

Swedenborg Theology Course

Session 1

Who are We?

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People everywhere long to find meaning in their lives, and to feel that their personal life histories are part of a larger, purposeful whole. Through the ages, people have turned to religion out of a desire to understand their first origins and their ultimate destination. People turn to religion to bring their lives into harmony with the laws that govern the universe—not merely the physical laws, but the moral and spiritual laws as well. Spiritually restless, people set out on a search until they find a way of life that satisfies, and a worldview that makes intelligible their reason for being here. For this series, I want to take as our starting point the fact of our seeking, and ask: Who are we? What is the essence of the human experience? Why are we searching and what do we hope to find?

"Who Are We?" is, of course, one of the perennial questions, and can be approached from many directions. I will take as my starting point in these reflections a lesson I have learned from ministry over the years. From the experience of performing baptisms, weddings and memorial services, I have witnessed first hand the fundamental reality that every human being loves and is loved. The memorial services have brought this home to me in an especially powerful way. There I spend time with those whom the departed person loved. And they in turn are present out of love. While a loved one can be removed from our presence, the love remains. I am always struck by the paradox of our individuality: each person is unique and irreplaceable, and is remembered for his or her unique qualities, but at the same time the human experience is universal. We all share the same joys and sorrows. The meaning and impact of an individual human life is not measured by the number of years lived, by possessions, nor even, in the end, by career accomplishments. What is remembered in the end is the love given and received. We are all bound together in a network of love.

Indeed, the same lesson is to found in the rest of my ministry as well. In infant baptisms we are welcoming a child into the world, and asking God's blessing not only on the child, but also on the parents in their sacred task as parents. The infant is by nature loving and needs to be surrounded by love to thrive emotionally and spiritually. In wedding ceremonies, we are celebrating the love that leads two people to choose to share their lives, and we are blessing the commitment that binds them together. In worship, people are given a chance to reconnect with the spirit, and to renew a commitment to live a life of love of God and neighbor. In pastoral care, the goal is often to help people reconnect to the wisdom of their own loving hearts. I think if we simply look at our own experiences of life and at our observations of others, it is easy to see

that people truly thrive only when they love deeply and are deeply loved in return.

I take that then as the starting point of these reflections: every human being longs to love and be loved. Swedenborg takes this one step further still and insists that love is our life.

Love is the essential reality of every individual life.... Anyone who weighs the matter will discover that love is our vital core. We grow warm because of its presence and cold because of its absence, and when it is completely gone, we die. We do need to realize, though, that it is the quality of our love that determines the quality of our life. *Heaven and Hell n. 14 (excerpts)*.

In trying to understand what Swedenborg is getting at when he says that "love is the essential reality of every individual life," it has helped me to consider the following: Every day each of us makes thousands of decisions. Most of them are small and perhaps inconsequential, others are big. All of these decisions whether big or little add up, however, and they, more than anything else, show to the world who we are as human beings. In making decisions we are guided by a value system, and underneath our values is the nature of our love. What we cherish and hold dear determines how we choose. In other words, who we are as individual human beings is determined by what we love and how we express that love. As Swedenborg puts it, it is the quality of our love that determines the quality of our experience of life.

Love so understood is the basic motivational force and is directed not only toward people but also toward objects of all sorts. Love inspires all our studies, learnings, career choices, pastimes, etc. Love, for Swedenborg, both sets the goals and provides the energy which inspires us to pursue our goals.

Some Properties of Love

Love in its mature, fully-developed form is a rich, complex and often paradoxical reality. It is something we experience but it is more than just an experience. It is often accompanied by powerful emotions but it is more than just a feeling. I list here just a few of the most important of the properties of a mature, fully-developed love. The following points outline a Swedenborgian understanding of the nature of the love that makes us human.

1. *Love delights in its object, is attracted to it and seeks its well-being.* Love directs us toward an object, an object not identical to ourselves. Swedenborgian thought does have a place for taking proper care of yourself. In a very real sense, we need to properly love ourselves before we can love others. However, I would maintain that a life of self-absorption is in the end an unsatisfying life, that living just for oneself leaves a person feeling empty and cold inside. Assuming that each of us has had our share of both selfish and generous moments, I would also suggest that each of us can confirm the truth of this by reflecting on his or her own experience. Do not the deepest satisfactions come from the good we have

been able to do for another? Love in its truest sense invites us to reach out beyond ourselves.

2. *Love is freely offered.* There are folk tales of love potions, and today there are even "reality" shows in which people win their mates as a prize, yet I doubt that anyone is satisfied for long by a love that is not freely offered. If you could buy or force love, it wouldn't be love. Much as we might like to "make" others love us, in fact we can't, since that simply wouldn't be the kind of love we long for.
3. *Love seeks us out.* When we fall in love, we experience this as something that happens to us. It can come as a surprise, it can overwhelm. In those instances, it is not really a matter of choice. This is true not only of romantic love, but of the love that parents feel for a newborn child. We can also fall in love with a field of study, a skill, a craft, an activity, an organization, a cause, a religion, etc. However, it seems to me that any mature, enduring love moves beyond the "falling in love" stage to a stage of committed love. It moves from something out of our control to something that includes our ability to freely choose. This leads me to the next point.
4. *Love makes commitments and follows through on them.* This is one of the roots of the concept of faith. The Latin word "fides", which stands for faith in the Latin Bible and in Christian theology written in Latin, had in its older usage implications of holding oneself faithful to pledges and promises. Hence "fides" is the source of the English word "fidelity". Love is naturally faithful in that sense: it makes commitments and keeps them.
5. *Love seeks mutuality.* It is possible to love someone who doesn't return your love, but surely love is the most satisfying when it is mutual. Love seeks this mutuality.
6. *Love needs the support of wisdom to be fruitful.* This is a constant theme in Swedenborg's writings, where love and wisdom always go hand in hand. Wisdom is cold and fruitless if not motivated by love. Love is ineffective, or worse, harmful in its results if not guided by wisdom.

For Swedenborg we don't simply *have* love and wisdom (or not); we *are* each of us a particular kind of love joined with the wisdom that supports it. To love, Swedenborg says repeatedly in his writings, is to will what is good, and to be wise is to understand what is true. Thus Swedenborg writes

People who do not have an appropriate concept of spiritual and heavenly realities ... think that the earthly and material elements that make up their outmost form really make them what they are, and that without them they would not be human. Let them know, though, that they are not human beings because of these elements but because they are able to understand what is true and will what is good. *Heaven and Hell n. 60*

What really makes us human, according to Swedenborg, has nothing directly to do with

our bodies, nor the fact that we belong to the biological species *Homo sapiens*. What makes us human in the true sense of the word is our ability to love, that is to say, to will what is good and understand what is true.

Why Does Love Have to Hurt So Bad?

Given what we have said about humans as beings that love and are loved, and given what we have said so far about the nature of love, we might expect that our lives would be characterized by unbroken joy, peace, and understanding. Yet as popular music and the world's literature remind us, love often hurts. This is the great paradox of love. Why is this so? I don't have the answer, certainly not a complete one, but perhaps the following considerations will at least partially elucidate this fact.

1. *We are finite beings*. One implication of this is that we always make decisions on the basis of partial information, and we can never fully anticipate the consequences of our choices. Our intentions may be good, but we often lack the wisdom needed to perceive the truly helpful, loving action. There is always the possibility of miscommunication and unintended harm.
2. *We are growing beings*. The growing process itself can bring confusion, frustration, and pain. As we grow, we often question what before seemed certain, we often have to move beyond the comfortable and familiar to the unknown and risky.
3. *The presence of evil*. While affirming the goodness of God and the original goodness of creation, the Swedenborgian tradition also recognizes the reality and power of evil. In the world as it currently exists, sometimes people intentionally seek to harm us. Evil can be encountered within as well. We at times experience—or worse, act on—the impulse to harm others; we at times act in self-destructive ways. Even in a world without evil, love would sometimes hurt. It hurts all the more in a world in which evil is real and powerful. The nature of evil, and our need to resist evil are topics to which we return throughout these reflections.

All this suggests a first, provisional answer to our question, "Who Are We?" We are finite, growing, loved and loving beings. In the reflections to come we will rephrase and elaborate on this answer. For now I hope you will agree with this much: we find meaning and fulfillment in our lives to the degree to which we enter fully into the experience of loving and being loved.

Loving Love Itself

As a final thought for this reflection, I raise a question: Is it possible to love love itself? If we loved love itself, how would we live our lives? Certainly we would promote love everywhere and in every way we knew how. We would seek healing, forgiveness, peace and justice. We would seek to bring an end to physical want. We would seek to bring everyone out of loneliness and isolation. When I reflect on it, a life of love of love itself starts to look like the life that Jesus led. And what kind of object of love is this "love

itself?" Is it merely an abstract possibility, a goal to strive for? Or might it be the foundation of reality? What if "Love Itself" were another name for God? We take up this question in our next reflection, "Who Is God?"

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