

The Life and Times of Emanuel Swedenborg

Part 1

During the course of these talks I refer to and quote from the teaching contained in the theological Writings of Emanuel Swedenborg. I occasionally refer to him by name, books by him and I think it is understood that I prepare my talks from what is said in them. For example, I have quoted Swedenborg on Prayer and gone on to speak of the implications for us of statements he wrote. Also is the case of Aging and Old Age, Happiness, and Sleep. The purpose of this talk is the presentation of the teaching given in his many theological works; vital teaching, I hope you have come to see. In Swedenborg's Writings we find a distinctly new perspective on matters of belief and on the whole range of human experience - as on the nature and identity of God; the reason for the Incarnation, the purpose which lies behind the creation of the universe; the life after death, and so many other things.

Rarely though, have I spoken of Swedenborg the man, or felt I needed to. Rarely have I touched upon the unique role he was called upon to perform, or spoken at length of his life and accomplishments. I cannot remember ever attempting to speak of his mission in relation to the Christian Church as a whole, or endeavoured to define in so many words the particular contribution he was called upon to make. I have tended to presume either your own previous knowledge of these things or investigations you would make in this regard.

It seems appropriate that for once I speak of Swedenborg the man and his mission, and say something about the nature and the purpose of the teachings which were given to the world through him. Of his brilliance and the importance of his contributions to so many fields of science, few are in any doubt. Distinguished thinkers look on him as one of the great men of all time. What has been more of a puzzle to people is his later interest in theology and his role as a revelator. At the height of his fame and when the world lay at his feet, Swedenborg gave up his public career and for the remaining 27 years of his life spent "the bulk of his time adding theological works to his already lengthy scientific and philosophical writings". (Dr.Sig Synnestvedt, "The Essential Swedenborg", p,26) Some 30 volumes comprise those theological Writings. Of all religious writers he left the largest body of teaching for later generations to study.

Born in Stockholm, Sweden, in 1688, Swedenborg was the son of Jesper Swedberg and Sara Behm. Jesper was a prominent Lutheran who was successively Court Chaplain, Dean of Uppsala University and Bishop of the diocese of Skara. That Swedenborg was influenced by his home environment there is no doubt, for he grew into a man of deep religious conviction. However, as far as is known, he did not show any interest in following in his father's footsteps or seek ordination into the Lutheran Church. His interests lay in other directions, where he was to make such a name for himself.

Swedenborg's formal education at the University of Uppsala where he majored in philosophy, ended in the year 1709. During that period he studied various subjects and became proficient in the classical languages and for relaxation, wrote poetry and played the organ. In 1710 he left Sweden to broaden his education, staying first of all in England and later in Holland. In both countries he met and worked alongside the leading thinkers of those times and learnt numerous skills which he knew would be of use and advantage to him when he returned to his own country.

Back in Sweden in 1716, Swedenborg founded and edited his country's first scientific journal - *Daedalus Hyperboreus*. In successive issues he sketched plans for, or proposed the invention of, a one man submarine, a machine gun, an air plane, an ear trumpet, a pianola, jacks, pumps, and hoisting machines to be used at mines. Because of his mechanical genius Swedenborg became engineering advisor to King Charles XII and was appointed to the Board which controlled the Swedish mining industry. In 1719 his family was ennobled and being the eldest surviving son, he became a life long member of the Swedish House of Nobles.

It is impossible to stop over every detail, but Swedenborg turned from scientific pursuits to philosophy, publishing monumental works on the subject and in the mid 1730's, to an exhaustive study of anatomy. In each instance Swedenborg was interested in basic questions concerning human life and existence and his studies were motivated by a desire to demonstrate the reality of God and of the human soul.

As early as 1736, when he was 48 years old, Swedenborg had noted down in his Diary unusual and inexplicable occurrences. In 1745 he underwent a penetrating experience which finally caused him to change the direction of his life. In the words of the late Dr Helen Keller, "This keen observer of natural facts and analyser of things of

the mind, was given from on high, powers of observation of things spiritual; the senses of his spirit were quickened to recognize realities in the spiritual world." (My Religion p 21). As a result of these experiences, Swedenborg came to believe that God had called him to serve as the means by which a new revelation could be made to the world.

During the years 1745 to 1748 Swedenborg studied the Bible intensively, and went back to the original languages, Greek and Hebrew, in order to do so. He compiled his own Bible Indices; retired from the Board of Mines and, for the remaining 27 years of his life, gave himself over to the writing of theological books "the sole object of which was to make Christianity a living reality upon earth." (My Religion p.24)

The importance of these years of preparation which enabled Swedenborg to subsequently carry out his mission cannot be underestimated. In a sense his mission lay in going back to the Sacred Scriptures and in drawing forth from them the truths which lay there; truths which "tradition and the almost unconquerable habit of sectarian interpretation" (My Religion p.23) had obscured and covered over. In the 16th century the Christian Church was suffocating and dying under the weight of man-made dogma and doctrinal inventions such as "were never dreamed of by any prophet or apostle" (ibid). We in our day, easily forget the depths to which religious thinking had sunk at that time; forget - because we never experienced it - an era of salvation by faith alone; of the inexplicable doctrine of arbitrary predestination; of the damnation of all who were unbaptized, and of a wrathful God who sat in stern and uncompassionate judgement of mankind. It was thinking which needed totally revitalizing. The Church itself stood in sore need of renewal. And the teaching given through Swedenborg was given precisely for this reason.

Swedenborg made no effort to establish any kind of religious following. He published his books in Latin and contented himself with distributing them freely wherever he thought they would be welcomed and useful. Remarkably he did not even put his name to any of them until four years before his death. And yet the influence of the teaching contained in them has been remarkable and far reaching. Elizabeth Barrett Browning, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Sir Isaac Pitman, Victor Hugo, Goethe, William Butler Yeats and many others, testified to the impact such teaching had on them,

It was the late Dr.Helen Keller who wrote "Swedenborg was not a destroyer, but a

divinely inspired interpreter. He was a prophet sent by God. His own message proclaims it more convincingly than any saying of his followers could. There is no escaping his virile personality. As we read his message, we are filled with recognition and delight. He did not make a new Bible but he made the Bible all new. One who receives him gains a great spiritual possession." (My Religion p.56)

Part 2

Swedenborg possessed one of the most remarkable minds of all times, and the importance of some of the observations he made has only been recognised in recent times. He was the first to propound the now widely accepted "nebular hypothesis" on the origin of the Solar System. His studies of the nervous system and the brain earned him credit for supplying the first accurate understanding of the importance of the cerebral cortex, and the respiratory movement of the brain tissues. At a comparatively early age he made certain geological observations which has been said would alone have been sufficient to have secured him a respected scientific name (Swedenborg the Scientist, page 36). He was also a brilliant mathematician, metallurgist, and a profound philosopher. Once it was said of him, "No single individual in the world's history ever encompassed in himself so great a variety of useful knowledge."

But Swedenborg's life is all the more remarkable in that in the year 1745 when the world lay at his feet, he abandoned his career as a scientist and philosopher to devote his time and energies to writing on theology. In 1745, he had in his own words "been called to a holy office by the Lord Himself". Taking into account his trained mind and religious convictions, he had been called upon to serve as the means by which a new revelation from God, and a new understanding of things spiritual, could be given to mankind. At a time when the Church was suffocating and dying because of "barbarous creeds" (Helen Keller) and doctrinal innovations, Swedenborg was called and that through his writings there might be wrought a renewal of Christian thinking and indeed of Christianity itself. The late Dr Helen Keller wrote in reference to those times of "the witchcraft of a Church literature ably and brilliantly advocating tenets that were never dreamed of by any prophet or Apostle" "Such was the age out of whose harsh environment the genius of Swedenborg grew, and whose fettering dogmas he was destined to shatter." (My Religion p.3)

Swedenborg first published his theological works anonymously. Later, when it became generally known that he was the author of them, there was little point in doing so. At no time had he particularly wanted to draw attention to himself and he did not seek a religious following. Even so, his books aroused a great deal of interest, and opinion became divided about him. Few of his contemporaries really came to terms with this phase of his career, though by a remarkable consensus of opinion, he remained of a cool temperament and never showed signs of being racked by passion or impulse. Perplexed by his claims, and the nature of what he was doing, as visitors may have been, yet they found him to be "a gentle, humorous man with a relaxed, benign air." (The Essential Swedenborg)

But of course that alone doesn't establish the truth of what he wrote. Similar things have been claimed in all sincerity, by other people. As you know, there exist today a number of religions and different sects whose initial impulse sprang from some vision or revelation which a particular person claimed to have enjoyed. Then again, there are those outstanding people who have over the years spoken on the impact which the doctrines and teachings contained in Swedenborg's theological works have had on them. But this, worthwhile though these testimonies are, cannot be looked upon as a guarantee as to the correctness of what is written. Shortly before his death in 1772 Swedenborg was questioned about his theological writings and he replied he had written "nothing but Divine Truth". But how can one tell? Is there any proof that he was right?

The answer is, no. There isn't any proof as such. It cannot be demonstrated by some observable means such as to convince everyone. What in fact people have to do is to examine the matter for themselves; to look into the claims he made and the things he wrote and to ask themselves whether these things could be so? Is what he wrote rational? Does it make sense? Is it in accord with the teaching of Scripture? Does what we find in those Writings bring freedom, happiness and peace to mankind? Swedenborg never pressed his claims upon anyone; never sought to convince the sceptic or to demonstrate to them the reality of what had happened to him. Unless he was asked he rarely spoke of what he was doing. And his answer to people who questioned him was that they should read "attentively and without prejudice" the books he had written. "These will" he is quoted as once having said, "answer for me". And this in fact is the only way we shall have our answer.

It was also so in the case of the Lord and the claims He made. We know only too well how opinion was divided about Him. People did not know what to make of Him and whether to believe He was the Messiah. John the Baptist, by that time a prisoner of King Herod, sent two of his disciples to the Lord to ask Him, "Are you the one who was to come, or should we expect someone else?" At no time did the Lord give an unequivocal answer "Yes, I am." or "Yes, let me settle the question once and for all". What in fact did He say? He told them to think and to consider the matter for themselves. "Jesus answered and said to them, go and show John again those things which you hear and see: the blind receive their sight, and the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, and the deaf hear, the dead are raised up, and the poor have the gospel preached to them," (Matthew 11: 4,5) It is as if the Lord said, 'It is going to be up to John to decide. He must reach his own conclusions and make up his own mind.' And so it is with us. We must examine what is said, not from some preconceived notion or sectarian bias, but calmly and 'without prejudice' and make up our own minds.

There are those who question the need for any kind of further revelation: who feel that the Scriptures are sufficient in themselves; that nothing more is needed. What is overlooked, however, is that from the early times of the Christian Church, misinterpretation of the Scriptures crept in, obscuring the simple truths and basic concepts presented in them. Statements were taken out of context and presented to profoundly influence the Church's thinking. And in time there arose a crying need for the restatement of the basic truths of genuine Christianity. Some way and in some manner there had to be a clearing away of the debris of religious dogma under which the Bible lay.

What I think is also important for us to remember is that while on earth the Lord Himself foreshadowed a time when a fuller and more detailed explanation of religious matters would be given. He acknowledged on more than one occasion the limited understanding of His hearers and spoke of the fact that though He had many things to say to them, yet men could not 'bear' them then. "When he, the Spirit of truth, comes, he will guide you into all truth. He will not speak on his own; he will speak only what he hears, and he will tell you what is yet to come (John 16:13) Hence then the need for and the purpose which lay behind, the giving of a further revelation.

Part 3

In 1745 Swedenborg abandoned his career as a scientist and a philosopher to devote the rest of his life to writing on theology. He deeply believed that he had been called by the Lord to serve as the means by which a new revelation could be given to the world. In the 18th century, the Christian Church was languishing under the weight of man made creeds and dogmas, and a kind of spiritual darkness enveloped the minds of people. So at this time a new disclosure of Divine Truth had, and indeed has as its purpose, the renewal of Christian thinking and indeed of Christianity itself.

We fail to appreciate, simply because we never experienced it, the depths to which religious thinking had sunk at that time. As things have now changed to a considerable extent, we also fail to appreciate "how a bitter theology treated man as a despised child of sin and gave the world over to the wrath of God. (quoting from the words of the late Dr.Helen Keller) Even the gentle angel, Charity, whom the saints of old had welcomed, was drawn from man's side; faith alone was exalted, and not faith either, but a self centred assumption that belief alone was necessary to salvation. All useful work seemed a vanity, all physical misfortunes were looked upon as punishments, and the darkness of all nights, ignorance and insensibility, lay upon the heart starved world." (My Religion p.13) Such was the age, the climate, the thinking and the teaching which so sorely stood in need of renewal.

So in a sense, Swedenborg's mission as a revelator lay in redefining basic Christian concepts, and in restating the truth which in so many instances and on so many issues had come to be obscured and lost sight of. He was aware of the tendency to hide behind ecclesiastical authority and to talk in impenetrable jargon which wouldn't satisfy, and wasn't satisfying, genuinely thinking people. He saw what was in certain respects the inhumanness of some of the things taught, and felt himself compelled to examine and to challenge the basis upon which such teaching was founded. I know that even to suggest the need for renewal can sound arrogant, and some would resent the idea. But certainly not all do. Presently, perhaps more so in Britain than in Australia, Churchmen speak of the crisis situation in which the Christian Church finds itself, and one of them, the Rector of St. Margaret's, Westminster, writes in a book of his "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, giving a new disclosure of the truth." (David L. Edwards, The British Churches Turn To The Future p.17) Elsewhere that same man speaks of

"the basic problem confronting the Churches" as being that of unbelief, and of the inadequacy of many of the traditional doctrines of the Church to satisfy rational thinking. (ibid.p.3,4) "Doctrines held for many centuries, and still held by many, to be fundamental to Christian faith, increasingly appear incredible." The doctrines of turning the other cheek and loving the enemy he describes as "more appropriate to fairyland than to the world which is real to this generation." And many of the doctrines about Christ himself seem, "incomprehensible except as echoes from childhood's Christmas". Here is a recognition of the need for renewal coming from within the Church itself. It's not just a matter of me saying so.

Our understanding of God Himself is a case in point. One of the most widespread notions about God, much coloured by Old Testament statements about Him, has been of a somewhat remote and stern figure; someone who blesses and curses, who rewards and punishes. Even today God is at times painted and talked about in nothing less than awesome terms such as would have us tremble before Him. Passages are quoted from the Old Testament which speak of the wrath of God. There it is said God destroys and can be angry. But the point is missed that God is revealed and talked about in the Old Testament according to the ability of the people of those times to understand Him.

Swedenborg insists that this can't possibly be the complete picture. God is a God of love and of infinite mercy who never punishes and never destroys, but who allowed Himself to be portrayed as He has been in the Old Testament because this was meaningful to those people. But, and I repeat the point, it is not the total picture. Nor are we called upon to base our understanding of Him on those statements.

And this leads me on to say something about the Divine Trinity - something which has troubled Christian thinkers throughout the ages and where again, restatement and redefinition is sorely needed. Many is the time the Church has attempted to define what is involved and to come to terms with the Scriptural statements which bear on it. There has been a great deal of confusion about the matter. People have been told that though God is one yet there are three coequal and distinct personalities in the Godhead. But this cannot be. Granted, as Swedenborg notes, there are these references to the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. But far from being separate individuals they are rather "three aspects of the one Divine Being, three manifestations of the Divine activity in the universe". There is only one God, the

Creator of the universe, who put on human nature and came on earth as Jesus Christ. And His continual operation to guide all people to what is good in life, and to bring them into lasting happiness, is what is meant by the Holy Spirit.

One other major area of confusion which has arisen in recent years is one which involves attitudes towards, and acceptance of, the teaching of the Bible. With the findings of science, the Church has been forced to reconsider its former acceptance of the literal accuracy of all that is written there. Little more than a hundred years ago, Christians universally accepted, for example, the Genesis story of the creation of the world just as it is written there. But it has been shown it could not have been so. And on the whole, people do not know what to make of it. The situation calls for the restatement and clarification of thinking about it, for a new 'disclosure' of just what is involved.

In this regard Swedenborg wrote, as it was given him to write, that such stories from Genesis were not intended to be taken literally. They are, he said, to be looked upon as having a deeper meaning. The Word of God, he showed, does not rest on strict historical and scientific accuracy, nor is it holy on that account, but on account of its having an inner, spiritual meaning in the same way that the parables of the New Testament contain within them an inner or deeper meaning. What really matters therefore about the story of creation in Genesis, is not argument and discussion as to whether it could have been scientifically so, but the fact that within it is described the successive stages in the creation of a new person within us. The days of creation "are so many successive states of the regeneration of man" (Arcana Caelestia 6)

[The Swedenborg Programme – Number 114.](#)

<http://www.swedenborg.com.au>

Excellent 8 minute video introduction to Swedenborg:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HEa0e8AcS78>