

Swedenborgianism

by Tim Martin

Founder: Emanuel Swedenborg

Founding Date: 1798

Official Publication: *Chrysalis*.

Organization Structure: Several independently directed groups.

Unique Terms: Correspondences.

Other Names: General Church of the New Jerusalem, General Convention of the New Jerusalem, The Swedenborgian Church, The Lord's New Church, and The Conference Church.

HISTORY

Emanuel Swedenborg was born in Stockholm, Sweden in 1688. Most of his life was dedicated to science. After being educated at the University of Uppsala,¹ he was credited with inventions and theories in many areas of study. He designed mining machinery, a glider aircraft and an airtight stove. It is claimed that he “investigated every known science of his times” and “wrote over seventy treatises on subjects such as: ‘fossils, earth’s revolution;’ and ‘fire and colors.’”²

At the age of fifty-five, Swedenborg turned his life’s efforts toward theology. He sought truth by way of meditations and “systematically opened his consciousness to inner influences.”³ Through opening himself up in this manner, Swedenborg was contacted by a being who claimed to be Jesus Christ. He learned much about the spirit world through such spiritual encounters, laying the basis for Swedenborgian theology.

Fifteen years after his death in 1772, the first sect of his followers were organized in England by a British printer named Robert Hindmarsh.⁴ In 1789 a conference met in the London church, and has met almost every year since.⁵ Swedenborg’s teachings reached the United States in the 1780’s.⁶

The first American society was organized in Baltimore in 1792, and the first [American] ministers were ordained in 1798. The General Convention of the New Jerusalem in the U.S.A. was founded in 1817 in Philadelphia. Differences of interpretation within the convention led to the formation in 1897 of a separate group, the General Church of the New Jerusalem.⁷

Currently, there are approximately 5,000 followers of Swedenborg in Great Britain among 75 societies.⁸ The largest numbers of followers can be found in North America, with approximately 13,500 members and associates who are affiliated with three different Swedenborgian organizations.⁹ It is difficult to determine the number of

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Swedenborg's followers because many are in smaller organizations in over thirty nations.¹⁰

One major publisher of Swedenborg's works is the Swedenborg Foundation, established in 1849 for the purpose of "keeping Swedenborg's works in print and available to the public."¹¹ Two regular publications of the Foundation are *Chrysalis*, a journal of "spiritual discovery;" and *Logos*, a newsletter about Foundation activities.¹²

Other major publishers of his works are J. Appleseed & Co., Swedenborg Scientific Association, Swedenborg Verlag, and Seminar Books.¹³ Educational institutions include (not exhaustive) the Academy of the New Church in Bryn Athyn, Pennsylvania; Swedenborg School of Religion in Newton, Massachusetts; and Urbana University in Urbana, Ohio.¹⁴

DOCTRINE

Since Emanuel Swedenborg's theology is divided into several different sects, it will not be possible to cover all of them. Hence, the theology covered herein will be limited to Emanuel Swedenborg's writings, and that of the General Church of the New Jerusalem.

Scripture: Swedenborg taught that some books in the Bible had a "spiritual sense" to them that the others did not have.¹⁵ The spiritual sense refers to his concept of correspondences, defined as speaking "spiritually while speaking naturally."¹⁶ The natural meaning is the plain meaning communicated in the writings of the scripture. The corresponding spiritual truth in the scripture, however, could not be found by normal rules of interpretation.

These truths were discernable only to Swedenborg himself, based on his many encounters with angels and Jesus. Correspondences have a one-to-one relationship with a truth in the spiritual realm. For example, within the story of the earth's creation in Genesis chapters one and two, Swedenborg taught that the correspondences point to the development of the Christian's spiritual character.

The first dawning of light is our ability to see truth in our minds. The water vapors, as clouds in the sky above the seas, show the separation and distinction between the waters above (heavenly truths) and the waters below (truths about natural things). . . .The dry land which then comes forth, ready for vegetation, pictures man's mind ready for planting of spiritual ideas.¹⁷

Not all books in the Bible have correspondences. Hence, the books that do not have correspondences are not regarded as Scripture. Since Swedenborg's works are regarded as revelatory by the New Church, only Swedenborg himself could define which books have correspondences. Despite the lack of canonicity in the New Testament books that are not inspired, Swedenborg taught that these are still useful for the church. Below is a list of the Biblical books with correspondences:

The five books of Moses, the book of Joshua, the book of Judges, the two books of Samuel, the two books of Kings, the Psalms of David, the Prophets Isaiah, Jeremiah, Lamentations, Ezekiel, Daniel, Hosea, Joel, Amos, Obadiah, Jonah, Micah, Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah, Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi; and in the New Testament the four Gospels, Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, and the Revelation.¹⁸

It is not that only some portions of scripture have correspondences, but “there is a spiritual meaning in every single word that the Lord spoke.”¹⁹ Swedenborg wrote many volumes describing the spiritual corresponding truths that are in the books he regarded as scripture.

God: Although Swedenborg used the word trinity, he defined it modalistically. “These three, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, are the three essentials of the one God, which make one, like the soul, the body, and operation in man.”²⁰ This can be compared to the three roles a man might have; father, husband and engineer. This does not mean that the husband is different from the father, it is merely a different mode in which the one man operates at a given time. According to Swedenborg, this illustration is applicable to God. The Father is God in His essence, while Jesus is the same Person, but revealed in man. Thus, Jesus is Jehovah who came in the flesh.

Swedenborg taught that the historic Christian doctrine of the trinity was “hatched’ by the Nicene Council, and perverted the whole of the Christian Church.”²¹ When Jesus referred to God as a person Who was different from Himself, He was speaking of “His indwelling Divinity — as though separate from, and greater than Himself.”²²

Instead of a person, the Holy Spirit is described as “breath, typifying the life giving influence which proceeds from the Lord.”²³ He is described as “divine truth” and the “proceeding divine” that comes from Jesus.²⁴ The Holy Spirit proceeds from Jesus “as heat and light from the sun.”²⁵

Salvation: Humanity’s foremost problem before Jesus came was that humans lost the ability to do good. Christ’s redemption restored humanity’s ability “to shun evil, and to do the Lord’s will in a life of holiness and righteousness.”²⁶ Since humanity now can overcome sin, they are obligated to do so. They must be “resisting and overcoming every inclination to evil, [then] he may lose his life of sin, and gain an eternal life of holiness.”²⁷ This process of shunning evil and following the Lord is the experience of being born again. It is not a one time event, but a process in which “the heart and mind become freed from evil affections and thoughts, and filled with holiness, purity, and love from the Lord.”²⁸

Humanity and Angels: The purpose for the creation of humanity is so they “may be prepared to become an angel, and thus be useful and happy in heaven for ever.”²⁹ Hence, an angel is merely a human being after death. Swedenborg arrived at this conclusion by having many conversations with angels.³⁰ From these encounters, he discerned that they are exactly like humans, having “faces, eyes, ears, bodies, arms, hands, and feet, that they see and hear one another, and talk together, and in a word lack nothing whatever that belongs to men.”³¹ The only difference is that angels do not have physical bodies. The identicalness of angels to humans even allows for men and women to continue to have marital love for each other after this life. Since marital love continues, there will be marriages in heaven.

Church: Swedenborg taught through correspondences that the New Jerusalem, spoken of in Revelation chapter 21, referred to a new church that was to be established on earth. Swedenborg started this new church with his own writings. This New Church was necessary because the churches in his day had become destitute. They were depicted in Revelation as false prophets, the dragon, the harlot, and the beasts. Since wickedness had perverted the Christian church, the truth needed to be reestablished. It was done so through the writings of Emanuel Swedenborg.

BIBLICAL RESPONSE

God: The Father, Son and Holy Spirit are distinct persons in the Bible. This is obvious in many passages where two or more persons of the Godhead were present. For example, when Jesus was baptized, the Father said from heaven that “this is My beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased” (Matthew 3:17).

Angels: Angels and humans are distinctly different beings in their essence (1 Corinthians 6:3; Hebrews 2:7).

Salvation: Salvation is based on God’s grace alone, not on human efforts (John 5:24; Ephesians 2:8–9; Titus 3:5).

Scripture: There is no clear reason to accept Swedenborg’s writings as revelatory. He discounts over half the Bible as from God based on his authority alone. There is no way to verify his claims on the lack of inspiration of these books, or the inspiration of his. His teachings are against what the Bible teaches, and what has been taught in Christianity through the ages. For him to enter the world’s theological arena with a new theology based on his spiritual encounters with Jesus and many angels, he becomes subject to the tests of Deuteronomy 13:1-3, and he fails.

Notes

- ¹ *Encyclopedia Britannica*, 15th ed., s.v. “New Church,” 437.
- ² N. Crompton, Pa.: *Swedenborg, The Man Who Wanted to Know*, (New York: Swedenborg Foundation, 1993), 8-9.
- ³ *Ibid.*
- ⁴ *Funk and Wagnalls New Encyclopedia*, vol. 25 (1996), s.v. “Swedenborg, Emmanuel,” 46.
- ⁵ *Encyclopedia Britannica*, 633.
- ⁶ *Ibid.*
- ⁷ *Ibid.*
- ⁸ *Funk and Wagnalls New Encyclopedia*, 49.
- ⁹ Jane Williams Hogan, PH.D., “The Role of Written Text in the Founding of the Swedenborgian Church,” *Logos*, winter issue 1998, 1.
- ¹⁰ *Ibid.*
- ¹¹ Swedenborg Foundation, *Swedenborg Foundation* (New York: Swedenborg Foundation, 1993), 5.
- ¹² *Ibid.*
- ¹³ Swedenborg Foundation [Online]. (1999, January) URL <http://www.swedenborg.com/links.html>.
- ¹⁴ *Ibid.*
- ¹⁵ Emanuel Swedenborg, *Posthumous Theological Works*, trans. J. Whitehead, (New York: Swedenborg Foundation, 1954), 311-313.
- ¹⁶ “Swedenborg, Emmanuel,” *The Doctrine of the New Jerusalem Concerning The Sacred Scripture*, (London: Swedenborg Society Inc.), 30.
- ¹⁷ H. Cranch, Pa.: “The Language of Parable,” (Illinois: The Swedenborg Center, 1983), 4.
- ¹⁸ Emanuel Swedenborg, *The Arcana Caelestia*, vol. 12, trans. J. F. Potts, (New York: Swedenborg Foundation, 1978), para. 10325.
- ¹⁹ Emanuel Swedenborg, *Love in Marriage*, (New York: Swedenborg Foundation, 1953), 46.
- ²⁰ Samuel Warren, *Compendium of Swedenborg’s Theological Writings*, (London: Swedenborg Society, 1954), 86.
- ²¹ Marguerite B. Block, *The New Church in the New World*, (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1932), 41.
- ²² Edmund Swift, *Manual of New-Church Doctrine*, (London: James Speirs, 1912), 18.
- ²³ *Ibid.*, 7.
- ²⁴ Warren, *Compendium*, 83.
- ²⁵ *Ibid.*, 84.
- ²⁶ Swift, *Manual*, 16.
- ²⁷ *Ibid.*, 20–21.
- ²⁸ *Ibid.*, 53.
- ²⁹ Swift, *Manual*, 39.
- ³⁰ Emanuel Swedenborg, *Life After Death*, (New York: The New-Church Press, date unknown), 10.
- ³¹ *Ibid.*, 10–11.



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