



Social Justice is the New Jerusalem

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Swedenborgian theology tenders a trove of material for bumper sticker spirituality. Such as, “You can have whatever you want,” which throws back onto a person the essential Swedenborgian question of “What will you come to love most?” Whatever that is, not only can you have it, but you will become it. Or, another one: “Influx is as to efflux.” That would start innumerable conversations at red lights. Google searches constantly flashing whenever you’re tooling around! It means that the quality of our spiritual sight is affected and adjusted by how we live. How we live reconfigures interior doors and windows of our consciousness. How we live is our efflux: that which flows out from us. That living effort in turn produces an energy that either opens more or closes more the higher hatches in our consciousness through which the brighter spiritual light might flow into us (influx). Spiritual strength and vision is causal, not casual. Influx is as to efflux.

Today I impart one of my favorite Swedenborgian bumper stickers as segue to what I want to talk about. The bumper sticker is: “Swedenborg might’ve been crazy, but every sane person prays he’s right.” The Nordic visionary has some pretty wild stuff about the Big Reality works, has some whopping wonders about where this is all going, has an enthralling travel guidebook for what it’s like to go to the *New Jerusalem*. Is *that* a fantastic place! Even the fiercest skeptic, if she or he is healthy, hopes he’s right. All aboard, indeed.

The New Jerusalem is quite a contrast to the earthly Jerusalem, which in a certain way continues to be a riveting symbol for the trials and tribulations of the natural world. But in traveling to the New Jerusalem a radical transformation happens. Gone is animosity, gone is oppression, gone is inhumanity. If we yearn to love justice and goodness more truly and nearly, it is right there to have in a place that is wall-to-wall with the qualities of transparency, trust, creative caring, and joyful building of ever new spaces of love and wisdom.

So my leading thought today is that there is perfect justice in the New Jerusalem, a justice that involves our relationship with each other *as well as with and based on* the One Who is the source of all being and relationship. Justice is a relational word, and in the history of Swedenborgianism there has

been a strong tendency to keep the relational spirituality questions on the personal family and work spheres. We haven't been too much of a social justice oriented tradition—not that we haven't had our committees and our occasional projects, not that we haven't had numerous individuals very engaged in their lives in outward social justice activities—but in comparative studies of denominations dozens of other traditions put much more emphasis in social justice foci and projects than has been true of all branches of the Swedenborgian faith. We have a tradition that has encouraged people to take their own stands in their individual lives for social justice application, using spiritual insights from the faith. But we have shied away from striving for a more collective voice in the public square on dicey matters happening in our world.

There is a rise currently happening in Convention, this denomination, to challenge our longstanding tradition as a non-political church organization. Political in the sense of focusing to a greater degree on issues of social justice in our larger society and world. A new time has perhaps arrived to take strategic steps to form a more holistic approach to the way we seek to embody our faith tradition collectively. At convention this summer Rebecca Esterson and Terrie Crenshaw shaped a draft statement that was affirmed unanimously to have responsible interrogations of our sacred texts such that diversity is honored and oppression is confronted. It is designed to support a year-long study and work project that will take steps to shape our voice on justice issues and to create some small groups to work on particular issues. What was so heartening was how much positive energy came back in numerous ways at convention with a clear impression of a feeling that it is time to include social justice discourse more prominently in our church life. It is part of who we now are spiritually, and the longstanding neutrality policy doesn't quite fit in the same way anymore. At Hillside, where I am most Sundays, we have a joys and concerns sharing at the end of every service, and on the Sunday after convention I shared as a joy around what seemed to be an authentic burst of support on this matter at convention, and it led to a 15-minute congregational discussion right then during joys-and-concerns, which had never happened in joy and concerns time before. Joys and concern is quick sharing before the closing prayer, not a time discussing them. It was another piece of evidence that the time is now.

I'm all in for this because I went through a process recently that changed my feelings on our unspoken neutrality policy. In preparing for an academic conference, I spent over a year researching where the churches were on the slavery issue in ante-bellum America. Though I studied all the major denominations, I focused especially on Swedenborgians. The result is being published in a forthcoming anthology on the legacy of slavery, and the reason the study went on as long as it did, and it is in fact still continuing, is that it became engrossing for me to explore my family history, in a sense.

Even though it is commonly implied on American Swedenborgian websites that Swedenborgians were progressive and even abolitionist on the slavery issue, that is not true for the significant majority of Swedenborgian leaders and congregations. You can cherry pick a few admirable voices and actions, but a comprehensive study reveals a very different picture.

An examination of Swedenborgian discourse in Antebellum America in sermons, pamphlets, articles, reports, and personal correspondence up through the end of the American Civil War in 1865 bares a predominant silence up to 1850 followed by a mixed and tepid conversation leading all the way up to the outbreak of war in 1861. Even after the war commenced when most American religious leaders and groups in the North finally swung into strong anti-slavery stands, Swedenborgians as a body in the North waited until 1864 to do so formally. As a collective voice, Swedenborgians were behind the curve for religious groups on the matter.

Swedenborg was not a social reformer theologian in the modern sense and did not address specific social issues in his expansive theological writings, and Swedenborgians were left on their own to address any and all social justice issues, and in a nutshell the viewpoint of the vast majority was that focusing on social ills was pointless as long as the world had not come to understand the true nature of Christianity. And thus the church's whole effort was needed to herald the New Jerusalem theological revolution.

There was, however, a late shift when a movement swept through the church. I call it slow conversions, and a fascinating dynamic emerged in the archives where over the course of a number of

years three of the most prominent figures in the conversation without a reference to either of the others cite the same Bible passage to frame the pivot they made on standing actively against slavery. It is our Old Testament reading this morning where Yahweh makes clear a divine disapproval of fasts that are entirely personal while the social dimension of life wreaks havoc on others. Here's the fast you should be doing, Yahweh exhorts: untying bonds of wickedness, undoing burdens placed on others to serve yourself, freeing the oppressed, breaking yokes that limit and dehumanize others. That is the fast that pleases Yahweh.

This study of where the churches were on slavery in Antebellum America had a profound effect on me that continues today. A sinking dismay shifted my sense of where the line ought to be in addressing social justice from within the church. How will future students of our current present tense characterize us?

We might look to the New Jerusalem for clues and instructions, if that indeed is our shining image. That city, writes Swedenborg, is laid out foursquare. We the key passage is from *Revelation Unveiled*. The city is foursquare with its length exactly the same measurement as its width. That means its goodness equals its truth. You can't just see the truth: you must live it out to birth into being its goodness. It's not just a talking game, though the talking game is necessary. But seeing the truth is only preparatory.

And so not for the first time in our church—because we have had many folks in many decades concerned about social justice and active in it in various ways and encouraging the church to focus on it—there is now a new initiative again. May it bear new fruit, and may it help us to be the church in a fuller sense.

The New Jerusalem is foursquare. That correspondence is justice—the justice that occurs when the goodness lived matches the truth seen. It is participating in relationship with others and with the One who gives all power to make things right *actually* throughout our living, both inwardly and

socially. Foursquare. Social justice *is* the New Jerusalem. Or maybe we can put it this way: influx is as to efflux.

Suggested Readings:

Isaiah 58:3-6, 9-12

“Why do we fast, but you do not see? Why humble ourselves, but you do not notice?”

Look, you serve your own interest on your fast day, and oppress all your workers. Look, you fast only to quarrel and to fight and to strike with a wicked fist. Such fasting as you do today will not make your voice heard on high. Is such the fast that I choose, a day to humble oneself? Is it to bow down the head like a bulrush, and to lie in sackcloth and ashes? Will you call this a fast, a day acceptable to the Lord? Is not this the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of injustice, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke? [...]

Then you shall call, and the Lord will answer; you shall cry for help, and he will say, Here I am. If you remove the yoke from among you, the pointing of the finger, the speaking of evil, if you offer your food to the hungry and satisfy the needs of the afflicted, then your light shall rise in the darkness and your gloom be like the noonday. The Lord will guide you continually, and satisfy your needs in parched places, and make your bones strong, and you shall be like a watered garden, like a spring of water, whose waters never fail. Your ancient ruins shall be rebuilt; you shall raise up the foundations of many generations; you shall be called the repairer of the breach, the restorer of streets to live in.¹

Revelation 21: 9-17

Then one of the seven angels who had the seven bowls full of the seven last plagues came and said to me, “Come, I will show you the bride, the wife of the Lamb.” And in the spirit he carried me away to a great, high mountain and showed me the holy city Jerusalem coming down out of heaven from God. It has the glory of God and a radiance like a very rare jewel, like jasper, clear as crystal. It has a great, high wall with twelve gates, and at the gates twelve angels, and on the gates are inscribed the names of the twelve tribes of the Israelites; on the east three gates, on the north three gates, on the south three gates, and on the west three gates. And the wall of the city has twelve foundations, and on them are the twelve names of the twelve apostles of the Lamb.

The angel who talked to me had a measuring rod of gold to measure the city and its gates and walls. The city lies foursquare, its length the same as its width; and he measured the city with his rod, fifteen hundred miles; its length and width and height are equal. He also measured its wall, one hundred forty-four cubits by human measurement, which the angel was using.²

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² Ibid.

Emanuel Swedenborg, *Revelation Unveiled* §905

“*And the city is laid out foursquare* means the justice in it. The reason the city was seen as foursquare is that *foursquare* or square means what is just, because triangular means what honest, in all cases on the lowest level, which is earthly. Foursquare or square means what is just because a square has four sides and the four sides face the four quarters, and giving equal attention to the four quarters is seeing everything fairly. That is why there were in the city three gates open to each region; and it says in Isaiah, “Open the gates, so that *a just nation* that guards faithfulness may come in” (Isaiah 26:2). The city was laid out foursquare so that its length and breadth were equal. Length means the good dimension of that church, while breadth means its true dimension; and when what is good and what is true are equal, then that is just. We find this meaning of “square” in the colloquialism “a square shooter,” meaning a man who does not lean to one side or the other out of unfairness. Because square means what is just, the altar of burnt offering (which means worship based on what is good and therefore true on the heavenly level) was square (Exodus 27:1). So too the altar of incense (meaning worship based on what is good and therefore true on the spiritual level) was square (Exodus 30:1, 2); and the breastplate of judgment that held the Urim and Thummim was doubly square (Exodus 28:15, 16; 39:9), among other instances.³

³ George Dole, forthcoming New Century Edition translation