

The Atonement Controversy-- What Was It Really About?

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Everyone who is familiar with the history of the Augustana Synod has heard about the atonement controversy of the 1870s. But most people do not know what the real point of disagreement actually was. The purpose of this paper is to clarify the main lines of the controversy.

All the European immigrant Lutheran groups, as they came to America, experienced controversy in their new homeland, for a variety of reasons, both theological and non-theological. These controversies led to division within the various nationality groups, so that the Norwegians, Danes, Finns, and Germans each had multiple separate church organizations in this country. The Swedes, however, were more fortunate, in that they remained a single *Lutheran* church body, although with the loss of those who became the Covenant Church.

The Augustana Synod was organized in 1860. At first it included both Swedes and Norwegians. However, the Norwegians soon decided that it would be better for them to go their own way, so just ten years later, in 1870, they separated peaceably to form their own denomination.

It was during the 1870s and 1880s that the Augustana Synod suffered its greatest strife, the famous atonement controversy, which led to the loss of a significant number of its pastors and members. Most of those who separated from the Augustana Synod during those troubled years eventually became part of the Mission Covenant Church, now the Evangelical Covenant Church.

This study does not attempt to settle “who was right” in the atonement controversy. Also, in the present discussion it is important to take note of the fact that today’s Evangelical Covenant Church does not define itself in terms of the theological position which triggered the original controversy and separation. In fact, if a sermon would be preached in a Covenant congregation today, expounding the interpretation of the atonement which the Lutherans were defending at the time of the great controversy (the interpretation which the Covenant people rejected, at that time), that traditionalist sermon in our day would not draw protest from Covenant pastors or theologians. So, though this may seem surprising, in truth the disagreement in doctrine which was at the root of the original break between the Swedes of the Lutheran church and the Swedes

of the Covenant movement is simply no longer an issue today. Thus the present study is in fact a historical report, and not a discussion of a present-day disagreement.

So, then, just what was the atonement controversy about? The answer to that historical question is to be found on three levels: (I) on the formal, surface level, the level of doctrinal statements; (II) on the level of underlying assumptions, the taken-for-granted convictions which underlay the various doctrinal assertions, and (III) on the level of the broader social context within which the controversy took place, the non-theological factors which inclined people toward one side or the other in the controversy.

I. The formal level of the debate

For most purposes, this was the most important level of discussion—even though it may not be the level on which many people made their decision one way or the other about the controversy. On this level, the debate was about two closely inter-related questions, “What did Jesus accomplish here on earth?” And, “Who was most affected by what Jesus accomplished here on earth?”

It is standard to say that the most important events in Jesus’ life on earth were his death and resurrection. But just what was it that was accomplished by Christ’s death on the cross? The majority interpretation down through the centuries has been what is commonly labeled the *vicarious satisfaction* theory of the atonement. That is, the human race, by its sin, had drawn down on itself the wrath of a righteous God. The appropriate punishment for human sin would be eternal damnation for every sinful human being. However, Christ on the cross bore the entire punishment for all human sin—past, present, and future. He appeased, or satisfied, the anger of God against human sinners. Now, thanks to what Christ accomplished on the cross, the perfect righteousness of Christ is freely credited by God to every person who has a true faith in Jesus. All true believers receive forgiveness and salvation. Now, to be sure, faith of course has vast implications for how believers should live. But salvation is not earned by living a righteous life; salvation is a pure gift of God, based on what Jesus did for human beings. And what Jesus did in bearing the punishment for every person, that is what is meant by the term “the atonement.”

But other interpretations of Christ’s death on the cross are possible. The Bible itself uses a number of different images in speaking of Christ’s death. There are alternate “theories of the atonement,” a number of which are outlined later in this paper. The atonement controversy centered around one of these alternative theories.

Now, in any church, in any time period, there will be “theological fashions” which for a time attract interest and support, and then (sometimes) fade back into obscurity, and go “out of fashion.” For purposes of this study, the relevant example of a rising theological fashion is that in the mid-1800s some Lutheran pastors and theologians in Sweden had come to question the predominant *vicarious satisfaction* interpretation of the atonement, and were considering, as a

possible alternative interpretation, what is called the subjective or moral influence theory of the atonement. This interpretation said that what Christ accomplished by his death on the cross was to demonstrate how great is God's love for sinful human beings. The purpose of this demonstration was to win those sinful human beings to love for God, and obedience to God.

This rising interest in the moral influence theory of the atonement was interwoven with the growth of the pietist movement in Sweden. Pietism first arose in Germany, and then in due time spread to other northern European countries. In Sweden, in the 1800s, pietism had become especially influential among the lower socioeconomic classes. Pietism charged that the state church had become cold, formal, dominated by the clergy, spiritually dead, and "channelized in rigid doctrinal and sacramentarian forms." (*An Encyclopedia of Religion*, Vergilius Ferm, ed., New York: Philosophical Library, 1945, p. 585.)

In reaction against those shortcomings, pietism emphasized a warm, heart-felt personal faith. At its best, pietism came to expression in a strong commitment to Jesus Christ, personal godliness, a lively devotional life, acts of kindness and love, and an emphasis on the importance of the laity in the life of the Christian community. Pietists of course rejoiced in these manifestations of positive religious life. However, pietism sometimes went to extremes, and at its worst it became fanatical, ascetic, separatist, rigid, anti-intellectual, hyper-critical, legalistic, overly self-confident in its judgments, and "out of control" with regard to individualistic and fantastic interpretations of Scripture. However rare or however common such unfortunate extremes may have been, critics of pietism inclined toward the thought that *all* pietism tended toward such extremes, and thus those critics used such putative faults as arguments against pietism as such.

Inevitably tensions arose between the pietists and the state church. And it was among the Swedish pietists that the most forceful challenge to the traditional interpretation of the atonement came. That momentous challenge came specifically from the pen of Pastor Paul Peter Waldenström.

Pastor Paul Peter Waldenström was a brilliant and highly-educated man, a Ph.D., and a leader in the pietist movement in Sweden. In 1868 he became the editor of the influential journal *Pietisten* (*The Pietist*). Then, in 1872, Waldenström published in *Pietisten* a sermon asserting and defending the moral influence theory of the atonement. This theory of the atonement had been around at least since Abelard in the 1100s, but it had had only a secondary influence, either in Sweden or anywhere else. Waldenström's sermon suddenly made the moral influence theory the center of widespread discussion. This sermon startled and offended the readers of *Pietisten* in both Sweden and America, and created an absolute firestorm of protest. However, Waldenström was not intimidated by these protests, but rather stood his ground with firm determination and skillful argumentation. Over the next several years he published a great number of articles, and also a book, defending the moral influence concept of the atonement.

Let it be mentioned here that all participants in the atonement controversy took for granted the literal truth of the story from Genesis 3 regarding the fall into sin on the part of Adam and Eve. They also accepted that, "In Adam's fall, we sinned all." So in the following discussion references to "the fall into sin" are set within that framework, the common currency of that day. .

In its fully developed form, Waldenström's teaching on the atonement included the following five points:

1. The traditional doctrine said that the fall of the human race into sin aroused the wrath of God against all humankind. But Waldenström, to the contrary, said that no change occurred in the attitude of God toward human beings because of the fall into sin. God remained totally loving toward each human being, as fully loving as he would have been if there had been no fall into sin.

2. Thus it was not a negative attitude on the part of God toward human beings which obstructed the salvation of human beings. Rather it was a negative attitude on the part of human beings toward God which stood between human beings and God.

3. The change which occurred in the fall into sin was a change only in human beings. They turned away from God, disobeyed God's will, and lost the eternal life which can be received only from God.

4. So, then, what Jesus needed to accomplish by his death on the cross was *not* to make God positive toward human beings, since God had never stopped being positive toward human beings (that is, gracious and loving toward them). No, what the atonement needed to accomplish was to get human beings to be positive toward God. Jesus' death on the cross was to draw people to God in love and obedience.

When Christ died on the cross, he was *not* taking our place, to bear our punishment and to appease God's wrath, as the traditional interpretation claimed. Rather, Jesus was acting in God's place, bearing the fiercest blows of God's enemies, namely death and the devil, for the purpose of demonstrating God's love for us and drawing us toward God. Christ's death on the cross was an important part of his life which draws people to God, but it was not so *utterly* central as the tradition had thought, since *every* part of Christ's earthly ministry was a demonstration of God's unceasing love for human beings, even in their sinful state.

So, according to Waldenström, atonement takes place when a person meets Christ in Christ's *total* earthly ministry, when that person is "won over," and when as a result that person turns to God in love and obedience.

5. Finally, according to Waldenström's interpretation, Christ did not atone for the sins of *all* human beings, but only for the sins of those who respond in faith and commitment. That is what atonement *is*, that a person is led to love and obey God.

So, to sum up Waldenström's five points in simplified form, Christ died, not to get God to love human beings (as the traditional interpretation had taught), but to get human beings to love God.

A few years after the atonement controversy began, the story became even more complicated. That is, this different theory of the atonement was not the only bombshell which Pastor Paul Peter Waldenström dropped into the life of the church in Sweden and in America. His second bombshell, closely related to the first one, was his proposal for a sharply different way of doing theology and forming Christian doctrine. When Waldenström's critics defended the traditional vicarious satisfaction theory of the atonement, Waldenström made it his primary method of rebuttal to ask the question, "*Var står det skrivet?*" "Where is that written?"

Waldenström, being the intelligent and highly educated man that he was, knew full well that, in promoting a different interpretation of the atonement, he was going against tradition, against the three great ecumenical creeds, and against the confessional documents of the Lutheran faith. But his strategy for his defense was to discredit the authority of all those standards by appealing to a different standard, namely the words of the Bible itself. This appeal to "the Word alone" had a natural persuasiveness for devout believers, since the Bible is of course God's word, the ultimate document revealing God's love for human beings. In a skillful debating tactic, Waldenström capitalized on the undeniable fact that there is no one place in the Bible where the traditional interpretation of the atonement is set forth clearly and unambiguously. He made it the cornerstone of his theological method to ask, concerning any teaching, his signature question, "*Var står det skrivet?*" He took it as a given that if a teaching can not be found written, clearly and explicitly, in the Bible, then Christians should not believe it. He made a point of it, to confidently assert and assume the truth of that position, and remained determinedly blind to even the possibility that that position could be a badly mistaken position.

Waldenström asserted that *his* interpretation of what the Bible really says was the *correct* interpretation. He focused attention, over and over and over again, on the many passages in the Bible which emphasize the love of God for human beings, even sinful human beings. In a highly selective manner, he repeatedly cited the many passages of that kind, in a totally one-sided way, to support his theory of the atonement, and thereby by implication to call into question the truth of the traditional interpretation.

Then, in yet another step, Waldenström further deflected criticism of his doctrinal teachings by saying that correct doctrine is really not the primary issue anyway. In good pietist style, he stressed that the focus should be on each person living a good Christian *life*, the life of one who has indeed turned to God in love and obedience. Said Waldenström, doctrine really does not matter all that much.

One of the leaders in the outcry against Waldenström and his theory of the atonement was Olof Olsson, pastor of Bethany Lutheran Church in Lindsborg, Kansas. Olsson charged that Waldenström was, in effect, denying the very divinity of Christ, and that he was insulting Christ

by making Christ's death on the cross be something less than the primary, central basis for our salvation. In retrospect it can be recognized that these charges, while understandable, were considerably overblown. But it was such high-level charges of out and out heresy which were leveled against Waldenström, not only by Olof Olsson, but by many others as well.

However, Waldenström also had his defenders. Both in Sweden and in this country there were pastors and others who—whether out of theological or non-theological motives—supported Waldenström and his interpretation of the atonement. There was sufficient positive interest in the man and his theology to support the development of the Covenant movement, and then the development of the new Covenant church which would soon emerge.

So, to sum up, this was the specific doctrinal point in dispute: what specifically did Jesus accomplish by his death on the cross?

Now, in addition to points already mentioned, there were also *other* factors which drew support to Waldenström and to his cause. Let us look at some of these other factors.

II. The “underlying assumptions” level of the debate

“Where is that written?” asked Waldenström, again and again. To find one's beliefs strictly in the words of the Bible itself was not a new idea. It has been the dream of many devout Christians over the centuries to develop a theology based strictly and directly on the words of the Bible, without mixing in any human reasoning, which might introduce errors. A few small and ultra-conservative denominations claim, even yet today, to be going strictly and solely by the words of the Bible. However, there is a widespread consensus among knowledgeable Christian thinkers that a sufficiently wide-ranging Christian doctrine based only on the specific words of the Bible is simply not possible. Those sectarians of any era who claim to take their entire teaching and practice only from the Bible are in fact deluding themselves. They are in truth including in their teaching much human reasoning and human intuitive judgment, even if they may refuse to recognize that reality. Always there is much unrecognized, unacknowledged selective attention, emphasizing some texts, and ignoring others.

It is a simple fact that the Bible does not provide a clear, unified presentation of the truth about God and the will of God. The Bible is simply not that kind of a book. It is not a systematic theology. People have sometimes wondered *why* God did not give us his truth in a more clear and explicit form, so that Christians would not have so much disagreement about doctrine and ethics. But God, in his infinite wisdom, has chosen to leave us to figure out many things for ourselves as best we can, on the basis of what revelation he *has* given us.

It is important to give a couple of illustrations here, to support this crucial, pivotal point in the present discussion. One example is that such a basic Christian teaching as the doctrine of the Trinity is not clearly, unambiguously stated anywhere in the Bible. There are indeed hints toward such a doctrine, such as Matthew 28:19: “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations,

baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.” But even such a passage as this is not, in itself, a full-blown doctrine of the Trinity. Another example is what mainstream Christian churches believe and teach about Jesus, namely, that he was both fully human and also, at the same time, fully divine, one person with two full and complete natures. That doctrine is not stated clearly anywhere in the Bible. And it took the early church over three hundred years to finally settle on what it was going to believe and teach concerning that important topic, the human and the divine sides of Jesus, and how they relate to each other. The point is that much Christian doctrine, even that which is central to the Christian faith, has been developed by the Christian church over time, through a process of reasoning and debate, starting from Scripture, but going beyond what is specifically stated in the words of the Bible. And Waldenström challenged the validity of this centuries-old process which has been so central to the life and thought of the Christian church.

Concerning Paul Peter Waldenström and his attempt to go strictly by what stands written in the Bible, the Covenant historian Karl A. Olsson says the following:

“It is paradoxical that Waldenström’s deceptively simple method, ‘*Var står det skrivet?*’ should be responsible for both immediate theological debate and ultimate withering of theological interest. This, nevertheless, is a fact. Waldenström had proposed a method [for determining doctrine] to end all methods. What was to follow among Waldenströmi-ans was not an interest in the larger theological areas, which had been vital to the church from the beginning, but fanciful and often arid speculation.” (Olsson, *By One Spirit*, p. 112; words in brackets inserted by the present author)

So, then, Waldenström, in his attempt to answer all doctrinal questions by finding a single, direct, and clear answer in the words of the Bible, was adopting a frame of reference, a way of doing theology, which rejected the experience-based majority judgment of the church over the centuries, the judgment that a credible theology cannot be developed by this method alone. Waldenström assumed one thing on this issue; his opponents assumed the opposite. And no way was found even to recognize, much less to deal successfully, with this disagreement in basic presuppositions. In any serious debate, until the basic presuppositions on each side have been identified and clarified, the disputants are almost certainly fated to simply talk past each other. Historian Karl A. Olsson lists various arguments which other theologians raised against Waldenström’s theory of the atonement, but he summarizes, with regard to Waldenström’s oversimplifying “where is that written?” approach, in these words: “Waldenström would not admit the difficulty.”

Let it be acknowledged that the unwillingness to admit difficulties was not all on one side. Waldenström’s opponents held stubbornly to the vicarious satisfaction theory of the atonement, and would not admit that there are difficulties (paradoxes, at the very least) in the traditional interpretation of the atonement. For example, the traditional theory implies that God is the kind of a being who would demand the agonizing death of a totally innocent person in order

that his honor and his sense of justice might be satisfied. It is difficult for a human mind to see how this is just, or appropriate to the supreme being. In any case, each side in the atonement controversy was so unquestioningly committed to its own frame of reference that it was not able to even begin to enter sympathetically into the other side's frame of reference. This guaranteed that the disputants would not, and could not, come to agreement. And, it must be acknowledged, there was an undeniable spiritual appeal to Waldenström's approach, to ask, concerning any teaching, "Where is that written?" That approach seemed so simple, and so spiritual. Those not knowledgeable about the history of Christian thought and the development of Christian doctrine would not be aware of the major pitfalls hidden in Waldenström's "deceptively simple" method.

There is a further spiritual appeal in Waldenström's interpretation of God, the interpretation which constantly emphasizes God's unfailing love for sinners, and does not take in to account Scripture passages which show the side of God where he is also a judge who will, when it cannot be avoided, condemn rebellious human beings to a fitting punishment. Waldenström's single-minded emphasis only on God's love does give an appeal to his theory of the atonement which is not so easily found in the traditional vicarious satisfaction theory. However, the attractiveness of Waldenström's one-sided interpretation did not make his interpretation true—even though it won him support among those not alert to the pitfalls inherent in his approach.

So, then, to sum up this second point, Waldenström rejected not just a single traditional Christian doctrine, but he also rejected the entire way of doing theology and forming Christian doctrine which had guided and served the church for the previous eighteen centuries. Waldenström simply assumed a "pure biblical" approach, and refused to see any difficulty with that method.

It can be mentioned, as an appendix to this section, that some of Waldenström's followers later presented Waldenström with the challenge of finding biblical text support for certain doctrines which Waldenström regarded as true. In some cases he was unable to find such textual support, and this difficulty caused him no small amount of distress. He sometimes wondered if he had made a mistake, in committing himself to the question, "*Var står det skrivet?*" That, however, is another topic, for another day.

III. The overall context of the debate

Just *why* was it that the combatants in this dispute were so intense in their own point of view, and so unable or unwilling to see value in the opposing point of view? As mentioned earlier, many people took their stand in this discussion partly, or mostly, on the basis of something other than just the analysis of biblical texts. So, then, what were some of the non-logical, non-theological factors which caused some people to favor one side, some the other?

No doubt one factor was straight-out human sinfulness. No serious human endeavor is free from the taint of sin. Another factor in the atonement controversy was a lack of sophistication among the disputants about the limits of human knowledge, especially regarding the things of God and the interpretation of Scripture. This naïveté about human limits led people to be overconfident about the accuracy and the adequacy of their own point of view regarding God and God's will, and about what Christ accomplished on the cross. Further, controversy tended to harden people in their differing positions. But when equally knowledgeable and equally spiritual people disagree on doctrine, that is a strong hint in support of the common-sense observation, that even the best of human reasoning and human understanding is not infallible. God does not make it clear—at least not in any obvious and indisputable way—which side in a theological controversy is right. It has been ever thus. However, this insight seems not to have occurred to the disputants on either side of this controversy. Modesty, humility, and realism were in short supply.

Historical factors also played in to the dispute. As has been mentioned, the State Church of Sweden at the time of the atonement controversy presented a stiff, formal, authoritarian expression of the faith, held to rigidly orthodox doctrine, and intensely opposed lay initiatives. There was also a rigid and powerful class system in place in Sweden at that time. The state church was closely tied to the government, and to the upper classes. The church was used by the powerful in society as a tool for oppressing the lower classes, and for preserving a system which kept “the little people” in poverty. This oppression took at least two forms. First of all, the church taught that it held “the power of the keys,” that is, the power to forgive sins, or to deny forgiveness. If poor peasants failed to be subservient to their (supposed) superiors, then it seemed to them that they thus risked eternal damnation. Also, one of the distinctive characteristics of life in Sweden, different from the other Scandinavian countries and the other northern European countries, was that in Sweden the government administered aid to the poor, not through government agencies, but through the church. Swedish pastors and lay people were accustomed to the church being the source of aid to the poor. The church's control of aid for the needy made the needy hesitant to challenge the church and the upper classes, which would be to lose their eligibility for aid when they might find themselves in desperate circumstances.

In spite of these potent forces of oppression, the state church nevertheless increasingly lost control of the common people. As the influence of pietism spread, people began gather for Bible study and worship (sometimes even including communion) in homes and rented halls, apart from the state church. The government and the church joined in fighting against such independent church life, especially against independent celebrations of the Lord's Supper, but they found themselves unable to contain the force of this intense spiritual movement. Among the pietists, leaders emerged, some of them well-educated pastors, but some of them laymen without much formal education. Because these zealous believers drew strength and inspiration by *reading* together from the Bible and from evangelical pietist writings, these pietists, and

especially their lay leaders, became known as *läsare*, readers. These lay leaders were very influential.

The *läsare* movement grew relatively rapidly. But from the beginning there was division within its ranks. A more conservative or traditionalist group of these pietists wanted to remain members of the state church if at all possible, and to find ways to survive and function as pietists without a formal break from the Church of Sweden. This group took for granted the correctness of Lutheran doctrine, and saw themselves as “a church within the church,” as more truly Lutheran than the state church with its “dead formalism.”

However, another group of Swedish pietists—including a few pastors—felt little bound to the state church or to Lutheran doctrine. They saw little reason to cling to the spiritually-dead state church and its teachings. More so than the other pietists, this second group engaged in revivals, and assumed that any true Christian would have had a conversion experience. Waldenström had at first held that spiritual renewal needed to take place within the state church framework. But in time, almost against his will, he was conscripted by the more radical pietists as their leader and their theologian. In time he bowed to the inevitable, and took up the mantle of providing strong leadership for the more radical form of Swedish pietism.

The majority of the Swedish pietist pastors and lay people who came to America in the mid to late 1800s, insofar as they thought about the matter at all, thought of themselves as Lutherans. But they did not at first place a lot of emphasis on their Lutheranism as such. However, in America they found an important difference from their situation back in Sweden. In Sweden they had had the Lutheran state church and a nation of Lutherans as the background for their life and work. Thus they didn't have to stress Lutheran teaching; they could just assume it as a given. In America, however, these Swedish Lutherans found themselves in a sharply different situation. Here they found themselves surrounded by Methodists, Baptists, Congregationalists, non-denominational revivalists, Mormons, and other varieties of religionists, all eager to snatch up any unwary Swedish immigrant who might wander within their grasp.

In this setting, Swedish Lutherans in America had to decide what kind of a church they were going to be. Especially they had to decide whether they were going to emphasize Christian faith according to a looser form of the pietist model, without much reference to Lutheranism, or whether, on the other hand, they were going to be pietists within a specifically Lutheran framework. Though a significant number of the Swedish immigrants favored the former position, the majority perspective was to stay within the Lutheran tradition. Thus most Swedish pastors in America soon came to place more emphasis than they had in “the old country” on adherence to traditional Lutheran doctrine and practice.

Olof Olsson, here in Lindsborg, is a good example of this tendency. He and his group had come to America in 1869 with the thought, originally, of establishing here a truly “pure” and independent Lutheran church, unaffiliated with any synod. Every member would have to be examined carefully regarding the authenticity of his or her faith. Even Pastor Olsson's wife Anna

had to undergo a rigorous examination by the Bethany Church Council before she could be admitted to membership in the congregation. However, within a year Pastor Olsson, largely out of pragmatic concerns, realized the necessity of bringing Bethany Lutheran Church into the Augustana Synod, and of accepting into membership even those Swedes who had not had a conversion experience. Olsson saw that Bethany Church needed to serve all the Swedes in the community, and not just those whose faith fit the revivalist model. However, many of the more non-traditional pietist members of Bethany Church did not like this change of emphasis, and their resentment against Pastor Olsson's changes contributed to the division which was soon to come. And the situation was similar throughout Swedish America, with tension between the more traditional and the more radical pietists.

When the atonement controversy broke out, Chicago was the primary center for the controversy in this country. But Lindsborg too was a major center for the debate, and had an importance in the dispute which was out of all proportion to the community's modest numerical size. This was largely because Lindsborg pastor Olof Olsson quickly took a leading national role in the controversy, in spite of his isolation in a small community on the far western edge of Augustana Synod territory. Olsson had one of the sharpest minds of all the Swedish pastors in America, and he quickly began publishing an unending series of magazine and newspaper articles vehemently criticizing the Waldenström point of view. Soon he also had a book in print denouncing the new teachings.

It is notorious how in Lindsborg men argued the atonement issue intensely, raising their voices, pounding their fists, and hurling Bible proof texts at each other. The struggle raged everywhere—in homes, in the stores, on street corners, everywhere. A fateful day came on April 12, 1874, Good Friday, when Pastor Olof Olsson, from the pulpit, expelled from Bethany Lutheran Church sixteen communicant members for their "Waldenströmian sympathies." This was very painful for the sensitive Pastor Olsson. And some of those he excommunicated were his close friends from way back in Sweden. But Pastor Olsson took this severe action because, with grief, he judged that he *had* to do it, because (as he saw it) the very *truth* of the Gospel was at stake!

But Pastor Olsson's opponents within the congregation, on the other hand, felt that Pastor Olsson was being far too controlling, too much like the state church clergy back in Sweden. These dissidents had not come all the way from Sweden to America, only to once again fall under the control of an authoritarian church. The dissidents judged that they *had* to resist Olsson's controlling impulses, because (as they saw it) the very *freedom* of the Gospel was at stake! For example, these dissident members insisted that they must have the freedom to host traveling (non-Lutheran) ministers in their homes when these traveling evangelists came through town, without having to worry about whether Pastor Olsson would approve or not. The immediate point is that Swedish Lutheran pastors throughout this country, already feeling

besieged by the religious pluralism of the American scene, did not at the time feel either able or willing to be tolerant toward either the ideas or the followers of Paul Peter Waldenström.

It just so happens that it was the atonement controversy which actually, a bit later, propelled Olof Olsson into the position of president and professor of theology at Augustana Theological Seminary in Rock Island. When Olof Olsson first came to America, he was viewed with suspicion by the leaders of the Augustana Synod, because of his perceived separatist tendencies. When Pastor Olsson applied for himself and his congregation to be admitted into the Augustana Synod, Synod officials were not sure they wanted Olsson in the Augustana ministerium. But he was admitted. And his powerful and single-minded defense of traditional Lutheran teaching during the atonement controversy, just a few years later, made him—ironically—the man whom the Synod soon wanted to come to the Seminary to train future Augustana pastors in theology.

And incidentally—speaking of irony—it is worthy of mention, as an interesting aside, that at one time, in the days before Pastor Paul Peter Waldenström, by his fateful printed sermon, precipitated the atonement controversy, the Augustana Synod had tried hard to get the brilliant and admired Waldenström to come to America and become the professor of theology at Augustana Seminary. Waldenström seriously considered accepting that call, and only accidental circumstances within his own family finally ruled out that possibility. It staggers the imagination, to think how different the history of the Augustana Lutheran Church might have been, had Waldenström been professor of theology at Rock Island when he would have published that fateful sermon.

But, to return now to our main thread of thought: One additional factor in the background of the atonement controversy, both in Sweden and in America, was the element of class conflict. That is, the more a person felt “looked down on” by supposed social superiors, the more likely that person might be to reject Lutheranism and to side with the Waldenströmiens. To side with the anti-establishment break-away group was to defy conventional authority, which, for people feeling “put down,” could be a very satisfying experience. In this and other ways, then, non-theological factors made their contributions to the sad dispute.

The atonement controversy was a costly experience for the Augustana Synod. It consumed a great deal of energy, and caused much personal pain. A significant number of pastors and members were lost to the Synod. On the other hand, the departure of many of the dissidents enabled the Augustana Synod to clarify and rally around its traditional middle-of-the-road orthodox Lutheran doctrinal position, and thus to achieve a greater degree of unity. Yet, even so, there remained different styles of piety within the Synod. Indeed, most in the synod were pietists of one stripe or another. But one distinctive strong pietist strain, widely represented throughout Augustana, found institutional embodiment in such places as the Lutheran Bible Institute in its several campuses. The distinctive LBI kind of pietism never gained the ascen-

dancy in Augustana, but its influence was always widely felt, and Augustana would not have been what it was without the influence of this somewhat more earnest form of pietism.

IV. Concluding reflections

It is well over a hundred years since the atonement controversy was at its height. Many things are much the same now as they were back then. Human nature doesn't change. But in more recent generations many important things have changed much for the better. Today there is more of a spirit of co-operation between churches. For the most part, members of one denomination look upon members of other Christian denominations as brothers and sisters in Christ. (There are of course some exceptions, but fortunately they represent only a small part of the Christian family.) Today we can look back with appreciation to Oliver Cromwell, who in the mid-1600s, in the midst of an intense doctrinal controversy in England, delivered to the members of his church these immortal words: "I beseech you, in the bowels of Christ, think it possible you may be mistaken." A recent writer goes on to comment, "Yes, it is possible! And we realize now," he continues, "that if a special mansion were reserved in heaven for all who claim to possess absolute truth, then that one corner of heaven itself would be—well, more like the other place." The author of those words, a Presbyterian, expressed appreciation for his own heritage, but he went on to say, "It is just as well that God, in God's manifold wisdom, did not make the whole world Presbyterian."

Surely we can rejoice that today's relationship between the Lutheran Church and its members, and the Evangelical Covenant Church and its members—that the relationship between us is much better now than at the time of bitterest conflict. Today we Lutherans can ask, Have the Covenant Church folk seen things in their walk with Christ which we Lutherans have missed? And perhaps they too will from time to time ask themselves that question in relationship to the Lutherans.

The leaders in the atonement controversy of the 1800s are not to be *too* much faulted for their perhaps excessive inflexibility. They did the best they could with who they were and the times in which they lived. And Olof Olsson in particular did in later years repent of some of his earlier harsh judgments, and did achieve some reconciliation with his erstwhile opponents.

In any case, we twenty-first century folk have the advantage of a century-plus of further reflection, since the great atonement controversy. So we are more able to ask, Is there perhaps room in the church for more than just one interpretation of just *how* Christ's life, death, and resurrection achieved God's gracious work of salvation? Doctrine does matter! But some doctrines are more central to the Christian faith than are other doctrines. The issues in the atonement controversy, regarding the specific *how* of Jesus' winning our salvation, are not at the very heart and core of the Christian faith. The heart and core is Jesus Christ, incarnate, crucified, and raised from the dead for our salvation. But our human understanding of that core Gospel truth is

sufficiently limited that it may be wise for us to do as Scripture itself does, namely, to live with, and work with, more than one way of talking about the atonement, realizing that each interpretation supplements the others, and adds to the richness of our overall understanding of the grace of God. Such an approach can make it easier for us to appreciate other believers whose doctrines differ from our own.

Against that background, I will, in concluding, make my own these words from a noted theologian: “It is not easy to be open-minded about the faith by which we propose to live, and die—but that is the obligation of every aware Christian today.”

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