



Where Is It Written?

Understanding
the cross and the
church's ministry
of love

Michelle Clifton-Soderstrom

Perhaps the most well-known Covenant adage is Paul Peter Waldenström's question, "Where is it written?" The question has served as the criteria for doctrine in the Covenant Church and originally emerged as a response to the comment, "How wonderful it is that God is reconciled!"

At face value, this comment seems innocuous—too cursory to raise flags or warrant much response. Furthermore, the theology behind the statement was acceptable, representing the idea that Jesus's death appeased an angry God. Popular still today, this view—called penal substitution—suggests that humans have accrued a debt of sin so immense that only God himself can pay it. So, God sends Jesus Christ who serves our sentence for crimes against God and humanity, substituting his own death on the cross for a death that was rightly ours.

While it was common parlance

for both clergy and laity to speak of an angry God as being reconciled through Christ's death, Waldenström (1838-1917) was not convinced of the scriptural basis for this view of atonement. Originally referring to "at-onement," the doctrine of the atonement is that area of theology that talks about restoring broken relationships with God. Theologies of the atonement ask such questions as: How is reconciliation with God achieved? How does God's saving action in Christ restore

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us to covenant relationship? How does God work in Christ to save sinners? Amidst these questions, the doctrine of the atonement seeks to understand the cross and death of Christ in light of a good Father, a sinless Son, and the church's ministry of love.

As a pastor and scholar, Waldenström was not persuaded that the penal substitution view answered such questions in a way that represented God, Jesus Christ, and humanity as revealed in Scripture. As a result, he launched a

the picture of God as cruel, it also was articulated in terms of human legal systems. Most importantly, Waldenström thought the view of penal substitution was absent from the biblical account, so he took up a study of Scripture.

Waldenström summed his study of the atonement in the following five theses:

1) The fall of humanity into sin occasioned no change in the disposition of God.

2) It was neither God's wrath nor

the function of expressing gratitude and for reconciliation.

In terms of reconciliation, the Old Testament makes clear that it is the blood, or source of life, that effects atonement rather than the actual death of the sacrificed animal. In fact on the Day of Atonement, the laying on of hands as an act of confession occurred not on the animal that was to be killed but on the goat that was to be kept alive (Leviticus 16:20-23). The live goat bears on itself all the sins of

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two-year Bible study that left us with not only a good denominational slogan but a biblical account of the atonement that Covenanters continue to hold dear.

What did Waldenström say?

At the time Waldenström took up his study of Scripture, two important influences were in play: the renewal movements and the view of penal substitution. The renewal movements in Sweden (which eventually gave birth to the Covenant Church) experienced their faith in terms of a heavenly Father who moved by love and who would do all that was necessary to reconcile himself and humanity. The story of the prodigal son was a cherished text, and these movements emphasized the father, not the son, as the central character in the story.

The faith experience of these groups set the stage for Waldenström to question the view of penal substitution, which assumes that humans owe a debt for their sin. Because we are incapable of paying such a debt, we are charged with a crime punishable by death and Jesus Christ takes our place from there. Waldenström considered the idea that God needed to be repaid or appeased a heathen one because it not only painted

vindictiveness toward us after the fall that blocked the way of salvation.

3) The change brought about by our fall into sin occurred only in humanity, in the sense that we became sinful and therefore separated from God.

4) We therefore needed reconciliation but not for the purpose of appeasing God's wrath in order to render God merciful; rather to blot out and take away our sin so as to render us righteous again.

5) Jesus Christ accomplished this reconciliation.

From Waldenström's study of Scripture, two distinctive emphases emerged: 1) the atonement is to blot out sin, or to sanctify sinners from their sins, and 2) the atonement is the reconciliation of sinners to God.

First, Scripture teaches that Christ's death was an atoning sacrifice. Nowhere, according to Waldenström, does Scripture say that God's justice demands punishment for sin to be forgiven. In fact, payment at all for the debt of sin is foreign to Scripture. The debt of sin can be *forgiven*, but it cannot be *repaid*. Further, the idea that Christ had to be punished for us, in our stead, had no biblical basis, according to Waldenström. Sacrifice, as it was practiced in the Old Testament, had both

the people of Israel and is in the end set free in the wilderness. Importantly, Waldenström notes that the atoning work is not explicitly linked to suffering and death but to the life that the blood represents.

In the New Testament, Christ's atoning sacrifice takes the character of the priestly office. The blood of Jesus as High Priest, as John 1 says, cleanses and purifies us from all sin. Hebrews 9-10 brings us further into the priestly reality of the blood of Christ, for it is Christ's blood—in contrast to that of goats and bulls—that cleanses us. This perfect sacrificial blood—which has the power to forgive—is offered by Christ himself. The writer of Hebrews thus declares, "How much more will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself without blemish to God, purify our conscience from the dead works to worship the living God!" (Hebrews 9:14). For this reason, it follows that Christ is the mediator of the new covenant, and the shedding of his blood serves not as payment for our debt but rather as the forgiveness of our sins.

The atoning sacrifice of Christ leads to Waldenström's second emphasis, namely that the work of Christ reconciles humanity to God and not vice

versa. Waldenström rejected any notion that God's wrath was appeased in the death of Christ, and, further, that Jesus was a substitution who stood in as a shield against God or "a lightning rod for his wrath." Waldenström's study of Scripture concluded that no change took place in God's disposition and, therefore, that humanity, not God, was reconciled through Christ's death on the cross.

The striking element in this conclusion is the depth of God's love for humanity. Such a love is neither improved nor diminished because it is already perfect. First John 3:16 says that we know God's love because Jesus laid down his life for us. We are able to perceive the depth of God's love because Christ's death reconciles us—it changes us so that we may receive it, precisely through the power and depth of God's forgiving love. Such a love does not need to be restored because it was never lost, and this is great cause for celebration.

Why does this matter for Covenanters?

Waldenström's vision of God was not only scriptural; it also found its way into the hearts and faith of the early revival of the Covenant. His study showed a God who directs his love toward restoring sinners to a state in which they can perceive and receive the gift of God's love. It reveals a God intent on bringing sinners back to himself and a story that works to transform people of faith. Waldenström exclaims, "Oh! How dear and precious to your heart you will find God to be when you thus behold him in Christ. Because in Christ you have the true manifestation of him."

Jesus's ministry was not a message of punishment and wrath; rather, his message was one of friendship and love. If we are to understand God's atoning work within the priestly office of Christ, it radically shifts the understanding of the cross as punishment to an understanding of the cross as a gift

to the sinner that shows God's love for us in spite of sin. The cross as a gift just might allow us to see the pain and death around us without completely turning inward—without destroying ourselves in the process. And it is precisely this—the strength to look around and find Christ in our suffering brothers and sisters—that empowers us to participate in Christ's mission on earth. Waldenström reminds us that the highest aim of all that the church says and does is the glorification of Christ. This should both relieve us and excite us.

P. P. Waldenström's view of the atonement has shaped the theological trajectory of the Evangelical Covenant Church. "Where is it written?" which translated more accurately means "What do the Scriptures say?" reveals characteristics at the heart of the Covenant beyond simply the question of God's atoning work in the world. We witness faith seeking understanding in the Gospel, we see the affirmation of the centrality of Scripture through study and preaching, and we find that the Covenant is not, in fact, non-doctrinal; to the contrary, Covenanters want to make claims about God. We want to know that what we say about God and God's relationship to us matters deeply—even amidst areas of disagreement. And perhaps most importantly, we affirm that conversation about God should in the end be reconciling—not alienating. Waldenström's work on the doctrine of the atonement demonstrates the invaluable nature of engaging theology as a church and uncovers a heritage that is deeply invested in the study of the word.

A plaque in Bethlehem Church in Gävle, Sweden, reads of Waldenström: "He gave our people a purer picture of God." Waldenström devoted two years of studying the Bible on a single question. In doing so, he has shown us a God whose love is steadfast and who beckons us into the story through the work of reconciliation in Jesus Christ. □



Paul Peter Waldenström (1838-1917)

Born in northern Sweden, Waldenström was a key leader in the Swedish free church movement. Unlike Carl Olaf Rosenius, whose preaching and piety strongly influenced Waldenström in his university days, Waldenström eventually advocated for a break from the state church of Sweden. His emphasis on strong biblicism over and above creedal confessions, alongside his vital evangelical piety, led him to join other "Mission Friends" in forming the Swedish Mission Covenant in 1878. Many of these same mission-minded Christians immigrated to the United States, eventually forming the Swedish Evangelical Mission Covenant of America in 1885 (today known as the Evangelical Covenant Church).

Waldenström was ordained in the Lutheran Church of Sweden in 1864 and served as a pastor and educator throughout his life. He earned his doctorate from Uppsala University and later received an honorary doctorate from Yale University. In 1868 he became editor of *Pietisten*, the main publication associated with the Swedish free church movement, when its founder Rosenius died.

Waldenström published his sermon on the atonement in that newspaper in 1872, provoking widespread theological debate. After extended controversy with the authorities, he resigned from the state church. His work with the Mission Friends led to his becoming president of the Swedish Mission Covenant in 1904. He made three trips to the United States, visiting and preaching in local Covenant churches. □