

Reading Like a Pietist

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In the summer of 1870 while Paul Peter Waldenström and a group of fellow pastors were talking shop one of them exclaimed, “How glorious it is that God is reconciled.” Axel Andersson takes up the tale:

Without further deliberation Waldenström replied with the question which after-wards became the slogan of the controversy about the atonement: “Where is that written?” The response of the clergymen present was merely to laugh at the question. Everyone knew quite well that it was written almost everywhere in the Bible. But when they began to seek specific passages none could be found.¹

For Waldenström this became a matter of serious study. Andersson continues, “In spite of the fact that he searched through the Bible several times he could not find a single text which stated God was reconciled.”² In 1872 he published his famous, if rather blandly named, “Sermon for the Twentieth Sunday after Trinity”—a sermon that was never actually preached.³ Waldenström’s conclusions are summarized by Andersson as follows:

1. That no change occurred in God’s heart because of the fall;
2. That it was therefore no wrath in God’s heart which through the fall came in the way of man’s salvation.
3. That the change which occurred through the fall was a change in man only, in that he became sinful and fell from God and the life which is in him;
4. That as a result of this fall a reconciliation was necessary for man’s salvation; but not a reconciliation which appeased God and presented him as merciful, but one which removed man’s sin and presented him righteous again;

5. That his reconciliation has been achieved in Christ Jesus.⁴

Of the following controversy Karl Olsson writes that “it is impossible within the limits of these pages to sketch adequately the fury and scope of the conflict and its disastrous effects. Families were divided, old friendships dissolved, and Rosenian evangelicals who had formerly worshipped together now eyed each other balefully across a battle line.”⁵ Lutherans on both sides of the Atlantic denounced Waldenström as a heretic. His followers also suffered. In the United States Olsson reports that “J. G. Princell . . . was suspended by the Augustana Synod in 1878 and defrocked the following year.” C. J. Nyvall was “denied the use of the pulpit” in Lindsborg, Kansas, because of his Waldenströmianism, “even though he was the spiritual father of a number of Augustana people. It was the same dreary story,” Olsson concludes, “in a score of places.”⁶

The shock waves were all the greater given that Waldenström was a leader in the Evangelical National Foundation in Sweden, an organization that, according to Glenn P. Anderson, was attempting “to keep the revivals within the bounds of the state church.”⁷ When C. O. Rosenius died in 1868, Waldenström had become the editor of the influential journal *Pietisten*. His apparent defection from Lutheran orthodoxy was thus stunning and disconcerting. But Waldenström was not done. After a year of studying the confessions of the Church he concluded that “the confessions were not a consistent and hence trustworthy guide to the truth of Scriptures.”⁸ As a result, Olsson argues, revival people “shifted the emphasis from confessional to scriptural theology or at least to scriptural study.”⁹ Waldenström was seen either as a dangerous heretic or “as a heroic champion not only for biblical truth but for the right of people to draw their own doctrinal conclusions without reference to the authority of confessions, creeds, clergy, or academic theologians.”¹⁰ Thus did Waldenström and the infant Covenant Church, as Olsson put it in a 1953 article, throw overboard the “astrolabe, the sextant and the compass” and launch “with only the stars of the Holy Scriptures to give it theological direction.”¹¹

I will have more to say about Waldenström’s view of the Bible

later, but at this point suffice it to say that I believe he came by his understanding and use of the Scriptures honestly. However startling his conclusions, Waldenström was following in the footsteps of his Pietist forebears, particularly Philipp Jakob Spener and August Hermann Francke. He was attempting, in other words, to read the Bible like a Pietist. In this reading he was both naïve and brave. He was naïve in pursuing the “brass ring” of Pietism, “a thoroughly consistent and pure biblical doctrine.”¹² With Olsson, “small wonder that when higher criticism began to invade universities and seminaries at the end of the century, and the possibility of thus harmonizing the Scriptures was brought into question, Waldenström published a deeply concerned pamphlet, *Let Us Keep Our Old Bible*.”¹³ On the other hand, he was brave in his passion to follow the biblical text where it took him regardless of creeds and confessions. This too he got from Spener and Francke and passed on as a heritage to later Pietist readers in the Evangelical Covenant Church.

One of those readers was David Nyvall, a Swedish immigrant to America instrumental in the founding of North Park College and Theological Seminary—now North Park University. Like Waldenström he was an educator, preacher, writer, and controversialist. At the beginning of the twentieth century Nyvall contended against a very different form of confessionalism: American fundamentalism. He also wrote a series of articles entitled “Let Us Keep Our Bible” in conscious echo of Waldenström’s earlier broadside. Nyvall was a very different spirit than Waldenström and faced a very different foe. He was a poet, an artist, given to subtlety, mystery, and beauty. His more prosaic colleagues found him at times perplexing and even maddening. Nyvall’s reading of the scriptures looked back to Waldenström and beyond to Spener and Francke. Nevertheless, he plotted his own course in navigating the waters of American fundamentalism and its challenge to the American Covenant Church.

These two distinct Pietist readers of Scripture not only gave shape to the Covenant Church’s view of Scripture, but prevented it from succumbing during the early part of the twentieth century to either “modernism” or “fundamentalism”—despite the fears of the denomination’s left and right wings. I will argue that this Pietist reading is clearly reflected in the Covenant Church’s latest statement on

the Bible. That paper suggests, to me at least, that Karl Olsson perhaps overstated his case when he argued that the Covenant Church, in following Waldenström, had tossed astrolabe and compass overboard in order to navigate by the stars of the Bible. Despite being non-confessional it has preserved a commitment to the historic creeds and confessions, while refusing to privilege any one of them.

Whether the Covenant's paper on the Bible will have a measureable impact on a growing and increasingly diverse denomination today is an open question. Many in the church wonder if such a non-confessional, Bible-centered Pietism is enough to preserve the Covenant Church's identity into the next generation. Be that as it may, I will also argue that such a centered scriptural piety that does not reject the broad traditions of the church can make ecumenical conversations possible today. And that, too, is a part of a Pietist heritage.

SPENER AND FRANCKE AS READERS OF THE BIBLE

Dale Brown calls Pietism a "back to the Bible movement."¹⁴ He sums up the Pietist view of the Bible as follows:

1. The supremacy of the Bible above all other external standards.
2. The teleological application of the Scriptures in daily life.
3. True exegesis as the work of the internal testimony of the Holy Spirit.
4. The regenerate understanding of the Scriptures truer than the unregenerate.¹⁵

For Pietists, true theology was *lived* theology. The Bible was not just to be analyzed and used to defend the confessions, be they Roman Catholic, Reformed, or Lutheran. According to F. Ernest Stoeffler, a key question for early Pietists was: "How are the insights of the Bible to be applied to the problems of daily life."¹⁶ For this reason, the Bible was a book for *all* the people of God, not simply the purview of ministers and theologians. This was considered part of the

“priesthood of all believers.”

The Pietists were convinced that they were not simply going back to the Bible, but back to Luther and the other reformers. Had not Luther himself begun the Reformation through reading the Bible for himself and using it to critique the fixed theology of the church? Had not Luther himself called for the “priesthood of every believer” and produced a Bible in the language of the people? The Pietists regarded Lutheran orthodoxy of the seventeenth century to be rigid, formal, and cold. They feared the Lutheran Church was taking on many of the scholastic characteristics and theology of the old Roman Church. They argued that the essence of the faith was not to be found in creedal orthodoxy but, with Stoeffler, “in the personally meaningful relationship of an individual to God.”¹⁷ They had, he continues, a “radical distaste for religious complacency” and expected Christians to pursue perfection in their personal and corporate relationships, as well as their relationships with God.¹⁸ The Pietists who had the most impact on the Swedish Mission Friends were the German Pietists Spener and Francke.

PHILIPP JAKOB SPENER

Spener was schooled in the piety of Johann Arndt and given an excellent theological and biblical education. He was a learned man, a scholar. And yet his instincts were entirely pastoral. According to James Stein, Spener was not “a systematic theologian” but “a shepherd who endeavored to let the divine truth of the gospel impinge upon and change human lives.”¹⁹ His theology was “more biblical than dogmatic.” For Spener, “the Bible had more of a spiritual than a mechanical authority.”²⁰ He had a high view of Scripture’s authority but was principally concerned with “all that we should believe, do, and hope for our salvation.”²¹ Therein was Scripture’s authority and not in history or science. According to Stein, he believed more in the inspiration of the authors than the inspiration of the words themselves. The Holy Spirit had inspired the authors to speak and write for the salvation and edification of God’s people. “God had filled his Word with heavenly power and in its use this power breaks forth. The Holy Spirit was with the written word—just as the Orthodox

had said. Still the Bible must be used, if its value was to be received."²² Unless it was used, lived, it was merely ink on a page.

Spener's commitment to the Bible is clearly seen in his most famous work, *Pia Desideria* (Pious desires). In his "Proposals to Correct Conditions in the Church" the Bible takes pride of place. He calls for "a more extensive use of the Word of God among us." He wants the Bible read in homes, studied in groups, and used in worship. He called for "the establishment and diligent exercise of the spiritual priesthood." This involved the serious study of the Word of God by the so-called laity, as well as the clergy. "Assumed here" according to Stein, "was that laity should take ownership of their own religious lives," including "the lay use of Scripture."²³ Pastors and people alike were called both to know and live the Scriptures, entrusting themselves to the Holy Spirit, who would make the meaning and life implications plain.

Spener was himself a serious student of the Bible. Both Spener and Francke were advocates of learning the biblical languages.²⁴ They were also concerned to do careful exegesis of the text. If the Bible and not the creeds and confessions held ultimate authority for Christians, careful and close study of the text was required. Spener's doctoral dissertation was an exposition and interpretation of Revelation 9:13-21. In the dissertation, entitled "Mohammedanism Foretold in the Angels of the Euphrates in St. John's Apocalypse," he defended the dubious thesis that the "hordes of vicious cavalry" released on hapless humanity in the passage reflected the rise of Islam.²⁵ But even here he took the occasion to "castigate Western Christendom for its sins." Even so abstruse a book as Revelation and as violent text as 9:13-21 could serve both the purification of the church and encouragement to holy living.²⁶ Apocalyptic speculation had to connect with life.

Spener successfully defended his dissertation, but Stein suggests the argumentative character of his defense "caused Spener to deplore the misuse of academic disputation."²⁷ The Bible was to serve the deepening of spiritual life and the purification of communal life, not be given over to professors for dissection and disputation. This conviction too found its way into *Pia Desideria*. A tolerance for differences and openness to the other was written on the heart of Spener

and his followers. “We must beware,” he wrote, “how we conduct ourselves in religious controversies with unbelievers and heretics.” According to Stein, “he reacted against the common belligerent mood of theological debate.” One was to speak up for the truth, but in a modest, loving and “brotherly” fashion.²⁸

AUGUST HERMANN FRANCKE

According to Gary Sattler, although Francke was an heir of Arndt and especially Spener, he was “a father of Pietism in that he gave to Spener’s movement a system.” He brought “an organizational genius to the basic goals of Pietism.”²⁹ Francke’s commitment to education, ministries of compassion, and publishing is well known. He made Halle a center of learning, mission, compassion, and distribution of pious literature—including the Bible. As deeply committed to the application of Scripture to life as Spener, he could be blunt, even harsh with those who failed to live up to his high standards. His “Scriptural Rules for Life,” for example, combines rather detailed pious good advice with occasional outbreaks of legalistic stuffiness.³⁰ It runs to thirty-eight pages in Sattler’s edition. He advises, “Do not speak of your enemies except out of love, to God’s glory and to your neighbor’s best.” He also suggests, “Always and in all company guard yourself against all improper [facial] expressions, gestures, and irregular positioning of your body. It testifies to disorder in your soul and thereby betrays your most private emotions. Your dear Jesus would not have done such.”³¹

Whatever the differences in temperament between Francke and Spener, they agreed about the role of the Bible. Brown argues that “even more than Spener, Francke is regarded as having placed the Bible at the center of the Christian life.”³² He insisted that the Holy Spirit “would enable the dead letter of the sacred writings to become a living power within us and . . . enlighten the mind of the believer in understanding.”³³ The word of God “carries life in itself like a grain of seed. . . . So the Word and Spirit cannot be separated.”³⁴ Also like Spener, Francke insisted that the “gift of interpretation . . . belongs not to the ungodly, but is with that assembly which is governed and sanctified by the Holy Spirit.”³⁵ Brown asserts that Francke’s stance

in this matter was “somewhat more radical and subjective” than Spener’s.³⁶ For both, the scriptures came alive as they were heard and lived by the impetus of the Holy Spirit.

Like Spener, Francke was committed to reading the Bible in the original languages. He recommended working on long passages and “advised students [to] carry Greek pocket editions with them and look up texts frequently as they are cited.” He advised the study of grammar and reading passages out loud in Greek and Hebrew.³⁷ In his “Guide to the Reading and Study of the Holy Scriptures,” he brought the “exegetical” and “spiritual” reading of the text together. He wrote: “Reading as it respects the LETTER of Scripture, divides itself into three branches: GRAMMATICAL, HISTORICAL, and ANALYTICAL. As it respects the Spirit of the Word, it comprehends four: EXPOSITORY, DOCTRINAL, INFERENTIAL and PRACTICAL.”³⁸

Francke combined the serious, close reading of the Bible as a historical and literary document in its own right with the conviction that it was an instrument of the Holy Spirit for salvation and edification. Later believers and scholars would separate what Francke kept together. His exegetical method, his historical consciousness and commitment to hearing the Bible in its own right, would lead to the historical-critical method and the higher criticism that so alarmed Waldenstrom. His insistence on the role of the Spirit in making the Word alive for the individual would lead to extreme subjectivism in the reading and appropriation of the text—outcomes, I suspect, that would alarm both Spener and Francke.

SUMMARY OF A PIETIST VIEW OF THE BIBLE

Spener and Francke’s understanding of the Bible and its function in the lives of individuals and the community may be summed up as follows.

1. The Bible must be studied as a text and not simply used as a proof-text. The Bible must be allowed to speak for itself and not be interpreted by use of creedal or confessional texts.

2. The Bible is, therefore, superior to creeds and confessions. At their best they are only accurate summaries of what the Bible teaches. This perhaps calls their necessity into question.

3. The Bible is a *lived* text. If the scriptures are not put into practice in the lives of individuals and their communities they are only ink on the page or a source of useless disputations of theologians and church bureaucrats.

4. The Bible is empowered by the Spirit to awaken and enliven faith. Without the presence of the Spirit, the Bible remains only seed and does not spring to life. This suggests only the regenerate can accurately read and understand the Bible.

5. The Bible's authority lies in leading individuals and the community to salvation and a pious life, not in its history, chronology, or science.

6. The Bible is a document of the *people*. It is not just for scholars, pastors, and other church leaders. This is implied in the Reformation principle of the priesthood of all believers.

The Pietists, then, in a manner of speaking, read the Bible as a "centered" and not "bounded set." At the center, for the Pietist reader of Scripture, was *new life* produced by the Spirit as the Scriptures were read and lived by the people. The boundaries were not set by scholarly truth claims about the Bible or churchly creeds and confessions. This meant, for one thing, that differences of opinion about the Bible's meaning should be tolerated and even expected. The reason to read and study Scripture was not to find or defend correct doctrine, but to elicit new life within oneself or one's community. This in the end was, of course, the Spirit's work, but it could be encouraged by the accurate preaching and teaching of the Word.

WALDENSTRÖM AS PIETIST READER

The nineteenth-century Mission Friends in Sweden and the United States wore the mantels of Spener and Francke. This is seen clearly in the earliest literature. For example, one of the first attempts at a theology of the Mission Friends in America was written in 1900 by Axel Mellander, dean of the decade-old seminary at North Park. Of the Mission Friends he writes: "In teaching they kept to the doctrinal concepts they had inherited from the Lutheran Church. But their interest in the Christlike life was greater than in questions of doctrine."³⁹ Nevertheless, it was a question of doctrine, Mellander ac-

knowledges, that finally separated the Mission Friends from their Lutheran sisters and brothers. He cites the aforementioned atonement controversy as the source of the final break. With Waldenström, Mellander and other Mission Friend leaders insisted that creeds and confessions must be subject to the scriptures, and not the other way around. In this, of course, they were reflecting the views of Spener and, especially, Francke. Mellander would later insist, however, in response to critics, who said “the Covenant does not have a confession of faith,” that to the contrary the Covenant Church had a very clearly articulated confession: “The Covenant holds God’s Word, the Holy Scriptures of the Old and New Testament as the only perfect rule for faith, doctrine, and conduct.”⁴⁰ That confession remains unchanged in the church’s constitution to this very day.

Such sentiments were expressed over and over again by Covenant leaders in early decades of the twentieth century. Consider the views recorded in 1910 by C. V. Bowman, who would in subsequent years become the president of the Covenant Church (1927-1932) and one of its most effective early historians: “In the context of accepting the New Testament and ideal church principle, there naturally followed the surrender of any established confessions (creeds) as conditions for membership in the churches. The Bible became the only infallible rule for faith and life of a people and consequently the only necessary confession of faith. All human decisions about how the Bible should be interpreted were abandoned as being not only untrustworthy but also superfluous.”⁴¹ The final rather startling line would suggest that Bowman imagined that the plain meaning of the Bible was clearly on the surface and required only application, not interpretation. It was also, of course, a swipe at both the creeds and theologians. His views were not atypical.

Mellander and Bowman’s convictions reflect not only the seventeenth-century Pietists but the particular slant put on the Pietist understanding of the Bible by P. P. Waldenström. He became *the* Pietist reader and interpreter of the Bible for many early Mission Friends. According to my colleague Philip Anderson, “For the American Covenant, with all of its diversity, Waldenström was a kind of Martin Luther. . . . It might be argued that without Waldenström there might have never been an American Covenant, at least in its present nonconfessional form.”⁴² To this very day,

he concludes, “thanks largely to Waldenström, the Covenant is noncreedal in its reliance on biblical authority and has lived with a core identity that must be experienced in the community of faith, not analyzed, accepted, or argued intellectually.”⁴³

So what was Waldenström’s approach to the reading, interpretation, and application of the Bible? The atonement controversy and the slogan “Where is it written?” suggest that, in the words of Rune W. Dahlén, “He started from the Bible as the complete and self-evident authority that in the broad view everyone could agree on.”⁴⁴ The Bible was a message from God that anyone could read and understand with sufficient effort. It did not require the interference of creeds or the expertise of theologians. Dahlén suggests, however, that by the turn of the century it had become clear to Waldenström that this would not be enough. Historical criticism was challenging “the conviction that the Bible had the definitive answer from God himself.”⁴⁵ P.W. would grumble that the liberal scholars and church leaders of Sweden “accepted only one declaration in the Apostles’ Creed’s second article, i.e. the words crucified, dead and buried.”⁴⁶ By 1910 Waldenström was using the word “inerrant” to describe the Bible’s authority: “The Bible is the inerrant rule for religious faith and righteous life.”⁴⁷ Waldenström is still enough of a Pietist reader to center inerrancy in “religious faith and righteous life,” but he was clearly alarmed at the erosion of the Bible’s authority.

What did Waldenström do to shore up that authority? At this point, he began what some may have considered an unexpected sojourn into canon and textual criticism. He considered both disciplines as ways to find “the pure Word of God.”⁴⁸ By pursuing textual criticism he sought to discover a Greek text as close to the original words of the apostles as possible. By pursuing canon criticism he meant to eliminate any book in the New Testament that was not clearly of apostolic origin. He wrote of the book of Hebrews that “the writer of the letter, in several places, bases his arguments on a misunderstanding of the cited Old Testament texts. Such misunderstandings would have been impossible for an apostle.”⁴⁹ Eventually he determined that seven New Testament books were not of apostolic origin and “may not be used as a basis for Christian teaching and faith.”⁵⁰ Waldenström was seeking a sure foundation for faith and

life, and thought to secure it in the very words of the apostles. This suggests, ironically perhaps, that the ultimate authority for Waldenström is *not* the Bible per se, but the *apostolic message* it contained.

Though Waldenström's use of words like *inerrancy* and his insistence on the final authority of the Bible may suggest he had much in common with emerging American fundamentalism, according to Dahlén, his concerns were really quite different. He was looking back with fear to the rationalism of the 1700s. "If that rationalism again became dominant," Dahlén writes, "it would mean that fewer people would be converted and that giving to foreign missions would diminish."⁵¹ He made every effort to defend the apostolic message of the New Testament to enable mission work and preserve piety within the Covenant churches. In this he went to ludicrous extremes: "In 1915 a central library was erected at the mission school at Lidingö, and there they locked the new theological books in a special 'poison cabinet' to which the students did not have access."⁵² Yes, for Waldenström the Bible was inerrant, but its inerrant authority lay principally in the spiritual and religious teachings of Jesus and the apostles, and in their application to faith and life.

As Olsson suggested, Waldenström's defense of the Bible and his attack on higher criticism smacked of panic. His younger contemporary David Nyvall would offer another kind of defense of the Bible and its place in the life of individuals and ministry of the church. His apology would be serene where Waldenström's was frenetic. It would be no less firm, however. Nyvall's foe was not state church confessionalism and higher criticism, but rather the political and theological perversities, as he saw them, of American fundamentalism. Although his Pietist reading of the Bible looked back with appreciation to Waldenström, his former teacher in Gävle, he took the conversation in a very different direction. His perspective was to have a profound impact on the American Covenant Church—an impact still felt to this very day.

DAVID NYVALL AS PIETIST READER

According to Karl Olsson, David Nyvall was "a Jacob, sinewy, mercurial, troubling, a true 'God-wrestler,' with his eyes so much on

the future than he seemed now and then to lose touch with present political realities.”⁵³ Olsson thought him an “artist” rather than a “scientist.” When it came to biblical exegesis, he was impatient with the kind of “questions of authorship, sources, and texts” that Waldenström worried “as a dog worries a bone.”⁵⁴ He was, Olsson writes, “a serious, solemn, and dignified man—not given to playfulness. His attempts at humor were often misunderstood or fell flat.”⁵⁵ In 1925 he found himself in a fight with an opponent as different from him as one could imagine. Their conflict produced a series of articles in which Nyvall defended what he understood to be his, and the Covenant Church’s, understanding of the Bible. The series was entitled “Let Us Keep Our Bible,” published in the Minneapolis-based Covenant newspaper *Veckobladet*. The immediate impetus was the so-called “Scopes Monkey Trial” in Dayton, Tennessee, and, in particular, the fundamentalist defense of the Bible by William Jennings Bryan.

His opponent was Gustaf F. Johnson. He had emigrated to Texas at the age of ten and after serving in Fredrik Franson’s mission in Japan he pastored the Free Church in Rockford, Illinois, and, most famously, the Minneapolis Tabernacle, now First Covenant Church in Minneapolis. Johnson was a born fighter. Olsson writes: “He seems to have enjoyed conflict and much of the comic spin-off.”⁵⁶ North Park Seminary dean Nils Lund wrote in his diary of him, “You must understand that Johnson is like an aeroplane. He needs resistance to fly.”⁵⁷ The outcome of the dialogue, if one may call it that (Nyvall was asked by the editors to write a series of articles and Johnson simply began responding to each one), was a conflict rooted in earlier controversies with Johnson and would continue to vex the Covenant Church for decades to come. In some ways the question was a simple one. Would the Covenant Church preserve the “centered set” reading of the Pietists or be drawn into the more “bounded set” reading of American fundamentalism?

In the end, Nyvall’s views for the most part prevailed for the church—but that is another story. My concern is not the dialogue per se, or the resulting controversy, but in Nyvall’s Pietist reading of the Bible. There is a sense in which Nyvall sees fundamentalism as just another form of confessionalism. He critiques “those proud people

who believe their opinions on the Bible are necessarily the opinions of the Bible and that their thoughts on God and his great world are necessarily God's thoughts, although now as ever his thoughts are so much higher than those of men [sic] as the heavens are higher than the earth."⁵⁸ He accuses Bryan and his colleagues of a form of "materialism." "Of all the materialism," he writes, "there is none so deadly as the Scripture interpretation that ministers not to the New Testament, which is the spirit that gives life, but to the letter that kills."⁵⁹ Like the Pietists, Nyvall is concerned with the Bible as a source of life, not as a source of "science." The inner reality of the Bible "cannot be spoken nor understood barely by letters, because the letters themselves belong to the world and the things of the world. *It must be spoken in words which the Holy Ghost teaches, in words to be spiritually discerned.*"⁶⁰ When the fundamentalist reads the Bible as a scientific, literalistic text, the scriptures are misunderstood and misused.

Interestingly, Nyvall combines his critique of the literalistic reading of the Bible with a critique of Bryan's political views. It is clear that he sees Bryan's attempts to write the laws of the Bible into the laws of the state as an attempt to produce a state church in America. "We do not want any State Church in this country," he writes, "not even under Bryan. He is no doubt a perfectly sincere man, a good Christian politician, if anyone, but he is in the habit of forcing his convictions through the means of popular voting, and voting has never been a very reliable support of the interests of faith. Votes may help us one day and destroy us the next."⁶¹ He concludes in good Pietist fashion: "The Scriptures reveal themselves to those who seek in them what is there. But if we expect to find in the Scriptures what certainly is not there, Astronomy, Chemistry, Biology, and the satisfactions of political ambition and the like, then the Scriptures will become a closed book to us and might become a dangerous book."⁶²

In a subsequent article, Nyvall is clearly concerned that a fundamentalist reading of the Bible will lead to requirements and expectations of individuals and congregations that do not lead to either salvation or maturity. "The most important content of the Bible," he insists, "is neither law nor history, but matters of faith and salvation. And it is these we threaten by our manifold legislation in the name of

the Bible. We hold so many clubs over the heads of our fellow humans that there is little time and less passion to speak the Gospel to them.”⁶³ He seems to think that his fundamentalist opponents are in their own sense “rationalists” and even “modernists.” “When we read something that we do not understand, and immediately draw the conclusion that it is wrong, have we not thereby said that only that which we understand is correct? But if that is implied, in what way do we distinguish ourselves from other rationalists, who also hold that only that which they understand is correct?”⁶⁴ He scathingly suggests that science is not “the only or the worst enemy. Where the Bible is concerned, our worst enemies are not outside but inside the walls.” He concludes, “there is only one place where the Bible is securely ours. And that is neither in laws or in schools, or even in the churches, but in our hearts.”⁶⁵ These views are firmly rooted in Pietism, but does it concede too much to subjectivity? I will return to this question.

In his fourth essay, Nyvall turns to the question of whether and how one must believe in the Bible. He worries that the fundamentalists want to substitute believing in the Bible for believing in God: “It is possible,” he writes, “to believe in the Bible instead of believing in God. . . . The holiest objects are the first to become idols.”⁶⁶ One no more becomes a Christian by believing in the Bible, he insists, than does a Roman Catholic by believing in the church and the Pope.⁶⁷ “No institution and no book,” he argues, “no matter how holy it may be, can replace a living faith in the living God. And man [sic] cannot lose his Bible in a more frightful way than in this way: that it becomes an idol.”⁶⁸ Near the end of the essay he concludes: “To keep our Bible involves in its deepest meaning that it becomes for me God’s word about Christ, bearing fruit through the Spirit. It concerns something essentially greater and more indispensable than knowledge and legislation and reform. It makes the Bible into a word of life.”⁶⁹

In the next essay, Nyvall addresses “verbal inspiration.” By this he means “the position that the Holy Scriptures, word for word, yes, letter for letter, are dictated by God or the Holy Spirit to persons who repeat this literal message altogether ‘as if God talked through a megaphone.’” He calls this a view that “works more destructively than all rationalism upon biblical faith.”⁷⁰ He argues that a problem

with this understanding of the scripture's identity and authority is that not only do we not have the original text of the New Testament, all of the vernacular texts are obviously translations. If this is the case, what is the real meaning and significance of *verbal* inspiration? Furthermore, he argues, this view turns the biblical authors into "megaphones or mediums" rather than sincere servants of God who cooperated with him and "placed not only their mouths and their hands but their thoughts and their wills at the disposal of truth."⁷¹

Nyvall suggests, moreover, that the earliest readers of the gospels were not troubled by the "differences and contradictions" in the story. "It is not the church but the heretics who sought to suppress this fact by excluding all the Gospels except one so that men should avoid the offense of different expositions."⁷² Christians can "have different ideas" about the "situations and details," he insists, "without any damage to our faith in Christ. The only belief they damage is the belief in verbal inspiration."⁷³ The doctrine of verbal inspiration is really not for the defense of the Bible, Nyvall claims, but "for the defense of dogmas that one cannot defend in any other way because one either will not or cannot believe that one can think about holy things." "It is precisely at this point," he concludes, "that the so-called Fundamentalism allies itself with the so-called Modernism."⁷⁴ They are like people who back around a circle in the opposite direction until they bang into each other.

Nyvall continues his attack on American fundamentalism and its view of the Bible in essay six. He calls it "a modern American orthodoxy" and argues "that it is built on the Westminster Confession, which is for the Calvinist church what the Augsburg Confession is for the Lutheran."⁷⁵ Having thus tarred fundamentalism with the brush of confessionalism, he insists that in the Covenant Church in Sweden and in America "the Holy Scriptures are recognized as the only sufficient and all-sufficient norm with two clear purposes: as a charter of freedom and as a charter of brotherhood."⁷⁶ He argues that the separation from the state church in Sweden had both a negative and a positive dimension. Negatively, it separated the Mission Friends from the assumption that the confessions and Lutheran orthodoxy were more important than "living faith in Christ." Positively, it made it possible to have fellowship and worship with all who had such a

living faith, whether or not they understood their Bibles or interpreted their faith in the same way.⁷⁷ The Mission Friends want to “drink directly from the fountain,” not “from the dippers of others.”⁷⁸

Fundamentalist “orthodoxy” is for Nyvall a return to “the fleshpots of Egypt.” “Our conscience is bound to the Scriptures, in our New Testament, but not bound by meanings and outlooks that lack support there. Can anything be more suitable? Can anything be more desirable? . . . If we have won this freedom through God’s grace,” he continues, “why should we ‘tempt God by wishing to fasten upon the disciples necks a yoke neither we nor our fathers were able to bear?’”⁷⁹ He calls for a “living orthodoxy” born of the scriptures, the traditions, and “the time of awakening.”⁸⁰ There is another kind of orthodoxy—an orthodoxy that seeks to control and enslave. Against this orthodoxy Nyvall is implacably opposed.⁸¹

In his seventh essay Nyvall again links modernists and fundamentalists. Both seem more concerned for their own views, their own interpretations, than they do the living word of God. They also require agreement or then pour scorn on the other. “It is not my brethren who live by the grace of God and seek nourishment for this life in God’s word [with whom my whole nature rises in revolt]. With them I am in essential agreement despite differences in interpretation. No, they are the theologians who give me stone when I ask for bread, these theologians who battle each other, each from his own side of the common position of reading with Bible without edification.”⁸² Nyvall can get along with anyone, right or left, who reads the Bible for *life*. But those who want to turn it into a long argument over theological, historical, or scientific truth, he has no use for.

In Nyvall’s eighth essay he returns to the question of state and church. He is very chary of positive relationships between the two. He argues for a free church organized not around “accepted dogmas” but rather “on the basis of the Holy Scriptures, or more correctly the New Testament, read and interpreted by every man [*sic*], without any restriction on the right of interpretation other than honesty and brotherliness.”⁸³ He worries that denominational structures may get in the way of this essential freedom. When the Spirit is replaced by hierarchy, freedom is truncated by “power questions, board issues, dogmatic questions” instead of “a life question and a faith question.”

Where the Spirit is, he insists, “there is freedom.”⁸⁴ Nevertheless, he wonders if “it is possible to build . . . a union, a denomination on voluntarism and pure spiritual interests, only on faith and life, without the border-guarding inherent in clear and inflexible dogmas, and without the enticements of official power and magnificent services of worship. Is it possible to pass along purely spiritual interests to a second generation?”⁸⁵ This is a poignant and enduring question.

WALDENSTRÖM AND NYVALL AS PIETIST READERS OF THE SCRIPTURES

P. P. Waldenström and David Nyvall are examples of the two sides of a Pietist reading of Scripture. Waldenström increasingly represented the *objective* side. He desperately sought to throw up exegetical and historical breastworks to defend the authority of the Bible against the assaults of historical-critical skepticism. Like many in the evangelical camp who would (and continue to) follow his example, he tried to use the weapons of his rationalist critics against them. Rejecting confessionalism and scorning theology, he seemed to have little choice in the matter. Nyvall, on the other hand, representing the more *subjective* side of Pietism, refusing to permit exegesis and history to either undercut or come to the aid of the scriptures. For him, the witness of the Spirit, the inherent power of the word of God, and the distant defensive perimeter of historic orthodoxy were enough. Whereas Waldenström increasingly moved in the direction of a “bounded set” reading of the Bible, Nyvall remained solidly within the “centered set” reading of his forebears.

Both writers agreed that creeds and confessions were dubious defenders of the Christian faith in general and the Christian scriptures in particular. Both were more than wary of the state church, whether it was the official Lutheran state church of Sweden or the unofficial American state religion of William Jennings Bryan and his fundamentalist defenders. Both agreed that the scriptures were life giving and transforming. They agreed with the power of the Spirit’s presence and witness within the renewed individual and community. For Nyvall, that in itself was nearly enough. For Waldenström, more was needed. I believe that both were somewhat naïve about the

extent of the challenges to their positions and about the effectiveness of their attempts to address those challenges. Exegesis, canon criticism, and textual criticism alone would not be enough to defeat the skeptical historical critics on their own ground. A redeemed individual reading the Scripture on his or her own, empowered by the Spirit, would not be enough to provide the basis for an enduring community. It was as likely a recipe for chaos as it was for community.

READING THE BIBLE IN AMERICA: WALDENSTRÖM
AND NYVALL IN CONTEXT

According to Mark Noll, ever since the Civil War American Christians, particularly American evangelicals and other conservatives, have desperately sought a means of reasserting the authority of the Bible in American life. In his book *The Civil War as a Theological Crisis*, Noll argues that before the war most Americans would have viewed the Bible as the unquestioned authority on life and morality. They would also have assumed they were capable of discerning the plain meaning of the text without the intervention of popes, priests, bishops, or pastors. In the conflict over slavery leading up to the civil war, however, both sides appealed to the Bible to authorize their positions. Noll argues that this led to a “first-order crisis.” “A wide range of Protestants,” he writes, “were discovering that the Bible they had relied on for building up America’s republican civilization was not nearly as univocal, not nearly as easy to interpret, not nearly as inherently unifying for an overwhelmingly Christian people, as they once had thought.”⁸⁶

Noll argues that the Civil War could be understood not only as a war to end slavery and preserve the union, but a kind of “battle for the Bible.” He writes:

With the debate over the Bible and slavery at such a pass, and especially with the success of the proslavery biblical argument manifestly (if also uncomfortably) convincing to most Southerners and many in the North, difficulties abounded. The country had a problem because its most trusted religious authority, the Bible, was sounding an uncertain note. The evangelical Protestant churches had a problem because the mere fact of

trusting implicitly in the Bible was not solving disagreements about what the Bible taught concerning slavery. The country and the churches were both in trouble because the remedy that finally solved the question of how to interpret the Bible was recourse to arms. The supreme crisis over the Bible was that there existed no apparent biblical resolution of the crisis. . . . It was left to those consummate theologians the Reverend Doctors Ulysses S. Grant and William Tecumseh Sherman, to decide what in fact the Bible actually meant.⁸⁷

Realizing, perhaps, that resorting to armed conflict every time there was a dispute over the interpretation of Scripture was impractical, Americans sought to find other means to answer the most pressing biblical and theological questions. Thus began what Noll calls “The Reign of the Scholarly Expert.” This rather dubious reign lasted, Noll argues, “from the founding of the Society of Biblical Literature and Exegesis in 1880 for almost exactly one century—to the discovery of postmodernism in the early 1980s.”⁸⁸ This reign did little to bring order to the interpretive chaos and, in fact, added to it. The populace at large, for the most part, studiously ignored the “scholarly experts” unless they were *their* scholarly experts—much to the chagrin of the folks in the recent Jesus Seminar of New Testament scholars. Biblical scholars with either “conservative” or “liberal” credentials were trotted out in the face of any interpretive crisis like expert defense and prosecution witnesses at a criminal trial. Like the Rosenian Pietists mentioned earlier by Karl Olsson, they glared balefully at one another across battle lines. A bewildering variety of interpretive approaches and specialist “readings” have arisen over the last few decades, furthering eroding the confidence of even those in the academy that the Bible can really become a unifying force for church and society. I am bold to suggest that perhaps reading the Scriptures like a Pietist is a way through our contemporary impasse.

ENDNOTES

1. Axel Anderson, *The Christian Doctrine of the Atonement According to P. P. Waldenström*, trans. G. F. Hedstrand (Chicago: Covenant Book Concern, 1937), 6f.

2. Ibid., 7.
3. The sermon is found in *The Word Is Near You*, ed. and trans. Herbert E. Palmquist (Chicago: Covenant Press, 1974), 101-15.
4. Anderson, *Christian Doctrine of the Atonement*, 8.
5. Karl A. Olsson, *By One Spirit* (Chicago: Covenant Press, 1962), 257.
6. Olsson, *By One Spirit*, 257f.
7. Glenn P. Anderson, ed., *Covenant Roots* (Chicago: Covenant Press, 1980), 101.
8. Karl A. Olsson, *Into One Body . . . by the Cross*, vol. 1 (Chicago: Covenant Press, 1985), 16.
9. Ibid.
10. Ibid.
11. Cited in Scott E. Erickson, *David Nyvall and the Shape of an Immigrant Church* (Uppsala, Sweden: Acta Universitatis Upsaliensis, *Studia Historico-Ecclesiastica Upsaliensia* 38, 1996), 208.
12. Olson, *Into One Body*, 16
13. Ibid.
14. Dale Brown, *Understanding Pietism* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1978), 65.
15. Ibid., 64.
16. F. Ernest Stoeffler, *The Rise of Evangelical Pietism* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1971), 21.
17. Ibid., 13.
18. Ibid., 16.
19. K. James Stein, *Philipp Jakob Spener: Pietist Patriarch* (Chicago: Covenant Press, 1986), 150.
20. Ibid., 151.
21. Ibid.
22. Ibid., 152.
23. Ibid., 99.
24. Brown, *Pietism*, 76f.
25. Stein, *Spener*, 66.
26. Ibid., 66f.
27. Ibid., 67.
28. Ibid., 100.
29. Gary R. Sattler, *God's Glory, Neighbor's Good* (Chicago: Covenant Publications, 1982), 19.
30. See *ibid.*, 199-237.
31. Ibid., 204.
32. Brown, *Pietism*, 65.
33. Ibid., 69.

34. Ibid., 70.
35. Ibid., 72.
36. Ibid., 73.
37. Ibid., 76.
38. Ibid., 78.
39. Anderson, *Covenant Roots*, 65.
40. Ibid., 117.
41. Ibid., 81.
42. Philip J. Anderson, "Paul Peter Waldenström and America: Influence and Presence in Historical Perspective," *Covenant Quarterly* 52 (1994): 5.
43. Anderson, "Waldenström and America," 16f.
44. Rune W. Dahlén, "Waldenström's View of the Bible," *Covenant Quarterly* 52 (1994): 38.
45. Ibid.
46. Ibid., 45.
47. Ibid., 39.
48. Ibid., 40.
49. Ibid.
50. Ibid.
51. Ibid.
52. Ibid., 43.
53. Olsson, *Into One Body*, 255.
54. Ibid., 256.
55. Ibid., 256f..
56. Ibid., 257.
57. Ibid.
58. The series of articles was originally published in Swedish in *Veckobladet* in 1925 and subsequently translated into English by Zenos Hawkinson. An English typescript version is available in the Covenant Archives and Historical Library, Brandel Library, North Park University, Chicago. In what follows, I will cite the articles in the following fashion: Article 1, page 1, will be represented as 1:1. Article 3, page 8, will be 3:8, and so on. The passage quoted here is from 1:1.
59. 1:2.
60. 1:3.
61. 1:7.
62. Ibid.
63. 3:7.
64. 3:8.
65. Ibid.
66. 4:3.

- 67. Ibid.
- 68. Ibid.
- 69. 4:6.
- 70. 5:2.
- 71. 5:6.
- 72. 5:7.
- 73. 5:7f.
- 74. 5:8.
- 75. 6:1.
- 76. 6:2.
- 77. 6:2f.
- 78. 6:3.
- 79. 6:4.
- 80. 6:5.
- 81. 6:8ff.
- 82. 7:7.
- 83. 8:4.
- 84. 8:4.
- 85. 8:5.
- 86. Mark A. Noll, *The Civil War as a Theological Crisis* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006), 32f..
- 87. Ibid., 50
- 88. Ibid., 162.