

# Setting Boundaries or Finding Life?

Reading the Bible in the Covenant Church JOHN E. PHELAN JR.

**T**he Evangelical Covenant Church occupies an unusual space in the American church. Although the church has a high view of Scripture, it does not use the terms “inerrant” or “infallible” to describe its view of the Bible in the resource paper “The Covenant Church and the Bible,” which explores the Covenant view of Scripture. And although it values the historic creeds, its only formal statement of faith is found in the preamble to the Covenant Constitution and Bylaws: “The Evangelical Covenant Church... confesses that the Holy Scripture, the Old and New Testament, is the word of God and the only perfect rule for faith, doctrine, and conduct.”

The Covenant Church has steadfastly refused to produce an elaborate statement of faith such as is found in many evangelical denominations. Pastors being examined for ordination are expected to defend their views and practices from the Holy Scriptures rather than simply demonstrate their acceptance of the denomination’s distinct theology or statement of faith.

How did the Covenant Church

arrive at such a position? How has it sustained its evangelical stance without the rigid boundaries of confessions or statements of faith? Will the church be able to sustain its convictions into the future?

Answers to these questions may be located in our history. From its heritage in Pietism, the Evangelical Covenant Church developed a “centered set” as opposed to a “bounded set” approach to biblical authority and the life of the church. Rather than set boundaries and defend them, the Covenant Church has insisted we move toward the center, the heart of Christian faith as a lived reality. Rather than seeking ways to defend and exclude, the church has sought to assure many points of access to enable even the most skeptical or broken to move toward the heart of God. How did this happen?

Two intellectual and spiritual giants tower over the Covenant Church’s early decades—the Swedish Bible scholar, church leader, politician, and controversialist, Paul Peter Waldenström, and the brilliant mercurial pioneer, Swedish American

educator David Nyvall. They were themselves the heirs of the earlier spiritual genius of the German Pietists Philipp Jakob Spener and August Hermann Francke. Waldenström and Nyvall were *Pietist* readers of the Bible. Their assumptions about the nature and function of the Scriptures shaped their controversies—with the Lutheran State Church in Sweden, in Waldenström’s case, and with American fundamentalism in Nyvall’s. These remote controversies have given shape to the unique position of the Evangelical Covenant Church within the broader context of American evangelicalism.

The seventeenth century was a time of violent controversy in Europe. As the ecclesiastical divisions of the Reformation hardened, anathemas were hurled not only between Protestants and Roman Catholics, but also between the various bodies of the fragmenting Protestant communities. The century was soaked with the blood of martyrs. Spener and Francke were distressed by both the physical violence of war and martyrdom and the metaphorical violence of the



theologians. For them the truth of the Scriptures was not in the particularities of interpretive schemes but in their capacity to give life. They read the Scriptures seriously, closely, and lovingly. They did so not to determine how to best their rivals, but how best to love their God.

Their views may be summed as follows:

1) The Bible must be studied as a text and not simply as a proof-text. It must be allowed to speak for itself and not used simply to support creedal and confessional texts.

2) The Bible is superior to creeds and confessions. At best the creeds are only summaries of what the Bible already teaches.

3) The Bible is a *lived* text. Unless the Scriptures are practiced they are only ink on the page.

4) The Bible is empowered by the Spirit to enliven faith. The presence of the Spirit gives the Scriptures the power to give life.

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*, not just scholars, pastors, and church leaders.

Both Waldenström and Nyvall were profoundly impacted by the Pietists. But they were also affected by the contemporary challenges to their churches. Not only were they very different individuals, they had very different fears. Both distrusted creeds and confessions and rejected the formalism and orthodoxies of the Lutheran State Church of Sweden. Both were committed to the unique and powerful authority of the Scriptures. Both looked to the empowering presence of the Spirit to give life. But Waldenström looked back with fear to the rationalism of the seventeenth century that sapped the strength of the church and robbed the Scriptures of their authority. Nyvall looked with alarm on the emerging fundamentalism of the early twentieth century. He was particularly concerned with the fundamentalists attempt to fix their views of the Bible and science into law, which he saw as an attempt to produce a state church in America.

Waldenström was famous, or infam-

ous, for his views on the atonement. In the summer of 1870 during a conversation with a number of pastors someone exclaimed, "How glorious it is that God is reconciled." Waldenström asked, "Where is that written?" Everyone simply laughed at him. Of course, they thought, the notion that God was reconciled by the death of Christ was everywhere. But Waldenström was not so sure. He began an intensive two-year study of the Bible that convinced him that this notion of the atonement was an imposition upon the biblical text.

In a sermon published in 1872 Waldenström argued that "no change occurred in God's heart because of the fall." God's wrath did not stand in the way of human salvation; the change that occurred through the fall was a change in humans only. A reconciliation was necessary—not a reconciliation that appeased God and enabled God to be merciful, but one that

---

**John E. Phelan Jr.** is professor of theological studies at North Park Theological Seminary. This article is adapted from a presentation at the symposium, *The Augustana Synod and the Covenant Church: Contact, Conflict, and Confluence 1860-2010*, held in November at North Park University in Chicago.

removed human sin and presented humans as righteous. This reconciliation was achieved in Christ Jesus. As the Apostle Paul put it, “in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself” (2 Corinthians 5:19).

For Waldenström, Lutheran orthodoxy had imposed theological views on the church that were not sustainable from the Holy Scriptures. The so-called penal substitutionary view of the atonement found its origin, he claimed, not in the New Testament, but in Anselm of Canterbury and John Calvin. In this he was quite right. But Waldenström’s “Bible only” views were later to give him difficulties. In the later decades of the nineteenth century, higher criticism posed uncomfortable questions of Waldenström. Doubts were expressed about the historicity of certain key events in the New Testament and the accuracy of the reporting of the words of Jesus. To Waldenström these attacks were reminiscent of the rationalist attacks on the Bible in the seventeenth century. Rather than turning to creeds or confessions, Waldenström turned, ironically, to the very historical scholarship that threatened the Scripture’s authority. He studied textual criticism to get as close to the words of the original writings of the apostles as possible. Eventually he raised questions about seven New Testament books he deemed not apostolic and thus lacking the necessary authority for Christian life and practice.

In the face of the threat of rationalism Waldenström turned away from his Pietist heritage in order to protect a text that David Nyvall insisted needed no protection. In his eagerness to protect the Bible, Waldenström seemed to forget the presence and power of the Spirit awakening life and giving rise to faith. Nyvall rejected the attempts of American fundamentalism to protect the Bible by declaring it inerrant. He critiqued “those proud people who believe that their thoughts on God and his great

**Rather than seeking ways to defend and exclude, the church has sought to assure many points of access to enable even the most skeptical or broken to move toward the heart of God.**

world are necessarily God’s thoughts.” The fundamentalists, in other words, were protecting not the word of God, but their *own* words. Nyvall was distressed by the so-called “Scopes monkey trial” and the testimony of William Jennings Bryan. He feared that Bryan and his fundamentalist followers would create a de facto state church in the United States. In this he was perhaps prescient.

Nyvall’s principle objection to the fundamentalist view of the Bible was that it turned the Bible into an idol and not a word of life. In the Bible, believers found words of life, hope, peace, and joy. These words were to be *lived*, not argued over. They were to be lived with, not eliminated. It was the heretics, like Marcion (a second-century Christian who rejected the Old Testament and accepted only the letters of Paul and the Gospel of Luke), Nyvall argued, who tried to suppress the differences and difficulties of the texts by excluding disagreeable ones! Christians can have differences over the interpretation of Scripture, said Nyvall, without any damage to individual faith or the mission of the church. The Scriptures were not a source of boundaries and dogmas, but the source of *life*.

As suggested earlier, we in the Evangelical Covenant Church read the Bible as a *centered set* rather than a *bounded set*. We are concerned with the central message and affirmation of the Bible. We are not interested in setting protective barriers around the Bible. We do not seek to protect the Scriptures with creeds, confessions, or rigid theologies. We seek more than truth in the Bible; we seek *life*. We are “centered set Pietists.” We do not set up boundaries and borders but

rather points of access for people to find new life in Christ. We find in our living faith an occasion for ecumenical conversations, whatever our theological differences. As members of the Evangelical Covenant Church I would hope we would agree with our Pietist

forebears and with Waldenström and Nyvall on the following:

1) The Bible is the word of God and continues to speak with us by the power of the Spirit producing new life in Christ.

2) All the tools of historical, grammatical, cultural, and theological research be brought to bear on the text of the Bible—but that the methods themselves do not have the last word.

3) We “give the dead a vote” by honoring the history and tradition of the whole Christian community over time.

4) We engage in “communal discernment” reading the Scriptures *together* and not as isolated individuals.

5) We recognize the value of personal piety and the varieties of spiritual experiences, subjecting these as well to communal discernment.

6) We speak with modesty and put our opinions forward with humility.

7) We subject ourselves to one another out of love for Christ.

If we believe in the power and presence of the Spirit to lead to truth, awoken to life, and move in mission we do not need to be defensive and frightened. Our confidence is in God, not in our pet theologies and personal convictions. A centered set Pietism will honor the Scriptures as the life-giving word, hear with respect the creeds and confessions of the past without giving them veto power, listen carefully to the theologians and scholars who have thought hard about meanings and implications, join charitably with other believers in the process of communal discernment, and finally—and most importantly—*live* out of the text. ■