

Emanuel Swedenborg - A Summary

There are times, as I think you would expect, when frequently I am asked to say something about Swedenborg; about the teachings contained in his theological Writings, and about the relationship which those teachings bear to orthodox Christian beliefs and doctrine. People want a kind of summary. Who was Swedenborg? What are the principal teachings he wrote about? How do these differ from what is elsewhere understood and believed?

In my talk I am going to endeavour to present such a summary; to speak as if you, the listener, are the one who has asked the questions. Rather than speak on one particular subject, as I usually do, or on a particular facet of a subject as in a series of talks, my aim is to present the overall picture; to give a composite view of things.

Emanuel Swedenborg was born in Stockholm in 1688 and he died in London at the age of 84, in 1772. As a young man and in his early adulthood he developed keen mathematical and scientific interests and became widely known and respected throughout Europe because of his writings on these subjects. At the same time, Swedenborg's was a religious background, his father being a bishop in the Lutheran Church, and he never lost his faith and convictions. It did however concern him that contemporaries in intellectual circles were doing this and for some considerable period he laboured to demonstrate the existence of the soul and the reality of the things of the spirit by scientific methods and by philosophic reasoning and deduction.

That it is impossible to do this he at last had to admit. But the experience of having tried, and failed, led him to see that it can only be by means of revelation from God that these things can be known. Logical and rational explanations of a great many things were needed. But, and as he saw, it was beyond man to discover these for himself. They would have to be revealed from above.

Called by the Lord, as indeed he believed he was, to make known such a Revelation, Swedenborg abandoned his scientific career in 1744 and in 1749, after several years of preparation, part of which involved the careful study of the Bible in its original languages, he began writing those books which are otherwise referred to as his theological Writings. In those Writings (consisting, by the way, of a monumental thirty volumes), he continually refers to the Sacred Scriptures and constantly points to confirmations in them of the points he makes.

Swedenborg is best known throughout the world for the light his Writings shed on the life after death, and the most popular and widely-read of all his books is the work, *"Heaven And Hell"*. Important though that teaching is, and fundamental as is the reality of the spiritual world to everything else he wrote about, it is still only one thing. There is so much else besides. Because of the obscurity into which people had come, and the false doctrines which were then being taught, new light needed to be shed in all areas of Christian belief and teaching.

In a summary such as this is I cannot attempt to touch upon everything, but I can select the main points and speak about those. And I am going to start with what is the most important of all, teaching concerning God. (I say 'most important of all' because it is so central. The way in which we think of God cannot but influence everything else).

There is, wrote Swedenborg, one God who is the Creator and Preserver of the universe. Because of the power of evil from hell which was at the time threatening the destruction of mankind this one God Himself came into the world, taking on human nature by birth of the virgin Mary. He did not send another. Jesus Christ was God manifested in the flesh. And by successive victories in temptations, to which He was subject throughout His life on earth, He overcame the hells; restored man's freewill, and re-opened the possibilities of human salvation. Whereas in the past the teaching of the Church had been in terms of three co-equal Persons in the Godhead, Swedenborg showed that this is not so. God is one and He is at the same time our Creator, Redeemer, and Saviour.

Widely different as this was - and is - from orthodox teaching on the subject, so too is the teaching different which Swedenborg brings us on the subject of the Sacred Scriptures or the Word. He explained that within the stories and incidents, the Old Testament laws and regulations, the descriptions of battles, and so on, there lies an internal, spiritual meaning: that in fact these stories are as it were vessels containing instruction which is of timeless relevance and importance to us all. We need, he wrote, to get behind the literal story as such and to find out what the Lord is endeavouring to teach us by it. The story of Joseph, for example, and in particular, the way in which he was treated by his brothers, when explained according to its spiritual meaning, teaches us concerning the tendency we all share at first to mistreat, to mock, and to want to be rid of higher principles in our lives. Joseph represents those higher principles; that better side to our nature; the teaching and ideals which are present in our minds. But in the early stages, when we are bent on, & caught up with our own interests and satisfactions, we are not comfortable with these.

In time, however, and despite what seems impossible odds, these ideals and higher principles can come to have a ruling influence in our lives, represented, as this is, by Joseph's rise to a position of great power and authority. The whole of the Divine Word similarly contains within it a deeper, spiritual sense which, through Swedenborg, has been revealed and explained to mankind.

From love, and out of His infinite desire to bless the lives of others separate from Himself with happiness, God created the universe and He creates all of us who are in it. And this brings me to the next point, concerning the purpose which lies behind creation. "Why are we here?", many ask. "What are we doing here?" "What is the point of our existence?" We are born. We are educated. We become adult; work for the greater part of our lives; become old, and die. And in thinking about this people become disillusioned and cynical. But there is so much more to life. The purpose of our creation is that we might in time find our place in heaven and be happy there. Each of us is, by design, different from the other and capable of serving a distinctly different use. Everyone has a part to play, not only in this world, but in heaven, in the spiritual world, to all eternity. What God wants for us, however, is one thing. We must want it as well. And when it comes to it this is why we are here. In a world of good and evil, of truth and falsity, of selfishness and selflessness; in a world where our inclinations pull us one way and our conscience speaks to us of another way; we are free to choose - free to choose either the life of heaven and to admit its influences into our lives, or to choose the life of hell and admit its influences into our lives. Whilst it is His desire that all should come into heaven, the Lord will not compel anyone. The choice, with which we are confronted in this world, is ours.

And this leads me on to what, as I said at the commencement, is the best-known of the teachings Swedenborg brings us, concerning the life after death. The spiritual world is another and different dimension of consciousness into which everyone enters when they die. It is a real world which, though we do not comprehend it with our physical senses, we are in unconscious association throughout our life in this world. At death people discard the physical body, which served them in the world and are resurrected into the spiritual world, taking with them all their faculties, their loves and abilities, their knowledge, their memories and their character. And they continue to live in a spiritual body which is in the human form. As for the essential character of a person, it is not changed by death and it happens that in time people choose to be with others who are like themselves; who share similar interests and feelings, either in heaven or in hell.

For many people, the spiritual world is some sort of curiosity, better thought about if and when we get there and in no real way connected with our lives here and now. In Swedenborg's Writings it is shown to be otherwise. Man is, above all else, a spiritual being, already - as we noted - in unconscious association with the spiritual world, and constantly influenced, as to thoughts and ideas, from it.

Though he distributed his books widely during his life time and would, when asked, talk freely about them, Swedenborg never attempted to found a Church, and it was not until 11 years after his death that a small group of people got together in London and formed a reading group from which developed what was to become known as "The New Church", or "The Church of the New Jerusalem" - a Church, which, though small, exists around the world. (There are Societies of the New Church located in the mainland capitals around Australia, two being here in Sydney). The members of the New Church believe that the doctrines found in Swedenborg's Writings were revealed through him by the Lord and that they hold within them the hope of a new spiritual age for mankind, giving, as they do, a new opportunity for freedom of belief and for true Christian living, and 'a new and reasonable understanding of our relations to the Lord, His love and care for us, and our dependence upon Him and duty to Him'.

In 1972, five hundred leading members of the British and Irish Churches met at a Conference in Birmingham to consider in depth the crisis which Christianity faces today. The author of the printed report of that Conference, and the Canon of St. Margaret's Church, Westminster, wrote: "At the Church Leaders' Conference I saw more clearly than ever before that what Christianity needs is a new Pentecost, giving knowledge where there is now confusion, confidence where there is now doubt, and joy where there is now despair - and, as the source of all this, a new disclosure of the truth". (page 17).

Such a disclosure of truth is, if you will believe, contained in the theological works of Emanuel Swedenborg. Read them for yourself, and see.

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