



OUR DAILY BREAD
Resources for Spiritual Questers

An Introduction to the Swedenborgian Way of Life

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A Course Consisting of Weekly Reflections on Swedenborg's Theology

Course Outline

WEEK I: INTRODUCTION

WEEK II: GOD IMAGE:

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WEEK IV: DOCTRINE OF LIVING I-- FAITH:

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WEEK VIII: REGENERATION (REBIRTH)

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WEEK VIII: REGENERATION (Rebirth)

Swedenborg’s understanding about spiritual rebirth, or “regeneration” as he calls it, has some parallels with traditional Christianity. Regeneration means rebirth in Latin—re-generation. Most Christians agree that some form of rebirth is necessary. Jesus says this in John 3:3, “Jesus replied, “Very truly I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God unless they are born again.”” In some Christian faiths, rebirth is called “sanctification.” What brings about the sanctification is “sanctifying grace.” In other Christian denominations, faith gives a person new life in Christ. And in Evangelical Christianity, a person is instantly reborn when he or she accepts Jesus as their personal Savior.

For Swedenborg, regeneration is a process. And it involves real personality transformation. We become different people. Changing who we are clearly can’t happen instantly. Regeneration takes a lifetime and even continues into the next life. Swedenborg divides this process into 3 stages: repentance, reformation, regeneration.

The process of repentance, reformation, and regeneration has a basic pattern that we go through with individual variations. In general, the process is moving from being a natural person to becoming a spiritual person. By natural, we mean the self that we are given at birth, given by nature. It can be called our biological or worldly self. We need to become a spiritual person. The Latin root of the word “spiritual,” is *inspirare*, or *spiritus*. In Latin, *spiritus* or *inspirare* breath, breathing, inspire, breathe into, excite, inflame, instill or plant, and blowing wind. Think about the Christian term Holy Spirit—Holy Breath. If the Holy Spirit breathes into us, excites us, inspires us, instills God’s love in us, then we will be spiritual people. Basically we start out life oriented to self and the world.

The process begins with repentance. Repentance is seeing some character defect, or sin, in ourselves. Traditional Christians call this “prevenient grace.” For Swedenborg, sin can be called anything that blocks love. It is anything that prevents the inflow of God’s Holy Spirit. In order to know what direction we want to go in, we need to know what the good life is. So the repentance process requires knowledge, or truth. This is where faith comes in. Recall that faith

is truth of all kinds. The more truth we know, the more we see how our life can be better and the more we see where we don't match up to heavenly principles. I heard a Calvinist minister use the metaphor as if God were shining a flashlight on our souls, illuminating our shortcomings.

What comes between us and God's Holy Spirit are chiefly putting ourselves first and being intolerant of other people. Ego means edging-God-out. A sub-class of this is wanting to take everything in the world to ourselves, to own everything, to have it all. Another good measure of spirituality is to compare our lives to the 10 Commandments.

When we see something that needs to be changed in our lives, we begin the process of reformation. We re-form who we are. Paul talks about this process as dying to the desires of the flesh and living in the Spirit:

Galatians 5:13-25:

For you were called to freedom, brothers and sisters; only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for self-indulgence, but through love become slaves to one another. For the whole law is summed up in a single commandment, 'You shall love your neighbour as yourself.' If, however, you bite and devour one another, take care that you are not consumed by one another.

Live by the Spirit, I say, and do not gratify the desires of the flesh. For what the flesh desires is opposed to the Spirit, and what the Spirit desires is opposed to the flesh; for these are opposed to each other, to prevent you from doing what you want. But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not subject to the law. Now the works of the flesh are obvious: fornication, impurity, licentiousness, idolatry, sorcery, enmities, strife, jealousy, anger, quarrels, dissensions, factions, envy, drunkenness, carousing, and things like these. I am warning you, as I warned you before: those who do such things will not inherit the kingdom of God.¹

By contrast, the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity,

¹ New Revised Standard Version Bible: Anglicized Edition, copyright 1989, 1995, Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. There is no law against such things. And those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. If we live by the Spirit, let us also be guided by the Spirit.

This process of reforming ourselves takes a whole lifetime and is difficult. We want to keep our old habits, even if they are self-destructive, neurotic, maladapted, and sinful. Old habits die hard. This also means ways of viewing the world. When I was in school, they taught me that life was meaningless and that there was no higher life beyond the world we experience day-to-day. We were taught to embrace “existential despair.” When I entered a 12-step program, I was taught that I needed a positive world-view. I was taught to live in solutions, not problems. Over a few years, I changed the way I saw life. I embraced the sunshine, I found good in things, I left behind my despair and found joy and happiness in the little and great things in life. This was a process of reformation of my thoughts and attitudes.

We need to turn upside down spiritually. We start with self, first; we end with God first and our neighbors first. We start with craving for worldly gains; we end with loving heavenly riches.

Now we are at the regeneration part of rebirth. When the process is complete, we spontaneously act from spiritual love. The struggle is over. Our hearts are now aligned with God; our loves are heavenly; we desire only what is good. It is as Dante writes in the XXXIII Canto of *Paradiso*:

“But by now my desire and will were turned,
Like a balanced wheel rotated evenly,
By the Love that moves the sun and the other stars.”²

We are not at war with ourselves anymore. Evil influences go away, and angels surround us. It is the final stage in our spirituality. Confucius describes this process beautifully,

The Master said, “At fifteen I set my heart upon learning. At thirty, I had planted my

² Alighieri, Dante. *The Divine Comedy*. London: Penguin, 2003. Print.

feet firm upon the ground. At forty, I no longer suffered from perplexities. At fifty, I knew what were the biddings of Heaven. At sixty, I heard them with docile ear. At seventy, I could follow the dictates of my own heart; for what I desired no longer overstepped the boundaries of right.³

Some of Swedenborg's own words in this subject are the following:

There are two states that man must enter upon and pass through, when from being natural he is becoming spiritual. The first state is called Reformation, and the second Regeneration. In the first man looks from his natural to his spiritual state and longs for that state; in the second state he becomes spiritual-natural. The first state is formed by means of truths, which must be truths of faith, and through these he looks to charity; the second state is formed by means of the goods of charity, and by these he enters into the truths of faith. Or what is the same, the first is a state of thought from the understanding, and the second a state of love from the will (*True Christian Religion* n. 571).⁴

Every man may be regenerated, each according to his state; for the simple and the learned are regenerated differently; as are those engaged in different pursuits, and those who fill different offices; those who search into the external things of the Word, and those who search into its internals; those who are principled in natural good from their parents, and those who are in evil; those who from their infancy have entered into the vanities of the world, and those who sooner or later have withdrawn from them; in a word, those who constitute the Lord's external church are regenerated differently from those who constitute His internal church, and this variety, like that of men's features and dispositions, is infinite; and yet everyone, according to his state, may be regenerated and saved (*True Christian Religion* n. 580).⁵

³ Confucius. *Analects*. Ed. Edward G. Slingerland. Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Pub. Co., 2003. Print.

⁴ Swedenborg, Emanuel. *True Christian Religion*. London: Swedenborg Society, 1975. Print.

⁵ Ibid.

A CONFLICT ARISES BETWEEN THE INTERNAL AND THE EXTERNAL MAN, AND THEN THE ONE THAT CONQUERS RULES OVER THE OTHER. A conflict then arises because the internal man is reformed by means of truths; and from truths he sees what is evil and false, which evil and falsity are still in the external or natural man; consequently disagreement first springs up between the new will, which is above, and the old will, which is below; and as the disagreement is between the two wills, it is also between their delights; for the flesh, it is well known, is opposed to the spirit and the spirit to the flesh, and the flesh with its lusts must be subdued before the spirit can act and man become new. After this disagreement of the two wills a conflict arises; and this is called spiritual temptation (*True Christian Religion* n. 596).⁶

Another reason why the celestial man is the Sabbath or rest is that conflict ceases when he becomes celestial. Evil spirits withdraw and good spirits approach, as do celestial angels. When these are present evil spirits cannot possibly be present too, but flee far away. And because it was not the person himself who fought but the Lord alone on his behalf, it is said that 'the Lord rested' (*Arcana Coelestia* n. 87).⁷

But what these things involve cannot possibly be perceived unless it is known what man's state is while from being spiritual he is becoming celestial, for they are deeply hidden. While he is spiritual, the external man is not yet willing to yield obedience to and serve the internal, and therefore there is a combat; but when he becomes celestial, then the external man begins to obey and serve the internal, and therefore the combat ceases, and tranquility ensues (*Arcana Coelestia* n. 91).

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Swedenborg, Emanuel. *Arcana Coelestia*. Trans. John Faulkner. Potts. West Chester, PA: Swedenborg Foundation, 1997. Print.