

## Response to Fredrik Wenell, “Scattered Conversion”

Baptist World Alliance Annual Gathering, Stavanger, Norway (via Zoom), July 5, 2023

I am delighted to have been asked to respond to Fredrik’s excellent paper. I have been in conversation with Swedish Free Church theologians, including Fredrik, for many years. Though I am a Roman Catholic, we share a common concern for exploring what it might mean to be church in a post-Christian context, more specifically where state power is a challenge to the church. Fredrik has used the motif of scattering and gathering from my analysis of the church under the Pinochet regime in Chile, which is vastly different from the contemporary Swedish welfare state. What they have in common, as Fredrik points out, is a strong state that exerts oppositional pressure against any social body that comes between the state and the individual, including the church. Both forms of government also assume a certain deep affinity between Christianity and national identity. In both cases there is what I have elsewhere called a “migration of the holy” from church to nation-state, an appropriation of Christianity for the sometimes covert and sometimes overt sacralization of the nation-state.

Fredrik invokes the work of sociologist Lars Trägårdh on “statist individualism” in Sweden, which aims to free the poor from having to rely on charity, workers from reliance on employers, wives from reliance on husbands. Parents are freed from their children with state-sponsored childcare and children are freed from their parents with state-sponsored elder care. Education by bodies other than the state—homeschooling and church-sponsored schools—are considered threats to individual autonomy and are therefore discouraged. And so on. The object, according to Trägårdh, is not to rid us of

each other, but to allow us to love one another, which can only be done if we are free. Love is a gift, and a gift is not a gift if not freely given. So first individuals must be autonomous in order to freely enter into loving relationships. This is what Trägårdh calls the “Swedish theory of love,” and it is what underlies Swedish statist individualism. The telos of the welfare state, just like the telos of Christian life, is love and relationship.

The Swedish theory of love, however, begins with separation, that is, with an anthropology that sees the human being as essentially an autonomous agent. The basic unit of human life is the individual, who subsequently enters into society with other individuals. There is, as Trägårdh notes, a basic tension between individual autonomy and entering into relationship with others; I must surrender some of my freedom in order to join a family or a society; once I have children, I cannot sleep late if the baby is crying. The surrender of my freedom may be well worth it. But it is nevertheless a compromise, a zero-sum tug-of-war between my autonomy and the demands that are put upon me by my belonging to a group of other people. Love is entirely possible despite this tension; love is realized when one freely chooses to enter into a relationship with another and accept the compromises that that relationship entails. But the basic tension remains an insoluble problem: autonomy is required to enter into a loving relationship, but loving relationships inevitably compromise autonomy.

The Swedish theory of love explains why a pluralism of intermediate bodies—including the church—is a threat both to the autonomy of the individual and to the unity of the nation-state. Maximal freedom for the individual requires a strong state to liberate the individual from dependence on communities such as families and churches. The first step toward loving one’s neighbor is in fact not simply a separation but a

depersonalization of charity. The poor person who receives aid from the state is not thereby rendered independent, though that remains the long-term goal. The poor recipient of state aid is dependent on the state, but is thereby liberated from dependency on other persons. As Trägårdh points out, the depersonalization of charity is the means by which dependency is eliminated. The recipient of aid need not feel humiliated by the need to depend upon another person, because the state is not a person. The state is, rather, the impersonal force that hovers over persons, ensuring that they may maximize their freedom by freeing them from each other.

As Fredrik says, the welfare state has done much good in feeding the hungry and providing health care to the sick. He says “the problem is not the practices but that it has meant a scattering of other social bodies.” From the state’s point of view, however, this is not a problem but a solution, one that respects the dignity of each person and therefore one that realizes the deeper Christian logic of the Swedish folkhem. This is the fusion of Christian values with the nation that Fredrik calls “a kind of Swedish Constantinianism.” This is a peculiar kind of Constantinianism, however, in which the church does not use the state’s power to impose its will on the nation, but the church has become largely impotent, and the state has taken its place as the purveyor of Christian values to the nation. The church’s protest against this arrangement, however, cannot be simply that the church has lost social power and identity, and has become scattered. Again, that’s not a problem from the state’s point of view, but rather a solution. The church needs to show that the resulting depersonalization of charity is not in fact the fullness of a Christian value system. There is a Christian theory of love that is truer than the Swedish theory of love.

Christian theology attempts to break through the zero-sum tension between freedom and autonomy, mine and yours, by articulating a reality in which the horizontal dimension of human relationship is not all there is. Pluralism—that is the existence of something besides me—will always be a problem unless you and I are taken up into some kind of higher unity. According to Christians, this can only mean participation in God. For Christians, God is not simply the third term that hovers over individuals--like the state—trying to liberate individuals from dependence on one another. God in Christ rather draws individuals into participation in God's very being, thus overcoming the radical distinction between me and you.

The classic locus for Christian thinking about pluralism and love is therefore Paul's image of the Body of Christ in I Corinthians 12-13. There the emphasis on unity--because each is a member of the same body—is complemented by an emphasis on a plurality of gifts, services, and activities. Unity and plurality are not in tension precisely because individuals are incorporated into a higher unity, each of which has a unique role to play in the functioning of the whole. As Paul writes, "God arranged the members of the body, each one of them, as he chose. If all were a single member, where would the body be?" (I Cor. 12:18-19). The hand is not the eye, and vice-versa, but for precisely that reason the hand and the eye need each other. Because they belong to the same body, their relationship is necessarily characterized by *eros*, a need to be united to one another and a recognition that they are in fact united to and dependent on one another, whether they want to be or not. There is a kind of equality in the Body of Christ, because all belong to Christ and therefore are invested with the dignity of being members of God. At the same time, however, there is not a formal equality and

interchangeability of each member with every other, but a recognition that some members are weaker than others, or as Paul says, they “seem to be weaker,” but are in fact recognized as essential. “The members of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable, and those members of the body that we think less honorable we clothe with greater honor, and our less respectable members are treated with greater respect...God has so arranged the body, giving the greater honor to the inferior member” (12:22-24).

What Paul is doing here addresses the fear that other people will be humiliated by being the mere object of charity. For the Swedish theory of love, such humiliation seems inevitable: because people see themselves as autonomous from one another by nature, the gift from another can only be experienced as a threat. The only way to avoid that threat is to depersonalize the relationship by the mechanism of the state, to receive aid anonymously from the vertical dimension that transcends the horizontal relationships among autonomous individuals. Paul, on the other hand, is trying not only to get the apparently stronger members to see that the weaker have a unique dignity; by incorporating all into the same body, Paul wants to get the apparently stronger to see that they are in fact dependent on the weak for their very being. They are all connected by the same nervous system, such that “If one member suffers, all suffer together with it; if one member is honored, all rejoice together with it” (12:26). I think this is confirmed by experience. Anyone who has engaged in sustained work with poor people on a personal level knows that the dichotomy between helper and helped quickly dissolves as lives become intertwined. The risk of charitable work is not only the humiliation of the recipient but the humiliation of the giver. In truly personalized relationships, people

find that boundaries break down, with potentially radical consequences. Far from merely protecting recipients, bureaucratizing charity also immunizes the more comfortable people from the messy and potentially life-altering encounter with actual people who suffer. In that encounter, as Matthew 25 makes clear, we encounter Christ himself, and that changes everything.

The ultimate end is not some generic abstraction like “community.” There are communities that are tight-knit but poisonous. The ultimate end is participation in a good God. From a Christian point of view it is the overcoming of the separation and fear and mutual animosity that has plagued human history by incorporation into Christ. So Fredrik rightly says near the end of his paper that Baptist identity cannot be an end in itself; the church’s identity is only found in God. But Fredrik’s analysis shows why finding the Baptist identity in God means resisting the way the church has been scattered by the Swedish folkhem. The Christian theory of love is simply more true than the Swedish theory of love.

But Fredrik rightly rejects the idea that the Christian theory could be imposed on others. What is needed is a pluralism of bodies other than the state and the individual. If the state could acknowledge that it is not a neutral form of secularism but in fact imposes a particular anthropology and theory of love on others, then it might be opened to a richer kind of pluralism. The recognition that the Swedish theory of love is a particular type of sociality that differs from others, such as the Christian theory of love, ought to make clear the need for a pluralism of social spaces outside the state. If the state could recognize that it reinforces a competing theology to Christian theology, and to others, then it could perhaps recognize a plurality of spaces that would allow the

church and other social bodies to be themselves. This could be a step toward an open, and not a closed, secularity. And it could also be a step toward recognition of a more satisfactory theory of love.