

Swedenborg Theology Course

Session 2

Who Is God?

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God as Love Itself

We concluded the previous session by asking two questions: Is it possible to love love itself? And might not 'Love Itself' be another name for God? The Swedenborgian tradition, and indeed Christianity generally, would answer both these questions yes. An important Biblical source for this is the First Epistle of John:

Beloved, let us love one another; for love is of God, and anyone who loves is born of God and knows God. Anyonewho does not love does not know God; for God is love. [1 John 4:7-8]

In many ways Swedenborg's views on God are a spelling out of the implications of these words of John. God is Love Itself, and our ability to love comes from God. Furthermore, God is known by loving. John puts this quite bluntly: Anyone who loves knows God, anyone who doesn't love doesn't know God.

To be sure, it requires an act of faith to move from the observation that it is possible to love love itself to a belief in God as Love Itself. To love love itself is a possibility we can discover within ourselves. But to view "Love Itself" as a name of God is to consider Love Itself to be the uncreated ground of all being, the source of all existence. (Something like this is implied if we want to hold on to a traditional view of God at all.) I don't want to be misunderstood. I am not saying that there is an argument here (much less proof) for the existence of God. Rather I see this as an invitation, and invitation to an awakening of faith in Love Itself as the ultimate source and goal of all that we experience in our lives and in the world around us.

Since for Swedenborg love and wisdom always go hand-in-hand, he describes God as the perfect union of infinite love and infinite wisdom. The union of Divine Love and Wisdom is thus the basic Swedenborgian conception of God. In the last session, we spelled out some of the basic properties of love as we experience it. Many of these properties of love apply to Infinite, Divine Love as well, with a number of theologically interesting consequences.

1. *God is inherently a Creator God.* Consider this question: Could a being of Pure Love exist all by itself? What would be the point of a loving God who had no one with which to share that love? Since love always has an object and seeks mutuality, it is inevitable that the Divine Love would create. In creating the

universe God creates an object distinct enough from God and independent enough from God to be an object of God's love. Swedenborg states that God's purpose in creating is to create a heaven from the human race. In creating the universe and in particular human beings, the Divine is seeking the experience of loving and being loved. As conscious beings endowed with thought, feeling and freedom of choice we have the capacity, if we so choose, to return God's love. Thus we are invited to fulfill God's purpose in creating.

2. *God respects our freedom.* This is an implication of the point that true love is freely given. An infinite wisdom would understand this point more deeply than anyone. God seeks our love but knows better than to try to force it. This implies that God's creation involves a free self-limiting of God's limitlessness and power. God produces a universe and allows it to unfold according to its own internal logic. God grants us freedom of choice and action, and chooses to do nothing to overrule that freedom. It is central to God's purpose of creating a heaven from the human race that we can choose, if we want to, not to love God or each other. God is good and does not create evil, on Swedenborg's view, but in granting us freedom, and choosing not to override it, God allows for the possibility that humanity will choose evil and that through humanity evil will enter into the world.
3. *God's love for us is covenanted.* The love between God and ourselves calls for faithfulness on both sides. This finds expression in the Bible through the concept of 'covenant'. The Biblical concept of 'covenant' grew out of the treaties that existed between ancient Near Eastern rulers, treaties which demanded faithfulness to the promises made by both parties to the covenant. Covenanted relationship to God runs through the Old and New Testaments of the Bible. God promises salvation and deliverance from evil, while we are asked to live lives of justice and integrity.

God as the Divine Human

Swedenborg holds to an unabashedly 'anthropomorphic' view of God, that is to say, he believes that God is 'in human form.' This view of God is outlined in the opening sections of *Divine Love and Wisdom*. He unfolds his views as follows:

1. *God is Life itself and thus Love itself.* The implication of this for Swedenborg is that all life comes from God and that apart from God there is no life. We may seem to ourselves to be alive and to have a life of our own. But this is an illusion. We are in fact receptacles of life and are alive only to the degree that the Divine Life flows through us.
2. *God is not extended in space and time, but is completely present in every region of space and at every interval of time, no matter how large or small these regions or intervals.* Physical objects are extended in space, with one part being in one place, another part in another. Similarly, motions and processes are extended in time, one stage occurring at one time, another at a later time. God

does not relate to space and time in that way, but rather is completely present everywhere always.

3. *God is infinite and infinitely complex.* The concept of infinity has always been a challenge to our finite, human thought. The mathematical and logical understanding of infinity has grown since Swedenborg's time but many of the paradoxes of infinity remain and are just as challenging as ever. Indeed, Swedenborg is careful to say that God's infinity goes beyond our mathematical concepts of infinity. God's infinity for Swedenborg is an infinity of infinite things held together as one.
4. *God is human in form and has a body.* In DLW n. 18 we read:

Anyone can come to an inner assurance about the presence of infinite things in God—anyone, that is, who believes God is a person; because if God is a person, God has a body and everything that having a body entails. So God has a face, torso, abdomen, upper legs, and lower legs, since without these God would not be a person. Since God has these components, God also has eyes, ears, nose, mouth and tongue. God also has what we find within a person, such as a heart and lungs and the things that depend on them, all of which, taken together, make us human. We are created with these many components, and if we consider them in their interconnections, they are beyond counting. In the Divine-Human One, though, they are infinite. Nothing is lacking, so God has an infinite completeness.

The concept of an infinite, nonspatial, nontemporal God with a human body is a challenge to the imagination, to say the least. It is probably not helpful to try to imagine what the Divine Human looks like. And Swedenborg himself repeatedly warns us not to try to conceive of Divine realities in terms of the spatio-temporal forms that appear to our physical senses.

God's human form is better understood functionally. Throughout his scientific and theological careers Swedenborg always thought in images that I will call here 'organic.' His thought is 'organic' in that he always thought in terms of the interdependence of part and whole within complex structures. The human body is for him the prime example and model. The body doesn't exist apart from its organs, tissues, cells and fibers. And yet neither do the organs, tissues, cells and fibers exist—at least in their living state—apart from the body that sustains them. Moreover, while all of our organs, tissues, cells and fibers have their characteristic activities which they perform, often without our conscious knowledge and direction, we always act as unified individual persons. It is the person as a whole that sees, hears, thinks, acts, etc. Thus the organs, etc. of the body can be considered in terms of what they allow the unified person to do. With our eyes, we can see; with our ears, we can hear; with our legs and feet, we can walk; with

our hands, we grasp, manipulate and shape things.

The Divine, in Swedenborg's thought, is a complex, structured reality in the same way. Indeed, God is the most complex and complexly structured reality. As noted above, Swedenborg says that there are infinitely many things in God. And yet they make up one unified individual. Love Itself is capable of everything: it can see, hear, touch, inspire, move, generate, mold, etc. In that sense, God has eyes, ears, hands, etc. Yet while containing infinitely many things within, the Divine always acts as a unified individual. There is always a unity and consistency of purpose in all that God creates. Thus the Divine is preeminently an organic reality, in the sense of 'organic' we are using here.

What Makes a Human Human?

It might helpful to remember the simple and basic definition of 'human' which Swedenborg offers in *Heaven and Hell* n. 60., a passage that we quoted last time. There he says that it is not our material bodies that make us human, but rather our ability to know what is true and to will what is good. That is, what makes us 'human' is not a concrete reality, but rather a certain kind of potential or ability, essentially the ability to be moral beings, distinguishing moral truth from moral falsehood, and being able—if we wish—to choose what is good.

Often in contemporary English we use the phrase 'human being' as roughly equivalent to *Homo sapiens*, a species of intelligent mammal that evolved on planet Earth. Swedenborg is talking instead about a much broader concept, one that is discussed in contemporary philosophy when defining what makes a person a 'person.' If 'humans' (or if you prefer, 'persons') are beings that can know the truth and will the good, we could conceivably come to decide that other animals, say chimpanzees or dolphins, have these abilities too. Then they would be 'human' by Swedenborg's definition, (or if you prefer, 'persons'). Likewise if there are intelligent life forms on other planets in the universe, they would be 'human' too by Swedenborg's definition, just so long as they have the capacity to know the truth and will the good.

Is God 'human' by this definition? For anyone who believes what we have been saying about God up to this point, the answer is an obvious yes. In fact, God as the perfect union of infinite love and infinite wisdom is more completely and perfectly human than anything else in existence. Thus for Swedenborg, God is in this sense the only fully realized human being. We are human only to the extent that we are images of God and are receivers of the Divine Life.

A God found without and within

The above are abstract and philosophical considerations. They reach to the limit of our finite human understanding and are open to debate. But if we take Swedenborg's theological vision to heart, they have spiritual implications. However much or little we are aware of it at any moment in our lives, we are loved by a God that seeks our love.

God's love and wisdom are all around us, since all things that exist are vessels of God. When our spiritual eyes are open we see everything around us as the work of God. When our spiritual ears are open we hear all things in nature speaking to us of their Creator. All the love and support we receive from our fellow finite human beings finds its first source in God's love for all of us, a love which flows from God through them to us.

God is found within as well. Every moment of inner peace, every moment of inner joy, every time we are graced to feel gratitude, or renewed hope, renewed inspiration, every time it is given us to love wisely a fellow finite human being—all these come to us from the God whose life flows into us from within. To the degree that our hearts and our minds are open we come to realize that we are never alone but rather that we are always loved and invited to love in return.

We Are "Angels in Training"

The above considerations allow us to return to the question of the first session (Who are We?) and offer an answer particularly popular with Swedenborgians: We are "angels in training."

As we have seen, for Swedenborg God is in fact more fully human than we are. He sometimes states this in an extreme way, saying that God is the Only Human Being, and that God's life is the Only Human Life. We are, as the Bible says, created in the image and likeness of God. What God is infinitely and perfectly, we are in a finite, but growing and evolving way. That is to say, we are finite and partially realized unions of the love and wisdom that in their perfect and infinite union constitute God. We are human only to the degree that we let the Divine Humanity manifest within us, and we are alive only to the degree that the Divine Life flows through us.

By Swedenborg's definition an 'angel' is any being that receives God's love and wisdom, or to say it another way, any being that allows itself to be completely led by God. And 'heaven' by Swedenborg's definition is the total community of all angels. God's purpose in creating is to create a heaven from the human race, that is to say, to develop us all into angels. In other words, God gave us lives in the natural world so that we could learn how to be angels, and continue to be those angels when we enter the spiritual world. Thus we are here as "angels in training." Every moment of every day, and everything that happens in our lives provide opportunities to learn the lessons in love and wisdom that an angel in training would need to learn in order to become an angel in heaven.

God and Incarnation

Love in its (or should we say His, Her?) fullest form always seeks mutuality and concrete, physical expression. Only then does love become fully actualized and manifest. For Swedenborg, to be fully actualized implied manifestation on every level, including the physical level, the level of matter, energy, space and time. Applied to the

Divine Human this implies for Swedenborg that the Divine Human 'needed' to take on a finite human form in order to become fully actualized. The Infinite Divine Human took on finite physical human form in order to share our own finite human experience of loving and being loved. Thus God came to live among us as Jesus Christ.

An interesting consequence of this view is that human sin is not the sole reason for Jesus' birth and death. Jesus would have come, even if human evil had never entered the world, even if we were not in need of salvation. Since, however, human evil and sin had in fact entered the world Jesus came not only as God in finite human form but also as our savior. These are the themes we will take up in the next session: "Who is Jesus Christ?"