge is not what humans are called to, and neither is this any part of God's justice. God's righteousness is his love. "Righteousness is no antithesis to love, no limitation of love, no restraint or check on love."⁴⁴

⁴⁰ Waldenström, 33–34.

⁴¹ Waldenström, 107.

⁴² Waldenström, 107.

⁴³ Waldenström, 25.

⁴⁴ Waldenström, 19.

Waldenström explains that what it means to be an ambassador is to speak a word of reconciliation, not in Christ's place (vicariously), but for the sake of Christ (as his ambassador), because he told us to do it. The assumption is not that the brother needs to be appeased, or that the brother has wrath in his heart that can be cancelled. What happens in the heart of the wronged brother is not in the control of the one seeking to be reconciled. Loving enemies (as in Matt 5:44-48) is the highest example God's righteousness, explains Waldenström:

To love enemies is therefore a likeness of God's righteousness. Imagine two men who have been offended. One of them says: "My righteousness, or sense of justice, is violated or offended, and requires satisfaction if I am to show any favor towards him who offended me." But the other one, so far from demanding any satisfaction, sacrifices all that he has, that he may restore and reconcile the offender to himself.⁴⁵

Waldenström also references the Good Samaritan in this context (Luke 10:25-37). It is in looking at Christ that we understand who God is. Christ models the restorative reconciliation of the Samaritan, which is what we are supposed to do in turn.

From interpersonal relationships, Waldenström expands and applies this rationale to reconciling differences within the congregation. A congregation, he thought, should have "room for all who believe in Christ" and "not exclude any of the members of the body of Christ," only the unbelievers. Waldenström responds preemptively to claims that this view is impossible, by saying:

First and foremost, there is no congregation which does not contain a number of different opinions in sway. But these different opinions need not prevent them from staying together. ...There have existed and do exist congregations, which are built solely on the grounds that their members are believers in Christ. All of the apostolic congregations were such. And they demonstrated themselves capable of staying together, despite many different opinions. "Well then, how long?" you say. Answer: as long as love prevails within them. "But what about after that?" Well, when the love has grown cold,

⁴⁵ Waldenström, 17.

then the congregation is dead and what help would it be to attempt, with the aid of confessional documents, to try to hold the corpse together?⁴⁶

Waldenström held that a congregation that does not make room for everyone who is in Christ is sectarian. His vision for the congregation was as a place where differences of opinion can be reconciled precisely because it is held together not by confessional documents, but by common faith placed in Christ, the Reconciler.

Donald Frisk explained that the faith these revivalists emphasized was as reliance and trust (*fiducia*), rather than intellectual assent (*assensus*). When Waldenström speaks of a faith that will hold the congregation together, this is also what he means.⁴⁷ Making room for a diversity of opinions in peripheral matters of biblical interpretation became an aspirational principle of the Covenant Church. Waldenström explains further:

Such a heartfelt reliance on Jesus can exist in the midst of very poor and very incorrect knowledge. ...It is such a reliance that we find among all of those people in the New Testament who are called believers, as we shall soon see. If one were to have tested them according to our catechisms and spiritual textbooks, then they would surely not have performed well. ...See, in this way when you hold fast to and rely upon Jesus with all your heart, then you have a proper faith in him, and whether you are Lutheran, Reformed, Catholic, or whatever else, then you are yet a Christian.⁴⁸

Despite the high anti-Catholic sentiment of the period, it is remarkable that Waldenström includes “Catholic” in his congregational view. Any Christian, even a Catholic, could find a place in his ideal congregational model. This was an ecumenical vision, and he frequently urges Christians to “lower the walls” between different Christian traditions and communions.

Regarding a Christian’s calling to their work, Waldenström also connects this to the Sermon on the Mount, as he explains what it means to be salt and light:

⁴⁶ Translated in Mark Safstrom, *The Swedish Pietists*, 107 (from *Den Kristna församlingen*, 1899).

⁴⁷ Frisk, *Covenant Affirmations*, 100.

⁴⁸ Translated in Safstrom, *The Swedish Pietists*, 188-90 (from *Guds eviga frälsningsråd*, 1891).

This is how the Lord intends for the believers to be light in the world. They may be greater or lesser lights, they might stand in the market square, in the streets or inside a room, they may shine by the beds of the sick and the poor, or in some other place—each and every one of them is to shine with the light one has, until that point when their light has burned down or the master of the house has blown it out.⁴⁹

In regard to the analogy of what it means to be “salt,” Waldenström chooses to emphasize how salt can sting. When Waldenström compares John the Baptist to Herod, and sets John Wycliff, Jan Huss, Peter Waldo, and Martin Luther in opposition to the kingdoms of this world, he explains that in delivering their prophetic critiques they were “stinging in the wounds” of the temporal and religious authorities. And it was for their prophetic voice that they suffered.⁵⁰ Being salt and light is the calling to Christians to transform the context of their daily lives, and to sanctify their work, wherever they have been placed. The phrase he uses—“wherever we have been placed”—can be understood in a nineteenth-century Swedish social context in which there is still a lack of upward mobility for most people. There was not usually much agency in any modern sense. So, whatever one’s context, wherever one has been placed, the Christian is to embody the Sermon on the Mount in their work.

As members of Christ’s kingdom, Christians are called to the work of reconciliation between nations. Law and order in the kingdoms of this world is based in wrath, that is, the force of weapon and the subjugation of peoples.⁵¹ Christ’s kingdom is diametrically opposed to this, as Christ offers human society notions of justice that are not based in wrath or external force, but which proceed from God’s love. Referencing Gal 3:28, in which the distinction between Jew and Greek is removed, Waldenström sees the congregation as the only conceivable way of uniting all nations into one. He writes:

In the Christian congregation, on the other hand, a

⁴⁹ Translated in Safstrom, *The Swedish Pietists*, 218 (from *Samlade predikningar II*, 1902).

⁵⁰ Rebekah Eklund, *The Beatitudes through the Ages* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2021), 263. Eklund connects Waldenström’s sermon on “salt and light” with the Beatitudes, as well as identifying this within the context of a prophetic protest of empire.

⁵¹ Translated in Safstrom, *The Swedish Pietists*, 108 (cf. “Sermon for the Twentieth Sunday After Trinity,” 116–17).

melting together is supposed to happen, in which all the differences of class and nation are supposed to disappear. Even if it goes slowly, it happens nonetheless—and it is surely happening. This is not only a matter of a superficial unification, but a true melting together, and even now one can already start to see the faint beginnings of this. For wherever on earth believers meet together, they feel themselves drawn together as brothers and sisters. This is God's love in Christ Jesus, which makes them soft and melts away that which previously held them at a distance from one another.⁵²

Waldenström's references here to "melting together" bear some resemblance to the melting pot ideologies that would develop about this same time. Yet the melting pot is something that he seems to reject elsewhere in his commentary on Swedish immigration. Rather, this imagery can be read as his attempt to radically interpret Gal 3:28, particularly in "slaying the enmity" between peoples. This imagery expresses what it could mean for congregational members to truly become bonded together in the work of reconciling nations.

Activism is also one of the hallmarks of historical evangelical movements, as historian David Bebbington has defined them, and this was certainly a hallmark of nineteenth century Swedish Pietism. There were many Mission Covenanters who felt a calling into the political arena, and a remarkable number of them became members of the Swedish parliament. Waldenström himself served in the Riksdag from 1884 to 1905. Chief among his political concerns were issues related to the temperance movement, democratizing representation, alleviating poverty, stemming emigration through Liberal strategies (rather than Socialist ones), and separating the Church of Sweden from the state.⁵³

Waldenström tended to keep his religious writings separate from his commentary on politics and society. However, in his published travel accounts from his tours of North America, he shares frequent critical commentary on race relations in the United States. For instance, he expresses his bewilderment at racially segregated schools, theatres, restaurants, and train cars, quoting reports from Swedish-American newspapers. He found the phenomenon of lynching particularly

⁵² Translated in Safstrom, *The Swedish Pietists*, 108 (from *Davids Psalmer med utläggning*, 1904).

⁵³ Safstrom, *The Religious Origins of Democratic Pluralism*.

abhorrent and a miscarriage of justice, explains to his readers that the breaking of treaties with Native Americans was duplicitous on the part of the American government, and makes the case that the Chinese Exclusion Act, which had recently gone into effect, represented a double standard. He includes this litany of examples of American hypocrisy as part of an effort to convince Swedish immigrants to maintain a critical view of their new homeland.⁵⁴ At the end of one chapter of his 1890 travel account, after listing such critiques, he even concludes with this ominous picture of God's judgment:

As I have said before and will say again: America has certain good things to teach us. ...But the acknowledgment of all of this must nevertheless not make the objective observer blind to all of the social injustices that are allowed to exist in the same country, and which threaten the health of the union with perils that once led a prominent American statesman to exclaim: "I tremble for my country, when I reflect that God is just."⁵⁵

I am struck by his choice of quoting Thomas Jefferson's words here, and I think it is telling that Waldenström's rejection of references to God's wrath in preaching does not at all seem to mean a rejection of the notion of God's judgment as being severe. The gravity of the social injustices he critiques in the United States is not *lessened* by the fact that God's justice originates in his love, rather than his wrath. In following Waldenström's reasoning, if the people of Nineveh can heed the words of the prophet and allow themselves to be reconciled, then perhaps there is hope for the people of the United States to do the same.

Conclusion

In conclusion, these are just some examples of the ways I have found Waldenström's atonement ideas throughout his devotional writings and social commentary. Whatever limitations there may be in Waldenström's idea of the atonement on a theoretical level, I would say that the practical application of his ideas for preaching and congregational life demonstrate great potential to connect with contemporary interests in restorative justice, among other concerns. Waldenström himself emphasized that our ideas about the atonement—what we believe—are secondary to the one

⁵⁴ Waldenström, *Genom Norra Amerikas Förenta Stater* (Stockholm: Pietistens Expedition, 1890), 284–292.

⁵⁵ Waldenström, 291–92. Translation by the author.

in whom we place our faith.⁵⁶ His challenge was to encourage preachers to present their congregations with a picture of a God that is worthy of our trust, a reconciling God, whose reconciliation models the love that God expects from us. I will close with these words from Waldenström:

But his word does not give you a reconciliation to believe in, but it gives you a reconciler, a living person, the Son of God, in whom you can believe, upon whom you can rely with full confidence of heart, and to whom you can wholly surrender yourself.⁵⁷

⁵⁶ Frisk sums up his assessment thusly: “Waldenström’s doctrine served as a corrective to the overemphasis on the penal and forensic dimensions in the prevailing doctrine of his day, but not even the most ardent Waldenströmiens would contend that their hero spoke the final word on atonement. But he did direct attention to the organic unity of the incarnation, the death on the cross, and the resurrection in the work of atonement and also highlighted the necessity of subjective involvement in the atonement which has its basis in an objective historical act.” Frisk, *Covenant Affirmations*, 104.

⁵⁷ Waldenström, *The Reconciliation*, 108.