

David Nyvall's Enduring Impact on Christian Higher Education

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David Nyvall (1863–1946),¹ founding president of North Park University and Theological Seminary, was an impactful leader. He was purposeful in requiring his church to think innovatively about its philosophy of education. He is relevant today because he established an academic culture that has sustained and extended an immigrant community beyond its first generation. “Full of ambition,” he addressed the student body on North Park’s tenth anniversary (1901) and shared his vision for the young institution:

I would fain make this school a college, yea, a university. . . . I would make this dear community of ours a center of thought and art to the whole civilized world. . . . making this school a center from which radiates to all ends of the world the light of Christ’s truth, and the warmth of Christ’s love, and the

1. For treatments of David Nyvall, other than denominational and institutional histories, see the following: Leland H. Carlson, “David Nyvall—An Appreciation,” *Our Covenant* 17 (1942): 33–43; Zenos E. Hawkinson, “The Pietist Schoolman,” in Philip J. Anderson, ed., *Amicus Dei: Essays on Faith and Friendship* (Chicago, 1988), 96–108; Philip J. Anderson, “David Nyvall and Swedish-American Education,” in Philip J. Anderson and Dag Blanck, eds., *Swedish-American Life in Chicago: Cultural and Urban Aspects of an Immigrant People, 1850–1930* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1991), 327–42; Steven Elde, “The Hearth and the Chimney: Covenant Attitudes Toward Education,” *Covenant Quarterly* 49, no. 2 (1991): 3–43; and Scott E. Erickson, *David Nyvall and the Shape of an Immigrant Church: Ethnic, Denominational, and Educational Priorities among Swedes in America* (Uppsala: Uppsala University, 1996).

beauty of Christ's character. [This would be] a school with a schedule [for] becoming a Christian university."²

I begin with Nyvall's vision for the Christian university because it so clearly demonstrates his leadership, foresight, and call to action at the end of North Park's first decade. By that time Nyvall had already articulated a conceptual framework for the Covenant Church's school: theological training for pastors and a liberal arts curriculum for immigrants who otherwise would not have access to the American academy. Although his desire for a Christian university was not in near-term reach in 1901, it is clear that Nyvall wanted to inspire other leaders to carry his vision forward—a vision that is now a reality and that was made possible by his intentional leadership as North Park president for a quarter-century. As we celebrate North Park University and Theological Seminary at 125, it is important to reflect on Nyvall's philosophy for Christian higher education, the leadership that was required to establish the school, and what he did to ensure its success 125 years beyond its founding.

Nyvall's Early Faith and Intellectual Temperament

David Nyvall's leadership is rooted in his precocious character and complex personal history. It begins in youthful self-discovery in Vall, his rural family homestead near Karlskoga in the south-central county of Värmland, Sweden. David later reflected on mid-nineteenth century life with a brooding, troubled mother and an absent father whose religious fervor took him on frequent preaching trips. He wrote: "Things were as they were because of circumstances and responsibilities. And there was a certain temperament, which for lack of a better term, I choose to call a Karlskoga temperament—half cautious, half modest and shy—when it comes to expressing more tender feelings."³ David's father, C.J. Nyvall, was a traveling preacher, riding his horse Hulda with Bible in hand, always ready to preach a sermon. Formidable, he was an organizing force behind the Mission Friends movement. He was present at inaugural meetings for the Covenant Church in both Sweden and America.

2. David Nyvall, "The Poetry of Missions," reprinted in *Linnea, 1901*, p. 333. Karl A. Olsson has stated that a "Covenant university" was an "unfading dream" of Nyvall's. Olsson, *Into One Body... by the Cross*, vol. 1 (Chicago: Covenant Publications, 1985), 202.

3. David Nyvall, *Min Faders Testamente* (Chicago: Tryckt å Scandia Print Co., 1924), 373, my translation.

While his siblings and others around Vall worked in field and meadow, David read books, lying in a ditch or by a tree. When the others reported the bookworm's lack of cooperation with practical chores, C.J. Nyvall took David's side. David later reflected in an interview that his young mind was buzzing with new ideas and goals.⁴

When his parents left for a visit to the United States, David began a series of studies that ultimately prepared him for matriculation at Uppsala University. This opportunity was atypical for a farm boy who liked to read books in a ditch. But his father had contacts and opened doors, and David harbored ambitions and what he called intellectual pursuits: "I wrote volumes before I was fifteen. For the wastebasket. Before I was fifteen. . . . It seems that my pen is my permanent instructor."⁵

David toyed with being a poet. His father worried about his son's ego and lack of spiritual purity. The father wrote a prayer: "God, you know [David's] heart, that he does not want to live in accordance with your will, but rather to be something great in this world."⁶ For the traveling preacher, Christian faith was of preeminent importance, and religious conversion was what his movement called the "one thing necessary." This renewal movement was led by Mission Friends and fueled what would become the Covenant Church. Paul Peter Waldenström articulated a clear, simple theological framework for the Mission Friends when he proffered that there was one question required for the Christian: "Where is it written?"

In today's language, these were the branding promises of the Mission Friends movement and, eventually, the Covenant Church: conversion as the one thing necessary and "Where is it written?" as the interpretive cipher. These religious commitments make sense when seen in the context of mid-nineteenth-century Sweden, where the national church was corrupt and not meeting the spiritual needs of the people. It is understandable that P.P. Waldenström, C.J. Nyvall, and the Mission Friends would reject the perceived worldliness of the established church

4. Interview of David Nyvall by Olga Lindborg in *Friska Vindar*, April 1, 1933, pp. 97–99. Interview manuscript also found in David Nyvall Collection 1:6. Covenant Archives and Historical Library (CAHL), Chicago.

5. David Nyvall to Theodore W. Anderson, fall 1942. David Nyvall Charn Collection 1:10. CAHL.

6. C.J. Nyvall diary entry, December 28, 1878. C.J. Nyvall Collection. Riksarkivet (National Archives), Stockholm.

in favor of a return to the Bible, an evident conversion experience, and a Christian faith expressed through daily action.

The young David Nyvall was wrestling with this new approach to Christian faith. He did not despise “worldly” things. He found his faith something of a question mark and was attracted by the intellectual pursuits that his father and the Mission Friends had eschewed. David later reflected on what was for him a Christian faith filled with complexity and enigma:

One could just as easily have put out a volcano with a pail of water. It was like a fever that boiled and burned within me, all that cools notwithstanding, and was maintained by all the irreconcilable incongruities with which I had been raised from my early childhood. Despite all the doubts, questions, and adventurous thoughts, I still had a deeply religious nature. The faith of my father was not something to be questioned. Above all, my father’s life was one of praise. But I questioned and wondered about the revival preachers around me, while deeply despising religious radicals. Instead, the best people I found... were those who did not consider dancing to be a sin. I was split and divided from within.⁷

One remedy enacted by David’s father was to send this brooding teenager to study with Waldenström, who had a doctorate in classical languages. David would learn to read the Bible in its original languages and to answer the single question proposed by his new mentor and the Mission Friends movement: *Where is it written?* It is clear that the father hoped his son’s time with Waldenström would create an opening for a conversion experience and more joyful Christian living. Yet, at the time, North Park’s eventual founding president was living and writing “primarily in the minor key,” according to Nyvall’s presidential successor Karl Olsson. David himself was concerned about his lack of direction and was depressed because he felt that “all doors were closed” to him and that all “desires of [his] heart were cast down.”⁸ He wrote in his diary in 1882:

My sins! Got up without desire to work, without gratitude

7. Interview of David Nyvall by Olga Lindborg.

8. David Nyvall diary entry, November 27, 1881. David Nyvall Collection 15:11. CAHL.

in my heart to God, without adoration or praise on my lips to my righteous God, under whose protection I have rested. Worked with no diligence or concern. Even prayer was lacking. Went to school without praying. Attended the morning prayers with indifference and inattentiveness. My life in school lacks Christian seriousness. . . . O God . . . you know the deep misery of my heart.⁹

He wrote that same year about “working with a thousand subjects” without being able to bring any of them to fruition.¹⁰ He told his diary about his intellectual “shipwrecks” and that “with every day my future becomes darker and I become more of a riddle.” In contrast to his father’s straightforward faith, David’s mind worked like this: “I can ask and make a question of the answer” because “in reality my whole problem seems to be to encompass everything in questions.”¹¹

David Nyvall’s unpublished writings are invaluable sources for understanding this significant time of spiritual, emotional, and intellectual development prior to his twentieth birthday. In addition, the unpublished primary sources available in C.J. Nyvall’s archive provide insight into the father’s faith and lifework. David was clearly troubled that his approach to Christian faith was not as clear-cut as his father’s. When he performed his own “self-examination,” this was David’s conclusion: “I am a putrefied, bloodless cadaver, where my desires tremble about like worms in possession of the field.” The result: “I cannot work myself free from a Scylla without falling into a Charybdis.”¹²

Compounding these spiritual and intellectual troubles, young David Nyvall was soon confronted with the tense intellectual and religious atmosphere at Uppsala University, where he matriculated in 1883. The Bible was not on the syllabus for the spiritually tormented student from Vall. Instead, his reading list included Darwin’s *Origin of Species* and Viktor Rydberg’s *The Scripture’s Teaching about Christ*, a perspective on the life of Jesus with a biblical criticism that was considered shocking at the time. The most important work for David was Kierkegaard’s *Sickness*

9. David Nyvall diary entry, March 31, 1882. David Nyvall Collection 15:11. CAHL.

10. David Nyvall diary entry, August 6, 1882. David Nyvall Collection 15:11. CAHL.

11. David Nyvall diary entry, April 8, 1882. David Nyvall Collection 15:11. CAHL. Translated by Karl A. Olsson, *By One Spirit* (Chicago: Covenant Publications, 1962), 166–67.

12. *Ibid.*

unto Death. He referred to this work over and over and related its challenges to his own search for meaning in life and his desire to accomplish his own impossible possibility. David's pen remained his "permanent instructor," as evidenced through long, unpublished treatises. He wrote critical, intellectual, and faith reflections on topics such as greed, idleness, respectability, and conceit as well as on numerous theological and philosophical topics: What is the difference between imagination and reality; concerning irony; Christ's suffering and a Christian's suffering.¹³ David made a decision to prepare for a career in medicine. This is certainly surprising given the subjects that occupied his thinking and writing, yet it is clear in the sources that this was the only alternative acceptable to his father. C.J. Nyvall wanted his son to be a traveling preacher like himself but would accept medical studies for his intellectually inclined son.¹⁴

At this juncture, we encounter David's inner conflicts as well as the conflict between father and son—and, most importantly, clear differences regarding how Christian faith is experienced and expressed. C.J. Nyvall's best friends were his Bible and his horse Hulda, with whom he traveled thousands of miles as a revival preacher. He had had a dramatic conversion experience. His response to God's gift of grace and faith had been to dedicate his entire being to the gospel, often at the expense of his own family. He traveled on dusty roads, treacherous oceans, and rickety railroads with little financial support, and he delivered a straightforward message of faith and conversion. C.J. Nyvall did not give his listeners complex theology or spiritual cynicism; he preached the good news straight and simple. Simple does not mean simplistic; rather, people were hungry for a gospel they could understand and to which they could cling in troubled times. The traditional religious and societal institutions had been failing them for decades, and C.J. Nyvall's message rang true. For his listeners, it was a matter of acceptance or rejection—the former resulting in a pious life and the latter resulting in damnation. C.J. Nyvall was highly successful at a time of great spiritual crisis in Sweden, and the response was tremendous.

Things were different for the founding president of North Park University. David Nyvall never mentioned a dramatic conversion experience, and he disliked the religious radicalism of some of his father's contempo-

13. David Nyvall diary entries: April 29, May 22, and June 5, 1883. David Nyvall Collection 15:11. CAHL.

14. Erickson, *David Nyvall*, 61–63.

raries. His intellectual struggle with the issues that challenge Christian faith presented no easy solutions. He said himself that, while pondering Christian faith, he could not work himself “free from a Scylla without falling into a Charybdis.” He did not possess or write about spiritual clarity, rather “shipwrecks” caused by intellectual challenges to his faith.¹⁵ David’s best friends were ideas and questions, on which he reflected critically and freely with his pen and later his Corona typewriter. His pen and Corona produced what would become fifty-two archival boxes illuminating his thinking, leadership acumen, Christian character, emerging philosophy of education, and the mustard seed that would eventually grow into a Christian university.

Two stories from an interview with Karl Olsson, North Park president from 1959 to 1970, further illuminate Nyvall’s faith development and intellectual temperament. Olsson built the university in a manner consistent with Nyvall’s vision and oversaw the expansion of the junior college to a four-year liberal arts institution. In his boyhood home, the young Olsson overheard a heated debate on evolution. Olsson heard David Nyvall say, “If God could make man from dust, why couldn’t God make man from apes?” Many years later, Olsson asked Nyvall, now his professor, “Have you ever doubted God?” Nyvall answered, “I have never doubted God. But I have doubted Christ.”¹⁶

In his youth and beyond, David Nyvall allowed questions and ideas to influence his faith. His leadership gifts were developed through a process that included mystery, doubt, ambivalence, questions, and complexity. This process was not straightforward, as it never can be for educational visionaries and leaders of Nyvall’s strength and quality.

Establishing an Academic Culture

Something significant was missing for David Nyvall at age twenty-three when he left Uppsala for a trip to the United States, at first to visit his father, then to remain as an immigrant. He needed a classroom—a place where his questions and ideas could flourish in dialogue with students. He found his first teaching space in Minneapolis in the fall of 1886. It was a classroom for immigrants, in which Nyvall said he taught “everything I could persuade anybody to learn.”¹⁷

15. Erickson, *David Nyvall*, 56–66.

16. Scott Erickson interview of Karl A. Olsson, November 3, 1994.

17. David Nyvall, “Dreams That Come True,” *North Park College Cupola* (1923): 32.

It was tough going in Nyvall's first classroom at "Skogsbergh's School," named for the famous evangelist and preacher at the large Minneapolis Swedish Tabernacle. Most immigrant students had little formal education. C. V. Bowman, president of the Covenant Church from 1927 to 1932, noted that Nyvall attempted to "awaken thought," "sharpen insight," and help students learn "the detail and beauty of Swedish grammar." While seeking to warm student intellects in the cold temperatures of the church basement, Nyvall lectured in a fur coat for fear of frostbite.¹⁸ Nyvall remained in Minneapolis for one year, followed by one year of parish ministry and two years as an assistant instructor at the Swedish Department of Chicago Theological Seminary, a Congregational Church institution responsible for educating ministers in the infant Covenant Church.

During his first half-decade in America, David Nyvall had become increasingly concerned about the future of education in a largely poor Swedish immigrant community. It was a community struggling to survive and negotiate its ethnic identity. Swedish immigrants were navigating their way in unfamiliar territory without a school, educational plan, or academic culture of their own. If Swedish immigrants assimilated readily into the American culture, Nyvall feared they would get lost like small plants in the large American garden. They would become "foreign flowerpots" hidden inconspicuously "in the window of an attic."¹⁹ Urged by Nyvall, the Covenant Church voted to establish a school in 1891, with Nyvall appointed as president, located first in Minneapolis and by 1894 in Chicago.

In 1896, Nyvall reiterated the importance of immigrant education as a means of bolstering the strength and identity of his community:

Americanization is not becoming less and less Swedish. It is not disposing of an iota of our language or even one good and noble custom. It is not forgetting the good that I know nor the language I speak. Rather, the opposite: making use of the best of me in a new place by mastering a new language, the language of this country. As long as Swedish is our own

18. C.V. Bowman, *Son of the People: The Autobiography of C.V. Bowman* [1929] (Chicago, n.d.), 164–66.

19. David Nyvall to Erik J. Ekman, March 19, 1896. David Nyvall Collection 24:1:36–37. CAHL.

language, it will be a flowerpot that we guard so delicately inside the house. . . . Learn English. And do not forget Swedish! It is therefore no danger if friends of Swedish learn English. English will save Swedish.²⁰

Nyvall did not want his immigrant community simply to “Americanize” and thus lose its identity in a melting pot. He rejected an easy and straightforward cultural assimilation, causing some to accuse him and his immigrant community of denying their American citizenship. When a journalist charged immigrant schools with being un-American, Nyvall retorted in 1899:

Our American friends ought to be patient with us. We are coming. But it takes time to die for a nation so much alive as we are; it takes time to die when to die should mean to live again. If we are too early in season in planting ourselves, we will be squandering our national inheritance. . . . We might have occasion to get lost in this country like drops of water in the sand. But we might also have the opportunity to unite and become a flood watering many fields and driving many wheels. It is up to us to say what we choose. But whatever we choose, we will have to decide soon.²¹

To strengthen immigrant identity, North Park’s founding president had a plan for his school’s curriculum. It would offer courses typical for American schools. His vision was to establish a liberal arts model in addition to theological education for Covenant pastors.

When North Park was founded, few argued about or disagreed with the *need* for a school. Many agreed about the inadequacy of the arrangements for Covenant ministerial training at Chicago Theological Seminary. Many also believed that the children of Swedish immigrants needed a school. But several of Nyvall’s contemporaries drew different conclusions about the *kind* of education for the school and the *kind* of academic methodologies and practices Nyvall was establishing. Some in his immigrant community did not understand why limited funds should support the

20. David Nyvall, “Att amerikaniseras.” Article from March 1896. David Nyvall Collection 24:1. CAHL.

21. David Nyvall, “Among Swedish-American Colleges,” *North Park College Journal* (October 1899): 2.

liberal arts and professional courses. Some believed the Covenant school should simply supplement the American public school, with classes only in religion and Swedish language for Covenant pastors.

Those who questioned Nyvall's vision for a liberal education argued for a "simple Bible school."²² Others proposed that only training for pastors take place at North Park, while general education should be organized at other institutions. Skogsbergh argued that it was hard to support a school making the wild claim that being educated was important for "Christian mission."²³ Another Covenant leader proposed a church resolution that the Covenant maintain its "preacher's department" and that North Park suspend the teaching of anything other than courses for Covenant pastors. This would dispel concerns about the misuse of Covenant money supporting a liberal education.²⁴

The theories that North Park should be a Bible school were directly opposed to Nyvall's consistent vision for North Park. In two letters from 1893, he sharply criticized the philosophy of a simple preacher's school, insisting that North Park would not and should not be "merely a preacher's school," as that would not be a school at all.²⁵ Rather, it would include three academic departments: business college, seminary, and academy for the liberal arts.²⁶

E. Danielsson, an immigrant in the Covenant Church, offered a biblical argument against Nyvall's vision. In an unpublished letter, Danielsson warned the North Park president of the evils of education: "You know very well that it is forbidden to eat from the tree of knowledge." How can we follow Christ if we engage in "worldly wisdom and business"? The "snake of knowledge" would lure precious money to a worldly school when those funds were desperately needed for the work of God's kingdom. Danielsson concluded: "The harvest is great, but the workers are few."²⁷

22. See correspondence from September 1894. David Nyvall Collection 2:7. CAHL.

23. E.A. Skogsbergh to David Nyvall, June 20, 1898. David Nyvall Collection 26:3. CAHL.

24. Salem Covenant Church in Des Moines, Iowa, to Covenant Secretary David Nyvall, May 16, 1899. David Nyvall Collection 2:6. CAHL.

25. David Nyvall to C.A. Björk, August 14, 1893. Covenant Ministers Collection: Zenos Hawkinson Addition. CAHL.

26. David Nyvall to Gustaf Almfeldt, August 14, 1893. Covenant Ministers Collection: Zenos Hawkinson Addition. CAHL.

27. E. Danielsson to David Nyvall, 1892. The sources do not indicate Danielsson's relationship to the Covenant or any previous contact with David Nyvall. David Nyvall Charn Collection 5:113. CAHL.

Indeed, many contemporaries of David Nyvall were clearly and actively opposed to his educational philosophy. They drew conclusions about education resulting from the trepidation by which they approached intellectual disciplines and the exploration of ideas and questions. Based on their immigrant and religious experiences, they believed that education should be approached informally. Like C.J. Nyvall, they would ask: When did an intellectual discussion ever convert someone to Christ? How can a liberal education ensure faith? Like P.P. Waldenström, they would also ask, “Where is it written” that Swedish immigrant Christians should have a liberal arts school?²⁸

Richard Hofstadter, in his seminal work, *Anti-intellectualism in American Life*, describes impulses in the American context that align with the views of Nyvall’s detractors: “Biblical individualism” and “lack of firm institutional establishments.” Intellectual activity was “instrumental” (a simple preacher’s school) rather than instructional (Nyvall’s vision for a Christian university with a liberal arts curriculum). While the Puritan minister was considered well-educated, even an intellectual, Hofstadter notes that the nineteenth-century revival preacher was a “crusader.” The emphasis was on saving souls rather than on a liberal education.²⁹

Waldenström’s theological approach reflects Hofstadter’s description of anti-intellectual impulses. Indeed, many in the Covenant Church’s early immigrant community were under the spell of Waldenström, who challenged educational norms, church authority, and traditional confessions and structures. He criticized practices of the national Swedish church in his allegory *Squire Adamsson*. His four-word question defined an approach that jettisoned the established theological method and opened the door for biblical individualism and anti-institutionalism. Without a sustained and community-wide dialogue, theology was relegated to each individual Christian. One result of his influence is that many in the Swedish immigrant community viewed Nyvall’s educational philosophy with skepticism.³⁰

28. Scott E. Erickson, “Ethnic and Religious Education in Swedish America: David Nyvall and the Nature of Academic Culture for Immigrants,” *Swedish American Historical Quarterly* 47, no. 4 (1996): 207–208.

29. Richard Hofstadter, *Anti-intellectualism in American Life* (Knopf: New York, 1963), 56–59, 86, 108f.

30. Cf. Karl A. Olsson, “Covenant Beginnings: Doctrinal,” *Covenant Quarterly* 13, no. 4 (1953): 99–114.

Waldenström's former student, now president of the Covenant's immigrant school, believed that a single question was an oversimplification. In order for the immigrant church to survive and thrive, Nyvall argued that it was necessary to establish an academic culture defined by a care for the life of the mind, embracing theological complexity and developing an intellectual life. He further believed it was unsustainable for North Park to separate Christian faith from a liberal education. In 1895, he wrote:

North Park College strives to attain the high mission of becoming a school home for knowledge thirsting youth from a thousand homes throughout the country. It aims with God's help to offer the clear and unadulterated waters from the springs of knowledge to the thirsting ones. . . . We are trying to establish this education on a broad foundation. . . . Our opinion is that a preacher needs to be a [person] also educated in the liberal arts. He should not be educated into a separate caste and thus through his education destined to live in a world totally alien to the life interests of common people.³¹

Nyvall's leadership ensured that North Park would not adopt the "simple preacher's school" model. He set in motion many broadly conceived and far-reaching initiatives. Theological education, according to Nyvall, would not indoctrinate the preacher; instead, it would nurture and develop the preacher's intellect. Nyvall knew that second- and third-generation immigrants in the Covenant Church would not benefit from a Bible school. The American culture they were navigating was far too complex. In 1898, Nyvall clarified his philosophy for North Park: "Education means . . . all that culture implies. . . . To further the cause of Christian Education is the high aim of. . . North Park College. It is the ambition of every teacher here to see that all the studies and all the methods of studying are of the highest choice."³² North Park University's founding president established early the high pedagogical and curricular standards his school would uphold.

Yet, in the first decade of North Park's history, the issues and countervailing forces that confronted Nyvall were significant: the Swedish renewal

31. David Nyvall, "From North Park (1895)," *Covenant Quarterly* 13, no. 2 (1953): 36–38.

32. David Nyvall, "Some Plain Facts about Education," *Linnea* (1898): 46–47.

movement that proposed a different theological method; the desire to fund only a preacher's school; informal attitudes about education among his peers; and anti-intellectual attitudes both fueled by Waldenström and in the larger American evangelical context. Historian Sydney Mead has noted that, after about 1800, Americans were forced to make a choice between "being intelligent according to standards prevailing in their intellectual centers, and being religious according to standards prevailing in their denominations."³³ This was a choice akin to Nyvall's diary entry about his difficulty working himself "free from a Scylla without falling into a Charybdis," which in the early twentieth century had developed into an unhelpful dichotomy: the piety of the Mission Friend religious experience over against a rigorous academic culture that would support and sustain the immigrant community in the Covenant Church.

If one were hesitant about intellectuals and their educational goals, Nyvall's Uppsala-inspired notions about an academic culture for the Covenant Church would indeed sound foreign. Many of his contemporaries were unsure of, and even suspicious about, the founding president's 1901 goal for North Park to be a Christian university and a "center of thought and art to the whole civilized world." With the benefit of historical reflection, it is clear that Nyvall's vision endured amidst significant challenges both inside and outside his own church and his own immigrant community.

Further Defining an Academic Culture

David Nyvall's views about Christian higher education and the liberal arts between 1914 and 1918 are further illuminated in a series of unpublished correspondence with Charles Blanchard, president of Wheaton College. Blanchard was aligned with the Moody camp in Chicago and sought to shape Wheaton's developing fundamentalist position. For Blanchard, the "secularization" of society was a loss of the Christian ideal. He criticized the University of Chicago, which did not work for the "kingdom of God" but instead worked on behalf of "money and members and athletics and smokers and dances." Blanchard believed universities were "institutions where the Word of God is set aside and the law of God is treated as unimportant." He wrote to Nyvall in 1914:

33. Sidney E. Mead, "Denominationalism: The Shape of Protestantism in America," *Church History* 23, no. 4 (1954): 314.

President [William Rainey] Harper [of the Divinity School at the University of Chicago] said that a university could not be the advocate of a cause but must teach everything and let people choose what they will believe and do for themselves. I think [this] is a devil's doctrine for school life and that the further it goes the more harm it will do.³⁴

In replying to Blanchard, Nyvall expressed disappointment that Blanchard would seek to attract students to his Christian college by attacking the “policy of the universities.” Nyvall resisted characterizing universities as evil and of the devil. He wondered: Was it wrong to explore scholarship and science in an open environment? He asked Blanchard several questions: “Is every good thing divine? Is everything bad the devil himself? If a university is not Christian, may it not be a university? May I learn a handicraft wherever I may find it, but sciences only from the church?”³⁵

Blanchard was not interested in the relationship between science and faith. He questioned the demands of the secular university. He doubted the intentions of these institutions because they allowed discussion of “everything which some people believe to be true, atheism, infidelity, as well as Christianity.” Students in universities would be “expected to select that which was true from the teaching of the school.” He was concerned that this “universal learning” brought out “evil habits” in students who otherwise were from “clean and wholesome” homes. Blanchard concluded that universities were not fitting for North Park graduates.³⁶

Blanchard wondered why North Park would be “sustaining” a secular university (like the University of Chicago) that was “absolutely opposed” to the kind of biblical teaching and general instruction available at Christian schools like Wheaton.³⁷ Blanchard revealed that he had “known men to go into universities where drinking, gambling, profanity, and other vices were rife, and [they] live through it all [with] beautiful Christian lives.” Yet he reiterated his belief that most Christian parents “who value

34. Charles Blanchard to David Nyvall, October 26, 1914. Covenant Ministers Collection: Zenos Hawkinson Addition. CAHL.

35. David Nyvall to Charles Blanchard, October 30, 1914. Covenant Ministers Collection: Zenos Hawkinson Addition. CAHL.

36. Charles Blanchard to David Nyvall, October 31, 1914. Covenant Ministers Collection: Zenos Hawkinson Addition. CAHL.

37. Charles Blanchard to David Nyvall, February 5, 1915. Covenant Ministers Collection: Zenos Hawkinson Addition. CAHL.

their sons and daughters” would not desire to “subject them to that sort of influence.”³⁸

David Nyvall had a different view: “I have still to know of the first student who went from our [North Park] academy to the University of Chicago and lost faith and zeal. . . . I also know from conversation with not a small number [of them] what sort of temptations can meet students in class rooms in psychology and other subjects.” And the crux of Nyvall’s position: “[H]ow can ambitious students be persuaded to choose their colleges because of religious atmosphere? They would have to be able to see that [as a] choice between efficiency and character.”³⁹

Nyvall again makes it clear that he does not believe in creating dichotomies with opposing choices. This time he resists following Blanchard’s fundamentalist logic of choosing “character” over “efficiency.” For Nyvall, the life of the mind never required a choice against faith. The strength of a person’s Christian faith and character should be nurtured to withstand the very vices Blanchard feared. Avoiding the world should not be the goal of the person of faith, as Blanchard would argue. Cordoning off intellectual challenges was not Nyvall’s vision. Instead, Christian character would be developed in young people through their liberal education. Christian faith and a liberal education should have a constructive relationship in the Christian university, and not be relegated to a Scylla-Charybdis dichotomy. Nyvall wanted to inspire young people to welcome critical intellectual reflection in the context of their Christian faith.

Conclusion

North Park University, now 125 years since its humble founding, has been successful and is thriving today because of Nyvall’s inspirational leadership and the enduring strength of his vision. Education in the Covenant Church was not relegated to a simple preacher’s school because David Nyvall inspired his church to embrace an expansive view of the Christian academy. He established an academic culture to nurture the intellect and sustain Christian faith in an increasingly complex world. He required his first-generation immigrant peers to stretch their thinking about education in their adopted country. Nyvall led intentionally

38. Charles Blanchard to David Nyvall, June 8, 1918. Covenant Ministers Collection: Zenos Hawkinson Addition. CAHL.

39. David Nyvall to Charles Blanchard, May 22, 1918. David Nyvall Collection 10:7. CAHL.

through words connected to actions, and he did so amid significant resistance. His philosophy of education, developed over four decades, would deepen and grow to benefit his immigrant community and its successive generations.

There are clear intersections between the North Park story, the Swedish immigrant story, the Covenant story, and David Nyvall, who emerged on the scene at a time of epic change in his immigrant community. A complex, on-fire Christian intellectual, he did not shy away from hard questions about faith and learning, about the relationship between intellect and religion, or about the challenges of establishing an immigrant school in America. Rather, he engaged his detractors as well as his supporters. He welcomed discussion and disagreement. He seized the moment and established North Park as a liberal arts school rather than a Bible school. He created a curriculum not to indoctrinate but rather to nurture the intellect, ensuring that his immigrant community would be educated and equipped to navigate the American culture.

The practical outcome of his leadership, the institution he led, was neither a fundamentalist school nor an unsustainable, one-generation school for immigrants. Rather, the result is evident in the fruit of his lifework: North Park flourishes today as a university with deep institutional roots, a commitment to higher education, and a clear Christian identity. North Park still embodies the vision articulated by Nyvall in 1901: to be “a center from which radiates to all ends of the world the light of Christ’s truth, and the warmth of Christ’s love, and the beauty of Christ’s character.” Many generations of North Park graduates are the beneficiaries of David Nyvall’s lifework as well as his 1901 vision of the Christian university. I hope this article inspires you to carry David Nyvall’s vision forward for the sake of the gospel and to continue strengthening the Christian university he built.