

Reconciled and Reconciling: P. P. Waldenström's Atonement Sermon 150 Years Later

*Hauna Ondrey, associate professor of church history,
North Park Theological Seminary, Chicago, Illinois*

In 1872, Paul Peter Waldenström published within the pages of the Swedish devotional paper *Pietisten*, a sermon that would serve as an important catalyst in the formation of several free church traditions, among them the Swedish Mission Covenant (Svenska Missionsförbundet, now Ekumeniakyrkan) and the Evangelical Covenant Church in North America.

Waldenström had risen to prominence within the Swedish revival movement ten years prior to the publication of that sermon through the serial publication of his popular allegory *Squire Adamsson*.¹ At that time, the revival had coalesced, somewhat uneasily, within the Church of Sweden under the leadership of the enormously popular lay preacher Carl Olof Rosenius.² When Rosenius died suddenly in 1868, Waldenström succeeded him as editor of *Pietisten*, an important organ of the revival movement.

In his “Sermon for the Twentieth Sunday after Trinity,” published four years into his tenure as editor but reflecting the fruit of a two-year inquiry,

¹ P. P. Waldenström, *Squire Adamsson: or, Where Do You Live?: An Allegorical Tale from the Swedish Awakening*, trans. Mark D. Safstrom (Seattle: Pietisten, 2013).

² For an overview of Rosenius’s ministry and its place within the broader Swedish evangelical revival, see Mark Safstrom, “C. O. Rosenius and the Reading Culture of the Mission Friends,” in *Sacred Migrations: Borderlands of Community and Faith*, ed. Hauna Ondrey and Mark Safstrom (Chicago: Swedish-American Historical Society, 2020), 163–80.

Waldenström takes up the question of whether in the atonement God was reconciled in Christ, bringing to that question the cipher that in “all spiritual concerns and questions must be the principal thing: Where is it written?”³

His conclusion is presented in concentrated form in section 11:

Here comes now the kingdom of God in the gospel with another message ... teaching

1. that through our fall no change has entered the heart of God,
2. that because of this it was no severity or anger against humanity which through the fall rose up in the way of our redemption,
3. that the change that occurred with the fall was a change in humanity alone, in that we became sinful and thus fell away from God and from the life which is in him,
4. that for this reason an atonement indeed is needed for humanity's salvation, not an act of atonement that appeases God and presents him as being once again gracious, but one that removes humanity's sin and makes us once again righteous, and
5. that this atonement is in Jesus Christ.⁴

In other words, it is humanity that needs to be reconciled to God, not God to humanity. A foundational commitment for Waldenström here is that God is unchanging: God is always loving toward his creation and always wrathful toward sin, both before the cross and after the cross. God's love for humanity is unfailing. And that divine love is the cause of Christ's sacrifice, not its result.

Waldenström's sermon generated heated debate in published responses by the hundreds and resulted in Waldenström and his supporters being ostracized within the Lutheran church and the revival movement that strained to remain within it.⁵

As important as the theological and soteriological points were and would be—and Waldenström would go on to refine and elaborate these claims in subsequent writings—equally consequential was the challenge

³ P. P. Waldenström, “Sermon for the Twentieth Sunday after Trinity (1872),” in *Covenant Roots: Sources and Affirmations*, 2nd ed., ed. Glenn P. Anderson (Chicago: Covenant Publications, 1999), 102.

⁴ Waldenström, 101–102, slightly altered to match contemporary conventions.

⁵ To read more about the sermon's immediate reception and outcomes, see Karl A. Olsson, *By One Spirit* (Chicago: Covenant Publications, 1962), 105–20.

his conclusion posed to confessional orthodoxy of the national Church of Sweden, namely the Augsburg Confession, the binding standard of orthodoxy in Sweden since 1593. Though Waldenström himself was ordained within the Church of Sweden, his sermon exemplified his broader challenge to that body's confessionalism.

The conflicts that followed from this sermon further strained existing tensions within the revival movement, resulting in a formal division within the Swedish revival and the start of the Swedish Mission Covenant, and playing a key role in the shape the North American Covenant would adopt at its organization in 1885.

In April 2022, a day conference co-sponsored by North Park Theological Seminary and the Commission on Covenant History commemorated the 150th anniversary of this consequential sermon. Three presenters offered fresh insights into the ongoing relevance of Waldenström's sermon and broader legacy: Mark Safstrom, associate professor of Scandinavian studies at Augustana College, presented on "Reconciliation as Vocation: Waldenström's Challenge for Preaching and Congregational Life"; Al Tizon, affiliate professor of missional and global leadership at North Park Theological Seminary and executive pastor of Antioch Covenant Church in Antioch, California, spoke on "Reconciliation as Mission: Practicing God's Love among the Nations"; and Dominique Gilliard, director of racial righteousness and reconciliation for the Evangelical Covenant Church, addressed "The Driving Force behind Divine Justice."

Together, through their presentations, conversation, and engagement with participant questions, Safstrom, Tizon, and Gilliard guided us in considering the relevance of Waldenström's atonement theology for the church's calling today—to restorative justice, global mission, preaching, and congregational life—modeling constructive dialogue both with each other and between the past and present.

Covenanters today receive our historical inheritance no more uncritically than did Waldenström in 1872. Rather, precisely as inheritors of Waldenström's legacy, it is fitting for us to ask again and again, "Where is it written?"—to interrogate the fidelity of our belief in the good news of reconciliation in Christ and the integrity of our witness to this gospel in our own time. It is especially fitting for us to do so as we enter into Holy Week; to think afresh of what was accomplished on the cross and its corresponding call to proclaim and enact the gospel of reconciliation.

The conference was initially held in April 2022, as we journeyed from Good Friday to Easter Sunday, so let us continue, with that spirit, in proclaiming the fullness of the gospel in word and deed (Gilliard): the

great sacrifice, great peace, and great renewal (Tizon), remembering, as Safstrom concludes in the words of Waldenström, that “[God’s] 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.”⁶ May you be inspired by these articles to surrender to the living person of Christ, taking confidence of heart to, in the words of Al Tizon, “wage reconciliation.”

⁶ 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), 108.