

Who Is Jesus Christ?

Swedenborg Theology Course, Session 3
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Now Jesus and His disciples went out to the towns of Caesarea Philippi; and on the road He asked His disciples, saying to them, "Who do people say that I am?" So they answered, "John the Baptist; but some say, Elijah; and others, one of the prophets." He said to them, "But who do you say that I am?" Peter answered and said to Him, "You are the Christ." Then He strictly warned them that they should tell no one about Him. [Mark 8:27-30]

The question we are asking today has been a matter of controversy and discussion starting in Jesus' own lifetime and continuing into our own times. Notice how Jesus first asks "Who do people say I am?" and then follows up with the question, "But who do you say I am?" For your own spiritual life, that is the crucial question: who do *you* say Jesus is? How does Jesus enter *your* life?

Below I will offer an outline of Swedenborg's answer to who Jesus is, but please remember that Swedenborg's view is only offered in the hope that it will help you answer for yourself who Jesus is for you. For Swedenborgians, our true beliefs are always those that agree with the values we most deeply cherish.

Exiles from Eden

What makes Christianity a spiritual path, and not just a philosophy, is the commitment Christians make to follow Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior. But that raises a prior question: what is it that we need to be saved from? We need to answer that question before we can meaningfully discuss how Christ saves.

Swedenborg addresses the question of our need of salvation in terms of the history of human consciousness.

God's creation is composed of two great realms, the spiritual world, and the physical world. As human beings we have consciousness and life from the spiritual world and bodies from the physical world. We are so created that we live briefly in the physical realm and for eternity in the spiritual realm. Though our consciousness and life come from the spiritual realm, our human consciousness in its current state is unaware of the spiritual world while we are alive in the body.

According to Swedenborg, the earliest human beings had a very different state of consciousness from ours. These people, personified as Adam in the Genesis story, were aware of the spiritual world, even while they were alive in the body. Moreover, they

had what Swedenborg called "direct perception" of God's will for them. Endowed with this consciousness and freely choosing to live according to God's will, the human race known as "Adam" lived a life of peace and harmony, symbolized by the Garden of Eden.

Over time, these first people came to develop an increasing sense of independent and separate selfhood. They wanted to think for themselves and choose for themselves. A separate sense of self need not in principle lead to harm. But it did leave open the possibility that a self-centeredness would arise and that that self-centeredness would separate us from consciousness of God. And over time, that is exactly what happened: self-centeredness became a selfishness that placed a love of power and exclusive possession above love of God and neighbor. This was an inversion of the original value system that placed love of God and love of neighbor above love of power and love of possessions. In the wake of this development came evil and falsehood, injustice and violence. And since people were becoming ever more focused on physical reality, consciousness of God and spiritual reality were gradually lost. The "Fall" for Swedenborg was not a single event, but rather this progressive increase in evil and moral falsehood within human consciousness.

What remains true for us in our current state of consciousness? What makes us human, according to Swedenborg, is the potential we hold within ourselves to become finite but ever growing conduits of God's Love and Wisdom. Even in our current state, the deepest satisfactions in life come from loving well, that is, from knowing that we have served God and have been of use to others. The primary obstacle to this is a sense of separate, vulnerable self which cuts us off from a compassionate understanding of ourselves and others. An essential part of our spiritual journey, then, is a return to our original consciousness.

Jesus: Divine and Human

'Christology' is that branch of theology which tries to understand in human conceptual terms who Jesus was as the Christ. I have come to believe that the ideal Swedenborgian Christology would move in two directions simultaneously. It is in one direction the story of how the infinite God came to live a finite human life amongst us, experiencing our reality as we do. And simultaneously and in the opposite direction it is the story of how a finite person like you or I came to realize an inner conscious union with the God who dwells within.

As a person like you or I, Jesus was born like us, went through infancy, childhood, adolescence, and adulthood like us. And like us, he learned and developed in the process. In particular, he grew in spiritual insight and maturity, just as we grow and mature spiritually through our life experience.

As Jesus grew, he gradually become more and more aware of his union with the infinitely wise and compassionate reality that he knew as "the Father". In Swedenborg's view, Jesus the man was not initially aware of his union with God. His

consciousness grew and expanded over the course of his life, death, resurrection. In this process he experienced alternations in level of consciousness: at times he experienced conscious separation from God, at other times he experienced conscious union with God. In the Gospels both sorts of statement can be found: those that imply a separation between Father and Son, as well as those which affirm a union between Father and Son.

At birth, according to Swedenborg, Jesus' finite humanness and his inner Divinity were distinct, but over the course of his life, his finite humanity became completely united with the infinite Divinity within. This was effected primarily at the level of will. Jesus let his finite, personal will become the expression of God's will.

In the course of glorification, Jesus became the "New Adam," that is, he returned to the direct perception of God's will enjoyed by the first human beings.

This union of the human and Divine wills was forged in the course of temptation. It is a central part of Swedenborg's view of who Jesus was that he was tempted in all things as we are. See especially Jesus' words in the Garden of Gethsemane, "Father, let this cup pass from me. Yet not as I will but as you will." Jesus, like us, had free will, and, like us, was tempted not to accept God's will. But despite temptation, he chose God's will. Swedenborg calls the process through which Jesus' finite human nature was united with the infinite Divine nature within "glorification."

Delivering us from the Hells

All things, says Swedenborg, are connected in the spiritual realm. The average level of human consciousness at any one time in history is more or less the starting point for all of us. We are born into a world rife with evil and falsehood and we are inevitably influenced by it. No thought or feeling is exclusively our own, as it seems to us in our current level of consciousness, but enters into us from the spiritual world. All impulses towards compassion and helpfulness, along with the corresponding insights, enter our minds from the heavens. The impulses to lash out at those around, along with the instincts as to what will hurt, enter our minds from the hells. As free and conscious beings, we not only receive from the spiritual world, but contribute to the balance of good and evil within it as well. Every good impulse any one of us ever acts on adds to spiritual power of good throughout the spiritual realm, while every evil impulse any one of us ever acts on adds to the spiritual power of evil throughout the spiritual realm. It is only because the spiritual influences of good and evil upon us are in balance, that we can exert our own freedom to discern the difference between the good and evil options presented to us in any given situation, and choose accordingly.

At the time of Jesus' birth, in Swedenborg's view, the power of spiritual evil was becoming so great that it was threatening to overwhelm our human freedom to choose good over evil, or even to recognize the difference. Jesus in the course of his life, death, resurrection, and ascension was able to restore the balance between good and evil, thus

preserving our power to choose. By allowing himself to be tempted by evil and falsehood, while not acting on the basis of them, Jesus weakened their spiritual power. This point is rather subtle. He didn't destroy evil --- we've seen plenty of that in the history of the last two thousand years. But he weakened the power of evil enough to preserve our freedom.

The Christ Within

In Swedenborg's day and especially in Western Europe it was believed that in their disobedience Adam and Eve, and through them all humankind, had incurred God's judgement and were cut off from the life of Heaven. It was further believed that in dying on the cross, a death he did nothing to deserve, Jesus took upon himself the punishment we merit for our sins, and further still that we receive salvation in Christ through our faithful acknowledgement of his death for our sin. Swedenborg was vehemently opposed to this understanding of Christ's saving act, since to his mind we deny the unity of God if we imagine a compassionate "God the Son" atoning to a wrathful "God the Father." Thus Swedenborg adamantly rejected the doctrines, still widely held today, known as "Original Sin", "Vicarious Atonement", and "Salvation by Faith Alone".

Swedenborg would have us be very careful about how we understand the traditional Christian belief that Jesus "died for our sins," or to say it another way, that his death was an "atoning sacrifice." For Swedenborg this is never to be understood in terms of crime and punishment. Taken in its starkest form, the belief that Jesus took on himself the punishment we deserve for our sins would imply that our salvation was accomplished two thousand years ago, and thus in a certain sense, comes to us from outside. Our salvation, so understood, would involve a transaction between "God the Father" and "God the Son" and our participation in our own salvation would be by way of believing that this happened.

Swedenborgian theology doesn't usually use the language of "atoning sacrifice." However, I believe that there is a Swedenborgian way to understand this concept, and its sources in the New Testament. A Swedenborgian understanding of the cross would take the words 'sacrifice' and 'atonement' back to their roots. The word "sacrifice" in its Latin roots means to make holy. Atonement can be understood as "at-one-ment" a becoming one with. Jesus offered his life in a death he did not deserve as part of his mission to restore us to an "at-one-ment" with God. He offered his life for our sakes and to make possible for us our own reunion with God. It was a sacred act and an act of reconciliation. The death on the cross from the Swedenborgian point of view was at once the culminating temptation, and the ultimate demonstration of God's love for us. Jesus died a cruel, undeserved death while feeling nothing but love and compassion for those who were mistreating him. In so doing he resisted the temptation to return evil with evil, hatred with hatred, violence with violence. Furthermore, he respected our freedom by not using miraculous power to save his life, since had he done so our belief in him would be compelled instead of free. He was unshaken by the worst evil could

throw at him and remained unshaken in his love of God and neighbor.

In Galatians 2:20 Paul wrote, "It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me." Paul believed that if he died the death that Christ died, that is, if he died as to his own individual ego and self-will, he would live the life that Christ entered into when he rose from the dead. This, I believe, points to the deepest understanding of the death on the cross. It was just this death of the ego that allowed Jesus to rise on Easter as the Christ. It is this journey of death and resurrection that lies before us as well when we choose to follow Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior.

Swedenborgian Christianity is a resurrection faith. Christ rose from the dead on Easter Morning, and now completely united with the Divine Humanity, lives at the center of Heaven. All the angels of heaven look toward him and are guided by him. In our lives the angels are with us and guide us, but their guidance always derives ultimately from the Risen Christ. The Christ-nature is a reality that dwells within everyone. When we face the temptations that always accompany our free choices, we can always turn in prayer to Christ for guidance. Swedenborg says that if we could see deeply enough into our own spiritual process, we would see that whenever we win a spiritual battle, whenever we overcome a temptation, it is really Christ who has fought and won that battle for us. When as Swedenborgians we say that Jesus Christ is our Lord, we mean by that that we can always turn to him for guidance and help. When we say that Jesus Christ is our savior we mean by that that when we turn to the Lord, he fights and wins our spiritual battles for us. It is always Christ working within the deepest part of the soul who leads us back to union with God. It is always Christ who leads us into the life of loving and being loved that we were created for. The Risen Christ saves us from within and right now, as we open ourselves to the Christ-nature within. We participate in our own salvation by a process of repeatedly turning to the Lord for guidance. Swedenborg always insisted that the life which leads to heaven is a life of charity, that is to say, a life lived in useful service to God and neighbor. For it is in sincerely striving to live by the principles of love of God and love of neighbor that we open ourselves to the Christ within and thereby participate in Christ's union with God.