

Swedenborg's Christ by Julian Duckworth

Well we're working with incredibly profound material tonight. I'm more nervous tonight than I've been in any other talk I've given. If I ever give a more focused talk than this I should be very very surprised because you're dealing with the very heart of Divine activity, the incarnation on every level. So I approach it with awe and real personal humility and I hope that what I say tonight covers the material.

By the way, Swedenborg's talking about the Lord, the Lord Jesus Christ all the time in every way but he specifically deals with the historical actual event of Divine incarnation into the world substantially and I would say it's probably about a twelfth of his theological writing that goes specifically into the incarnation.

The first thing I want to do, I want to sing to you. I want to sing to you. This is an Appalachian carol.

I wonder as I wander all over the sky
How Jesus the Saviour was born for to die
For poor ordnery Christians like you and like I
I wonder – as I wander – all over the sky

And now my favourite quote after which I can go home because you've had the talk. "The angels never tire to all eternity in contemplating the advent of the Lord into the world." To me that's just the beauty when you really get into these sort of ideas. The angels to all eternity never tire in contemplating the advent of the Lord into the world of men. I haven't got the specific number but when I first came across that I can remember feeling Oh, there they are, in eternity, just working within the meaning, the point, the substance of the Lord coming into his own creation, into the world, physically working here. Again and again and again. I think that's a beautiful quote.

Christianity is unique among the world's religions in its belief that God entered the world of time and space in person. If that is true, it's astounding and staggering. If it's untrue then Christianity falls apart. But it's based on that incredible idea that God himself, the creator, can enter and be within his own creation. Swedenborg's writings focus on the Lord Jesus Christ who is God, God of everything and on all the Divine activity that ensues from that. He takes it as read that Jesus Christ is God and at times he argues vehemently against Jesus being the son of God as a separate person offering himself vicariously, in place of us, as a willing sacrifice for human sin to reconcile God to man, and man to God, through his death. That's traditional Christian theology. Still around, still exclusive, still very dogmatic. Instead Swedenborg presents the idea that God took on a human existence and became part of his own creation and that this is an inevitable part of Divine activity, an integral part of it. It's not separate from it. The incarnation was not a kind of Whoops; no stop-gap measure to deal with a desperate situation that God somehow has to put right as if God is caught short, flummoxed with things, caught on the hop. Boy, has it got that bad? No! It's an integral part of the whole scene. This is the problem because we're finite beings that we can only see it in terms of time and change, deterioration. Swedenborg also works on the incarnation using timing very much and deterioration or loss of consciousness. He had no other method at his disposal but God though knows the very moment he creates that he will enter creation as part of having created it. He must.

I believe Swedenborg understood that. The incarnation in person, in time, in space, is an essential ingredient to his overall teaching about spiritual life and regeneration. Here's a very big point. If you know Swedenborg's spiritual teaching you know that

he's always emphasizing, and he uses a word, he's always emphasizing physicality, reality, groundedness. His word is ultimates. The power in ultimate levels of existence. In other words the most spiritual person is someone who performs actual use. Swedenborg is always emphasizing the power of these down-to-earth levels. Physicality. That's you. Usefulness, that's life. The power of the Word as you read it. The incarnation above all, the presence in the world of God as man. These are realities. He's got very very little time for cogitation and abstract thought and no action. Forget it. So Swedenborg readily owns the specifically Christian teaching about Divine incarnation and God coming into the world, this world. I will say later why this world. Coming into this world to complete the work of creation, knowing that I said earlier, that the moment he created, he knew that he would have to enter that creation at a point in time.

I've always admired the early Christian church who literally had to fathom out what Christ is, and done and who he was, struggling to make sense of this incarnate God, hammering out a meaningful creed that says it. The Nicene Creed, the Apostles Creed, the Athanasian Creed. Struggling to get the words right.

Finally before we really start going, just concentrate on Christ's own level of consciousness. As a man imagine a human being who felt real fear at times, who grew up like a boy does but who at many other times had consciousness that went way beyond, opened up more than any of ours. Just imagine sensing everything, knowing everything and realizing that creation's purpose and its welfare sits squarely on your own shoulders. The ultimate buck stops here. That's pretty awesome.

Swedenborg describes the mind of Christ. If you go to the second book of the Arcana and you look around about 1400 you suddenly are in the Abraham stories. At that point Abram. And Abram being called and suddenly Swedenborg starts talking about the Lord as a boy growing up like any other child and yet having deep stirrings within him of strange realization; while he was still young, as a child. And Swedenborg says that these were soul realizations. Now I know every child is wrapped with a sense of wonder about life and that's a sort of normal human condition—wondering about reality and so on. But if you can imagine, Jesus while he was still young, opening up and having the most incredibly powerful what Swedenborg calls animadvertences—ghastly word. Animadvertences—promptings from his soul, stirrings almost beyond language. He also says that Jesus grew up like other children but developed faster. I think of Jesus perhaps as an unusually sensitive child, not fitting in too easily with children's stuff. A child perhaps a bit apart. So because this is such a deep area there's so much to draw from I'm going to be very methodical and just aim to touch about eight or nine aspects that Swedenborg raises, about this nature of Divine incarnation and I hope it works because I'm gonna have to leave out so much, just so much.

I've got eight or nine headings about the Lord and then I've got eight headings that were my, not so much Swedenborg, but my brainstorming of the difference that it all makes to us. What does it give us as a result of this achievement of Divine incarnation? What's changed? What's now possible?

So first of all the timing. The timing, we think of it as 2000 years ago. 2000 years ago is nothing. It's a blip. The aborigines have been here 40-50,000 years. That's a blip. You know, we're really dealing with things that we should not try to enshrine in time concepts. Swedenborg rarely brings timing into anything because it's us who artificially create time measurements and then you're asking all the wrong kind of

questions. I can only think of two actual time based references in Swedenborg, the incarnation and the last judgment and two of them are parallel events.

If you look at the world as it was at the time of the incarnation, the world around at that time, it doesn't seem to be very exceptional. The world was no really worse, not better, not much different from other epochs in known history. The Roman Empire was in full swing and locally the Jewish religion was extremely entrenched and ritualistic. And we must take into account that at that very time countries and civilizations like China were in full swing with great productivity. So let's not think about the whole globe but work with this development in the part of the world where we are working within this particular context.

Swedenborg never really refers to the Roman Empire but he certainly has a lot to say about the Jews at that time. And this is crunch material. This is one of the clues to the timing of the advent. I can't go into it this evening but Swedenborg like all philosophies describes different ages of spiritual consciousness that arise, endure and decline. And at the decline there's a change. There's a provision so that the essential connection between God and man can always be kept in place. But I can't deal with that this evening.

At the time of the incarnation the original consciousness of the human race was declining to the point where any true understanding was in danger of being finally extinguished. The Jews had the Word of God in which there is all truth but they had completely ritualized it so that they used it, they owned it, but they didn't know it. Any further from that and the connection with God would be irreparably lost. If you pay lip service to something and only lip service then your mind closes down and then you stop paying lip service. You do your own thing.

So Swedenborg says that the Lord was born into this world at a critical time. And he also says that the Lord was born into this world because this world was the most externally minded world in the whole universe. That puts us in our place. Our level of consciousness compared to some was and is appalling. Add to that, the Jews, the culture into which he came were as they were ritualistic and ignorant of its content, and you get the idea that the Lord began at the very bottom, where he had to. But there's another deeper aspect about the timing which is to do with the situation in the spiritual world.

When people die they take their beliefs, states entirely with them. As people died and entered the spiritual world they added to its overall state and contributed, accumulated to that quality. The ideal is, the spiritual beings who started their existence here, add to the perfection of heaven where all serve the Lord. That's the ideal. But if people grow external, material, ritualistic, if they believe false ideas and live in hypocrisy, then you have a build-up of disorder which affects the very balance of the spiritual world, which is crucial because we are meant to exist perfectly balanced between the two influences of heaven and hell. The equilibrium which gives us our freedom. The purpose of the spiritual world is to work beneficially with people in this world all the time. If there's an imbalance there must be a judgment to correct that balance. There must be. You can't leave it. And this too prompted the incarnation.

And Swedenborg described how the hells had infected the world of spirits into which people move on after they die and from there had begun to move into the lower heavens and close down and darken the consciousness of even angels. I don't know what that meant in terms of real risk outcome but I can see that somebody

somewhere, somehow, couldn't let that process continue. And it had to be challenged and addressed and only the Lord could do it. Sometime read the second half of Isaiah chapter 59. Sometime read the second half of Isaiah chapter 59 where the Lord alone is. Where the Lord alone seeing no man took on the work himself.

Interestingly in the gospels, Jesus' own physical presence causes a reaction from evil spirits possessing people. 'We know who you are Jesus of Nazareth, you're the holy one of God. Have you come to destroy us?' No, not to destroy. Curb. And it's interesting that the extent of possession of human minds at that time seems greater and significant.

The inevitability of the incarnation. I mentioned this at the beginning that at the very moment God created, He knew that He would have to enter His creation. I just want to mention that in creating conscious human beings who can consider objectively the meaning of their existence and grow into the image and likeness of God there must be an essential free will. There's no coercion, there's no robotic force or state. There must be the precious gift of free will. And that by design, people must live as if it is only themselves. That's your experience. That's what your senses tell you. There's no God. There's your life in you. Your mind, your soul may tell you different but your sense experiences—it's all in me. And it has to be like that. And this inevitably leads to the possibility of confirming that that appearance is the truth. But don't think of that as a risk because that's time and space stuff. But as a provision with an inevitable outcome that must happen.

Third the preparation for the advent. Whenever a baby is born it's not a sudden thing. But the baby physically develops over months and the soul also takes form and shape so that at the birth, the baby is physically fully formed and has everything there in his being, in potential. Swedenborg describes the creation itself as the Divine infilling a series of successive degrees or levels of existence with Divine life. If you like you can think of it as emanation from God creating levels that are more material, more concrete, more substantial successively. The degrees are increasingly further and further away from the source and become more and more substantial and finally material and physical. Yet every degree is always infilled by the Divine and kept in series and connection. And finally you have a physical universe. And the Divine is no less present in the ultimate level than in the very highest first degree. There's no diminution. And this creative process allows the Divine to be present in the whole of creation and maintain it at every moment. You, me, everything. This same process is true not only of the physical universe but in the creation of every person's physical body, the mind or consciousness of every human being, the formation of the Word as a text, as a fixed document containing all truth. This creation down to the ultimate plane. God there but there, no less. And in the Divine forming the receptacle that will become the person of Jesus Christ.

Swedenborg describes how the Lord from eternity prepared himself to be incarnated and be born into the world. And this is the idea that lies in the words "In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was God."

'Now, O Father,' Jesus said 'glorify me together with yourself with the glory which I had with you before the world was.' What does that mean? In that sense Christ had pre-existence but not as a separate person from God. The Divine in a human form was always there, always known, always conceived. God prepared himself to incarnate from eternity into this world.

Swedenborg describes a whole range of preparatory degrees that the Divine itself put on to prepare himself to become physical. The Divine itself which simply is uncreated and infinite. The Divine Human which exists and is in three degrees. Celestial, spiritual, and Natural degrees. Then the Lord had to and Swedenborg describes the Lord passing through all the heavens to put on his cloak of human form, human mind, human potential, human ultimate, passing through the heavens. So you have these highest degrees.



And then you have the Divine Natural which would become the consciousness of Christ and a level which would develop in him whereas the higher degrees exist in him, known or unknown. The level, and it's true of our own mind and it's true of our own development because it's always the parallel in our own life to the Divine life and its content. The rational, the level of understanding; factual level, the level of knowing; and the sensual level, the level of experience; and all these levels have to be taken on, assumed and made an integral part of the Lord's preparation to come into the world. But it couldn't stop there because none of those levels could be affected by the very thing that he had to have in order to do what he did while he was here. And that was to allow himself to be tempted, to make himself vulnerable and to put on through Mary a whole range of human hereditary evil tendencies. The tendencies, the sense of corporeal and natural desires and this physical level of the sense of only himself. Those last three are levels or degrees in the Lord preparing himself for incarnation which he literally had to face, work with and put off. Not transform them, put them away and refute them and their power over him. It's as critical as that, and growing these other degrees.

Now the Lord's unique birth. Every one of us here has a father and a mother. The Lord was unique in not having a physical father but a mother Mary through whom those human tendencies could be given to him, to give him exposure to temptation. His mother, however sweet she was, gave him his human to which he could be attacked. Swedenborg says that a person, like each of us, a person receives the soul from the father and the clothing of the body from the mother. But don't take that too

literally. Mothers give us far more hereditary than just our body. 46 chromosomes combining, all that stuff, genetic work to create our independent individuality. We get our soul from the father and the clothing of our body from our mother. Think spiritually. I believe Swedenborg's saying that we, we receive two quite different heredities through our father and mother. There is a hereditary imprint which we can really only ever come to terms with and never change. This is our paternal heredity. It will always be there. We can't lessen it. It simply is there and we have to come to terms with it and allow it to be kept down. Angels still have that heredity and know that if it were not for the Lord they would be prone to being driven by it. There's another hereditary imprint which can be changed and even removed from us by the Lord. Thank goodness through our regeneration—spiritual life. This is our maternal heredity. The Lord uniquely had the second but not the first genetic imprint. His paternal was Divine. That was his soul, so that logically, the Lord would be literally able to put off every maternal tendency and be completely Divine, unlike us and yet become fully human by living as a man in the physical world on the ultimate plane.

The Lord's development. This is a fascinating area. We can only lightly touch on it. The Lord as a growing child, like a good Jew would have read the scriptures daily. The Old Testament narratives. Perhaps more and more highly sensitively so, and begun to realize with this deep soul prompting, 'This is about me.' He saw that. He identified with it. Who knows, maybe it shook him to the core, that the security of the human race was going to rest with him alone. No paternal hereditary to have to contend with. Perhaps and just as powerfully only a full-blown Divine manifestation. Jesus it's you.

Swedenborg touches very powerfully on the development and processes going on and emerging within the Lord through his childhood and youth and early manhood pictured in the stories of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and Joseph, dawning realizations and the first stirrings of what it would require to go through to its completion. Here's one example. The Lord would have read I'm sure, Genesis 22, the story of Abram being told by God to go and sacrifice his own only beloved son. And he's willing to. This is Jesus—Oh God my father, what are you asking me here? What do I have to sacrifice to you? What is my only beloved son? what is it? what are you asking of me here? What's my treasure, my greatest possession? It's my mind, it's my reason, my sense of being who I am. Maybe it's my right to enjoy life and be just like others. Because Isaac means laughter. You're asking me to hand this over and I will do this but I don't understand it Lord. But you alone know everything and I will comply. I will put myself into your hands.

And Isaac is not sacrificed. Instead a ram is sacrificed, caught by its horns in the thicket from which it cannot extricate itself nor enter any further. It's caught. What a picture of the human condition.

Swedenborg says that the Lord's temptations took place throughout his entire life. In the gospels you have instances of temptation. But a lot of it is veiled over. You have the wilderness temptations, you have Gethsemane, finally you have the cross. Swedenborg says the Lord's temptations, this assault and attack on his will was there with him through his whole life. Imagine the hells then as I've said, so strong, sensing that their very holding power was being challenged by this figure of Christ. Boy they would rush, they would gather, who is he, what's happening, what do we stand to lose? Go for it before it's too late. Undermine him, use every trick in the book. The onslaught must have been colossal and directed almost exclusively to the Lord's own mind. And the Lord had to face every temptation as a man and feel its fear. There was nothing automatic about the outcome. It was always an act of sheer will.

Swedenborg says that the Lord being who he was alternated between two levels of different consciousness. At times Jesus Christ would have been fully aware of his divinity, its power, its zeal. At other times he was only conscious of himself, his humanity, his separation, his aloneness, his vulnerability. He could only be tempted when he was in these human states. He could only then resist them as a man on his own. When you feel god-like nothing can touch you. You're armed. When you feel you're just a man with a unique mission, you can be got at incredibly subtly.

What would have been the Lord's temptations? Appreciate very much that the Lord swung between these two levels of consciousness. And while they would have felt very different, the memory of exaltation would still be there to be drawn on in the times of darkness and fear. That's important because that would make the temptation all the harder. The understanding didn't shut down. Only the emotions changed.

Swedenborg suggests that the greatest love that the Lord had was his yearning to save the whole of the human race. To save it. The greatest temptation from that yearning was to be led to feel the futility and the pointlessness of it and that man would not respond or understand the work being undertaken for them, and go its own way. You look one way and you see people unmoved by anything. You look the other way and you see the power of evil to control them and you know that this must not happen. But you can't see the reward of what you've got to put into doing that. And yet you must do it and you must die at the end of it by the very people you're yearning to save.

One of the words which is very important in this process of growth, consciousness, overcoming, change of level and so on is this idea of glorification. Glorification is not simply the transformation of the Lord from being a man into being a Divine man. The Lord didn't transform these human tendencies that he got from Mary. He put them off. He cast them away. They were no longer there in him and he became increasingly Divine and as he resisted every temptation, his soul, the Divine itself deeply within him, changed the structure of his whole being down to the very substance of the physical body which goes beyond anything that ever happens to the likes of us. The key point is that the Lord worked through every level of human existence from soul to flesh so that now the Lord is in contact with every level of life and has the power to keep it pure and make it perfect. I can say no more than that.

Two last things. In the new church—in Swedenborg—there's an important distinction between redemption and salvation. Traditionally the Christian church emphasizes the cross. People complain that our churches don't have crosses in them. Some of them do but to emphasize the cross is to overstate one part of the human condition. Christianity emphasizes the cross and urges people to be saved, by believing that Jesus died for their sins, by them coming to the foot of the cross in faith, washed in the blood. Swedenborg gives a very different emphasis which strikes a much better balance and makes the work of Christ a universal achievement. He says that what Christ achieved in coming into the world was the eternal disempowering of evil so that it can never ever fundamentally threaten to take over the human race again, against its will. You know in, well the only thing I can think of is the story of Dracula. Have you ever read Dracula? Now in the story of Dracula the vampire can't gain entry at all unless he is invited in, unless he is summoned and welcomed. Otherwise he's powerless. You see. Jesus Christ disempowered evil so that its power to alter our freedom is taken away. We have been given spiritual freedom and the Lord has redeemed us. Our real salvation then lies in exercising our spiritual freedom and doing the work and all that that must mean. It's as serious and painstaking as that. Because it finally is up to us to cooperate and take responsibility. There are no

quick fixes but the securities are in place. That's timed redemption. We are saved as we cooperate in the work of our regeneration.

Okay. What was the difference in the spiritual world from this awesome fact of the incarnation? I guess the immediate effect in the spiritual world was the restoration of the right balance back again so that both heaven and hell can have their respective part and place in influencing people in this world as they exist to do. What was the difference in this world from the incarnation? In the Old Testament it talks about God adding to himself the arm of Jehovah. And Swedenborg picks that up and says somewhere that through the incarnation God was actually extending his very own being to an ultimate that was not there before, a plane which had not existed so that now God can know what it is like to be a human being because he's experienced that directly for himself. The arm of Jehovah. The beginning of the Christian church that worships a visible God. We have access and can turn to a personal, knowable God and then of course there are the gospels in the new revelation. So those are some of the differences that this incarnation has provided and brought into being.

In terms of us, I brainstormed on these and just wrote down quickly things that I felt that the fact of the incarnation now provides in various ways. One I've mentioned, that is our actual spiritual freedom. It sounds such a kind of fatuous thing just to say it, but it's there. You are free to choose what you will believe and call real. You're free to determine. There is nothing that can stop you from making those free choices. You can now acknowledge God and turn yourself to the Lord for his strength and power

The effect for us of the incarnation

1. Spiritual Freedom
2. Acknowledgement of the Lord
3. Our sins are borne (not wiped away)
4. Indwelling of God
5. Community in Christ
6. Understanding temptation
7. Belief being in use and service
8. Eternal closer conjunction

One of the deep theological things that Swedenborg touches on is that our sins are never ever wiped out. They're never ever made as if they never existed. Washed in the blood does not mean wiped out so that you're now squeaky clean. Our sins are borne as the Lord fights on our behalf for us and takes over the burden of our humanity. He bears our sins, not wipes them.

The indwellingness of God before the incarnation. I guess there was almost no sense that God dwells within us. Now there is and rightly and safely so. Not only that, but God dwells among us in community. We can now understand temptation. Before it must have been frightened to have negative states. Now we can begin to understand through Christ, that temptation has purpose, is part of the cycle that is for our

eventual good. Through the incarnation and its ultimate level of physical reality, we now understand that belief means action and service and use. We are to incarnate into a life of usefulness and offering and lose our life so that we find it.

And lastly the incarnation allows us to come closer and closer into union and relationship with a God who is present with us. Abide in me and I in you.

What you've had so far is theology. An attempt to wrestle and understand God-man, Divine Human, Incarnation.

The gospels offer us a fixed statement of the Lord's life and work and express very strongly, if you prepare to relate with it, a lot of the material behind the incarnation. It's fascinating to see the Lord's life and work in a historical context as real and known events. We're not dealing with a myth. We're dealing with an actuality. The Roman Empire, the province of Judea, Herod, Caesar Augustus. Real people.

Swedenborg is very careful to keep to the reality and not veer into cabalistic interpretation. He wisely says that the events represent the state of the church at that time and its treatment of the Word but he doesn't question the events. Just quite the opposite. He accepts the virgin birth as fact, because it was necessary for Christ's unique soul, but he also says that a virgin represents innocence and the affection for truth. So the virgin birth is real but there's a spiritual virgin birth. So he would be comfortable about us needing innocence before the Lord can ever be born in us. His comments on Mary as the mother of Jesus are quite straightforward. He met her in heaven. She acknowledges that she was the mother of the Lord but now she worships him along with everyone else and does not put herself in a special place. I don't think he once spiritualizes Mary or symbolizes her but he points out that Jesus never once called her mother but woman. Why? Because this represented Christ's need to put away his inherited human nature that came to him through Mary his mother.

Last thing. Perhaps all the theology and theory of the incarnation touches us, reminds us, but what can we do with it? Perhaps this is why we need the gospels. Perhaps the best and most powerful way of experiencing real incarnate presence is through bringing the gospel into ourselves for its work and teaching.

Thank you very much.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=a1wPo0KME9Y>

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Recommendations to following up on the content of this presentation.

What God/Jesus Is - S&L Short Clips

Is Jesus the same person as God, or different? Learn how to think about Jesus as a divine aspect of the one indivisible God.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5Y0q0Lw30aE>

The Purpose of Life's Tests and Struggles - S&L Short Clips

Do life's tests and hardships benefit us in the long run?

Bible stories about Jesus's life give us the answer.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=W36VhMHoRd0>

Read **Arcana 9937**, an exposition of the Lord's ongoing battle and work for every person in temptation; fighting for them, helping them to become better channels of love and wisdom.

<https://newchristianbiblestudy.org/exposition/translation/arcana-coelestia-elliott/ex-28/99370>