The Urban Well

The Mercy Seminar 2026, Term III.5

Opening Comments

Tonight we turn our attention from John Calvin and the era of the Reformation, to Emauel Swedenborg and the era of the Enlightenment. Swedenborg was born in 1688 in Stockholm, Sweden. His father was a prominent figure both at the University of Uppsala and in the Swedish Lutheran Church, including being appointed the Bishop of Skara. Swedenborg's early career was entirely taken up with scientific and mathematical investigations, and in his years after college he traveled throughout Europe to study under the luminaries of Enlightenment thought. Upon his return to Sweden, he started the first scientific journal in Sweden, and was appointed by King Charles XII of Sweden to the Board of Mines, a position he held for thirty years. During this time he continued his prodigious work on cosmology, anatomy, and mathematics, as well as chemistry and physics. By 1740, he completed his major study on the soul in relation to the body, in an attempt to give an empirical account of the immortality of the soul.

However, in 1743, this phase of Swedenborg's career came to a dramatic conclusion, sparked by a series of dreams he began to have during this period, which created a spiritual crisis for him. These dreams led him to experience extreme guilt for the pride he exhibited as a man of science. However, in his despair, Christ appeared to him and gave him respite from this guilt. In April of 1745, he had a waking vision of Christ, in which he was commanded to give up his worldly career and studies. From this time onward he dedicated his incredible intellectual energies to learning from his dreams and visions and communicating in his writings what he learned. He came to see his theological vision as a new revelation of God in Jesus, which represented the second coming of Christ. He spent an enormous amount of energy interpreting the Bible to show that its hidden spiritual meaning revealed the truth of this new revelation, and published commentaries on Genesis, Exodus, and Revelation to teach this interpretation. All of these writings were in Latin, and published anonymously in London, to avoid being accused of heresy by the Swedish Lutheran Church and thus be subject to censorship. Between 1749 and 1771, he published around thirty volumes in Latin, beginning with *Secrets of Heaven* in 1749, and including *Heaven and Hell* in 1758, from which we are reading this evening. His last work was a summary of his theological vision entitled *True Christian Religion*, published in 1771. Swedenborg died in London in 1772 and was initially buried in the Swedish Church. In 1908, at the request of the Swedish government, his body was transferred to Sweden to be buried in the Cathedral in Uppsala.

In his 1749 book *Secrets of Heaven*, Swedenborg describes the genesis of his theological journey. "The Lord in his divine mercy has granted me the opportunity for several years now, without break or interruption, to keep company with spirits and angels, to hear them talking, and to speak with them in

turn." He gives a similar description of this phenomenon in tonight's reading: "I have talked with spirits as a spirit and I have talked with them as a person in a body. When I have talked with them as a spirit, they could not tell that I was not a spirit myself, in a form just as human as theirs. That is how my inner self looked to them, because when I talked with them as a spirit, they could not see my material body." At the heart of these encounters lies Swedenborg's claim that human beings are spirit, not body, or even body and spirit. "I have presented this to persuade rational people that, when seen for what we really are, we are spirits, and that the physical part added to us so that we can function in the physical and material world is not the real person but only the tool of our spirit. A great deal of experience has taught me that with respect to our inner self we are spirits—experience that would fill whole volumes, as they say, if I were to include it all." It is important to see Swedenborg as reporting what he saw and experienced with regard to spirit in the same way we read the reports of Galileo regarding what he saw through the telescope in his book *Starry Messenger.* He is writing not as a mystical visionary for other mystics, but as a rational person for rational readers, in order to persuade us by the evidence he has experienced that we are truly spirit, and survive as such when our bodies die. In fact, we would not be able to think at all were we not spirit, for the body cannot think. "The human soul, whose immortality has been the topic of many authors, is our spirit; it is in fact immortal in all respects, and it is also what does the thinking in our bodies. This is because it is spiritual and the spiritual is open to the spiritual and lives spiritually, through thinking and willing. So all the rational life we can observe in our bodies belongs to the soul and none of it to the body."

Since all people are essentially spirit, all will survive the death of their body, and most importantly, they will continue to be the same person they were before the body died. "When someone's body can no longer perform its functions in the material world in response to the thoughts and emotions of its spirit, which come to it from the spiritual world, then we say that the individual has died. This happens when the breathing of the lungs and the pumping motion of the heart have ceased. But in fact that person has not died at all. He or she is only separated from the physicality that was useful to that individual in the world. The essential person is actually still alive." Swedenborg claims that he met many spirits in the spirit world who had not believed in the immortality of the soul, and who were surprised and even embarrassed to learn that they were still alive after their bodies died. "I talked with three whom I had known in the world and told them that their funeral services were now being planned so that their bodies could be buried. When they heard this, they were struck with a kind of bewilderment. They said that they were alive, and that what was being buried had been useful to them only in the material world. Later on, they were quite amazed at the fact that while they had been living in their bodies they had not believed in this kind of life after death, and still more that this disbelief was shared by almost everyone in the church."

However, the heart of Swedenborg's theological vision is not the immortality of the spirit per se, but rather the destiny of each spirit after death, either in heaven or in hell. According to Swedenborg, God is infinite love and infinite wisdom, or infinite goodness and infinite truth. God has created the human spirit with reason to know wisdom, and a heart to love God. Moreover, God's love and truth constantly

flow towards all spirits in this life, and our task is to open ourselves to this inflow from God. If we do, we will be drawn ever closer to God, and after the body dies we will continue on the path to heaven, where we will be drawn to other spirits who love God. However, human beings pervert themselves by free will, and choose to love themselves above all else, thereby closing themselves to the inflow of God's truth and love. By doing so, they embrace evil and thereby create hell, for they draw those who love themselves into community with them, as like seeks like.

> There are two doors, so to speak, within each of us as well, one facing hell and open to evil and false things from there, the other facing heaven and open to good and true things from there. The door to hell is opened for people who focus on what is evil and on the falsity that comes from evil, though just a little light from heaven flows in through certain cracks, which enables us to think, reason, and speak. On the other hand, the door to heaven is opened for people who focus on what is good and thus on what is true. There are actually two paths that lead to our rational mind, one from above the mind or from inside it, through which goodness and truth enter from the Lord, and one from below the mind or from outside it, through which evil and falsity infiltrate from hell. The rational mind itself is in the middle, where these two paths meet; so the more light from heaven is let in, the more rational we are, and the more that light is shut out, the less rational we are, however the situation may appear to us.

Our thoughts and our ruling love in this life prepare us for our destiny in the world of the spirit. The love and wisdom of God make it possible for all who are willing to prepare themselves for heaven, but if some resist this preparation, they are setting their course for hell. "In people who are being readied for heaven, the higher aspects of the mind open, and the lower close against the inflow of evil and falsity. In people who are being readied for hell, the lower aspects open, and the higher close against the inflow of goodness and truth."

When our bodies die and we transition to the next life, we enter what Swedenborg calls the spirit world. If our inner and outer lives correspond to the love of God, we enter directly into heaven. If our love for ourselves is manifested in our inner and outer lives, we enter directly into hell. However, most who have died will remain in the spirit world for many days or even years, until their spirits are brought into full correspondence with their ruling love. "After a while, though, they settle into a constant state of being that agrees with the state of their ruling love. In this state of being, people recognize others only if what they love is similar, since similarity unites and dissimilarity separates." Once we reach the state of constancy and correspondence with our ruling love, we will no longer be able to see those whose love differs from our own, but will instead be drawn to the fellowship of those who love what we love. Moreover, this affiliation is already happening in this life. Those who respond to God's love and wisdom in love and faith are already members of heaven and are in communion with others in this life who are destined to heaven. As he says, "I may add here that even while we are living in our bodies, each one of us is, with respect to our own spirits, in a community with other spirits even though we are unaware of it. By means of their spirits, good people are in angelic communities and evil people are in

hellish communities. Furthermore, we come into those same communities when we die." Once we realize that we are spirit, and the spirit is immortal, the task is to abandon our self-love and turn to the God who is love, which is exactly what happened to Swedenborg in his spiritual crisis of 1743-4.

In conclusion, I need to point out that the situation in which every spirit finds itself is in a middle ground between good and evil, and heaven and hell.

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This situation of equilibrium was only made possible by Christ, for before Christ came both heaven and earth were in danger of being overrun by the denizens of hell. The one God became human so that in his humanity he could defeat evil by confronting every temptation to evil that hell could devise, concluding with his death on the cross. Thus it is ultimately the divine humanity of Christ that makes our own ruling love for God possible. As Swedenborg says in *True Christian Religion*:

> God is one in essence and in person, in whom is a Divine trinity, and he is the Lord God the savior Jesus Christ. No mortal could have been saved unless the Lord had come into the world. He came into the world to remove hell from man, and that he did remove it by means of contests with it and victories over it, and thereby he subdued it and reduced it to order and made it obedient to himself. He came into the world to glorify his human which he took on in the world, that is, to unite it with the Divine from which [are all things], and thereby he eternally holds hell in order and under obedience to himself. As this could be accomplished only by means of temptations admitted into his human, even to the last of them, which was the passion of the cross, he endured even that. The Lord from eternity, who is Jehovah, came into the world to subjugate the hells and to glorify his human; and without this no mortal could have been saved; and those are saved who believe in him.