

Swedenborgianism (New Church)

*An Evaluation from the Theological Perspective of
The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod
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History, Beliefs, Practices

Identity:

Swedenborgian churches follow the teachings of Swedish philosopher and scientist, Emanuel Swedenborg. The Swedenborgian church is also known as the New Church or the Church of the New Jerusalem.

Founder:

Emanuel Swedenborg (1688-1772)

Statistics:

In 1997, the General Church of the New Jerusalem, Bryn Athyn, Pennsylvania, reported 3,036 members, with 36 congregations and 47 ministers (as well as 412 members and five congregations in Canada). The General Convention of the New Jerusalem in the United States of America, Newton, Massachusetts, the oldest Swedenborgian community in the United States, reported in 1996 a membership of 2,096 in the U.S. and Canada, with another community in Guyana. As of 1997, the Lord's New Church, also of Bryn Athyn, had three congregations in North Carolina, South Carolina, and Pennsylvania, as well as congregations in Holland, Japan, Sweden and South Africa.¹

History:

Emanuel Swedenborg, the son of a Swedish Lutheran bishop, spoke nine languages and wrote treatises in many fields of science, including chemistry, engineering, physics, mathematics, paleontology, botany, anatomy, and astronomy. He wrote the first Swedish texts on algebra and calculus. Swedenborg worked with the Bureau of Mines in Sweden, making practical suggestions to improve mining procedures and laying the foundation for the Swedish study of geology. In 1736 Swedenborg began to experience unusual dreams. He claimed that Jehovah visited him and told him to reveal the true interpretation of the Word of God. Swedenborg resigned from the Bureau of Mines and devoted the rest of his life to his spiritual interests. He said that he traveled to spirit realms and received revelations from spirits, continuing his conversations with angels and spirits over a period of 27 years. Swedenborg interpreted the Bible symbolically. He taught that the physical world is a symbol of the spiritual world and that Scripture contains *arcana coelestia*, heavenly secrets, that can only be understood by an enlightened person.

¹ J. Gordon Melton, ed., *Encyclopedia of American Religions* (Detroit: Gale Research, 1999), 669-670.

Swedenborg's teachings became popular in England. After his death several British followers translated his works into English and started a weekly meeting called the Theosophical Society. In 1787 this society became the New Jerusalem Church, and later, the New Church. An American society devoted to Swedenborg's teachings began in Baltimore in 1792. John Chapman, better known as Johnny Appleseed, followed Swedenborgian beliefs and spread Swedenborg's teachings in his travels; Andrew Carnegie, Robert Frost, and Helen Keller were also Swedenborg followers. In the early 1800s Swedenborgian teachings influenced American interest in communicating with spirits and the belief that spiritual and mental causes could bring about material results.

There are several Swedenborgian groups in the United States today. The General Church of the New Jerusalem has its headquarters and two schools—the Academy of the New Church College and the Academy of the New Church Theological School—in Bryn Athyn, Pennsylvania. The General Convention of the New Jerusalem in the United States of America was formed in 1817 and has headquarters in Newton, Massachusetts. They operate the Swedenborg School of Religion in Newton and Urbana College in Urbana, Ohio. The Lord's New Church, also of Bryn Athyn, was established in 1937.

The website of the Swedenborgian Church of North America states: "Welcome to a church where you hear an optimistic message. Our church affirms freedom of choice as we follow life's path experiencing both good and evil. From stone to stone, we step to the truth we choose: feeding the good in our lives, loving the good in all people, acknowledging the living spirit that enlightens our experience."²

Texts:

Writings by Emanuel Swedenborg include *Arcana Coelestia*, *The True Christian Religion*, *Apocalypse Explained*, *Spiritual Diary*, and *The Word of the Old Testament Explained*.

Beliefs and Practices:

Swedenborg wrote, "The falsities of the dogmas of the faith of the present Church must first be exposed and rejected, before the truths of the dogmas of the New Church are revealed and received."³ Among the orthodox teachings he rejected was the doctrine of the Trinity. Swedenborg taught that God is Being itself, which is called "Jehovah" and wrote: "Where there is Esse [being] there is Existere [taking form]; one is not possible apart from the other."⁴ In Jesus, Swedenborg believed, God the Father became incarnate as a man: "In all the heavens there is no other idea of God than that He is a Man."⁵ Based on his conversations with heavenly beings, Swedenborg explained that in heaven angels cannot "divide the Divine" into three because they know the Divine is one: "[The angels] have also told me that when people arrive

² <http://www.swedenborg.org/Home.aspx>

³ Quoted from Emanuel Swedenborg's *A Brief Exposition of the Doctrine of the New Church*, in John Ankerberg and John Weldon, eds., *Encyclopedia of Cults and New Religions* (Eugene, OR: Harvest House Publishers, 1999), 441.

⁴ (Emanuel Swedenborg, *Divine Love and Wisdom* (Radford, VA: Wilder Publications, 2007), 8.

⁵ Swedenborg, *Divine Love*, 7.

from earth with the idea of three divine beings they cannot be admitted to heaven. This is because their thinking vacillates between one opinion and the other, and in heaven they are not allowed to think ‘three’ and say ‘one.’”⁶ Swedenborg also described God as one in three principles; the Father as the principle of love, the Son, of divine wisdom, and the Holy Spirit as the energy of divinity within humans. According to Swedenborg, God, in Jesus, entered into the human experience as the ultimate expression of love and provided a path to be followed.

Swedenborg taught a “law of correspondences” between the physical and the spiritual realms. He believed that he was able to discern these “hidden depths” found within the details of God’s Word. He wrote, “There is in fact spiritual meaning in these details, for they intend not only the outward and earthly events that we find on the literal level but spiritual and heavenly events as well. This holds true not just for the meaning of phrases but even for each word. The Word is in fact written in pure correspondences so that there may be deeper meaning in the details.”⁷ On its website, the Swedenborgian Church of North America explains some of the spiritual meanings in Scripture:

The Bible is a very complex compilation of books that are far too rich to be limited to literal interpretation. The creation story is not an historical account but a description of our own stages of spiritual growth. The generations of Abraham speak of our growing complexity. The escape from slavery in Egypt, the wandering in the wilderness, and the claiming of the Promised Land recount our own spiritual journey as we truly become ourselves. The descending of the New Jerusalem described in Revelation is the completion of the spiritual evolution of the human race. The Bible is a map of our journey from the Garden of Eden to the Holy City. It is our story!⁸

According to Swedenborgian teaching, God gives people the freedom to choose their beliefs and live by that choice: “Heaven and hell are not rewards or punishments distributed on judgment day but the present inner experience we freely choose. We may choose to enjoy peace and openness, or to close ourselves to fear.”⁹ However, because people are thought of as spirits clothed in material bodies, these inner experiences continue after death in a spirit world, in personal heavens or hells based on choices made in this life. Swedenborg believed the last judgment began spiritually in 1757 and considered Jesus’ Second Coming to be a return in spirit and truth rather than Christ’s actual, physical appearing. The Swedenborg church states: “The Second Coming is an active process that is happening within us and the world. As we increase compassion, integrity, understanding, and healing in our lives, we are helping God create ‘a new Heaven and a new earth.’”¹⁰

⁶ Emanuel Swedenborg, *Heaven and Hell* (Westchester, PA: Swedenborg Foundation, 2000), 90.

⁷ Swedenborg, *Heaven and Hell*, 88.

⁸ <http://www.swedenborg.org/DeepSeeker.aspx>

⁹ <http://www.swedenborg.org/Beliefs.aspx>

¹⁰ <http://www.swedenborg.org/Beliefs.aspx>

A Lutheran Response:

The Swedenborgian church cannot be characterized as Christian because of its denial of the Holy Trinity and its rejection of salvation through faith in Jesus Christ. As Lutherans, we confess the doctrine of the Holy Trinity, the truth that the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are three distinct Persons in one God. The Augsburg Confession states, “The churches among us teach...there is one divine essence which is called God and is God...Yet, there are three persons, coeternal and of the same essence and power: the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.”¹¹ In the Smalcald Articles, Martin Luther notes that “neither the Father nor the Holy Spirit, but the Son, became a human being.”¹² In opposition to the idea that the Persons of the Trinity are merely principles or divine energy, the Augsburg Confession rejects “those who suggest that God is ‘two principles’ of good and evil, those who say there is ‘only one person’ and those who teach that ‘Word’ signifies a spoken word and ‘Spirit’ a created movement in things.”¹³

The Formula of Concord states that “we confess our adherence to the prophetic and apostolic writings of the Old and New Testaments, as to the pure, clear fountain of Israel, which alone is the one true guiding principle, according to which all teachers and teaching are to be judged and evaluated.”¹⁴ The Bible is not a book of hidden correspondences and secret meanings that can only be revealed by an enlightened individual. Scripture is a “pure, clear fountain” that describes in ordinary human language the mighty acts of God in time and history. Martin Luther described the Scriptures as “the richest of mines” containing divine wisdom “which God here lays before you in such simple guise as to quench all pride.”¹⁵ The Formula of Concord, describing the words of Jesus in the institution of Holy Communion, states that the Lord “did not use flowery language but rather the most appropriate, simple, unambiguous, and plain words. He also did so in all articles of faith and in every other institution of the signs of his covenant and grace, or sacraments, such as circumcision, the various sacrifices in the Old Testament, and Holy Baptism.”¹⁶

In its attempts to interpret secret meanings in Scripture, the Swedenborgian church does not distinguish the teachings of the Law and the Gospel in God’s Word. The Swedenborgian church denies the true Christian faith with its belief that people may, if they wish, choose a life of peace with God. According to Scripture, no one is able to justify themselves through obedience to the Law and find peace with God, since “all who rely on works of the law are under a curse” (Galatians 3:10). We cannot earn forgiveness and eternal life through our own works or effort. We were “dead in our trespasses,” until God “made us alive together with Christ” (Ephesians 2:5). The Gospel, the good news of salvation in Christ Jesus, is clearly taught in Scripture: “By grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast” (Ephesians 2:8-9).

¹¹ *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*, ed. Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000), 37.

¹² *The Book of Concord*, 300.

¹³ *The Book of Concord*, 37.

¹⁴ *The Book of Concord*, 527.

¹⁵ Martin Luther, *Prefaces to the Old Testament, Luther’s Works*, vol. 35, ed. E. Theodore Bachman (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1960), 236.

¹⁶ *The Book of Concord*, 601-602.

Heaven and hell are not “present inner experiences,” but real places. Those who fall asleep in Jesus are with Him “in Paradise” (Luke 23:43), “at home with the Lord” (2 Corinthians 5:8), as they await the bodily resurrection on the Last Day. Hell is a place of eternal fire “prepared for the devil and his angels” (Matthew 25:41). Jesus’ Second Coming is not, as the Swedenborg church teaches, a current process within believers. Jesus will return bodily on the Last Day, as He has promised (Matthew 25:31-46; Revelation 1:7; Revelation 22:20), to “judge the living and the dead” (John 5:28-29; Revelation 20:11-15).¹⁷ Those who reject His lordship will be condemned to eternal torment (Matthew 25:41). To those who by God’s grace trust in Christ for their salvation, Jesus the King will say, “Come, you who are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world” (Matthew 25:34).

Links and Websites:

The website of the Swedenborgian Church of North America
www.swedenborg.org

A Comparative Study of Varying Approaches to Biblical Interpretation (1973)
<http://www.lcms.org/Document.fdoc?src=lcm&id=305>

An Evaluation of Christian Science
<http://www.lcms.org/Document.fdoc?src=lcm&id=372>

An Evaluation of the Unity School of Christianity
<http://www.lcms.org/Document.fdoc?src=lcm&id=398>

¹⁷ The Apostles’ Creed, *The Book of Concord*, 22.