

Birthday of a New Age. A Classic Sermon

By Rev. Othmar Tobisch

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Bible Reading

Then Jesus said to the Jews who had believed in him, “If you continue in my word, you are truly my disciples; and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free.”

They answered him, “We are the descendants of Abraham and have never been slaves to anyone. What do you mean by saying, ‘You will be made free’?”

Jesus answered them, “Very truly, I tell you, everyone who commits sin is a slave to sin. The slave does not have a permanent place in the household; the son has a place there forever. So if the Son makes you free, you will be free indeed.” (*Matthew 8:31–36*)

People

People in the church from now on will have more freedom of thought in matters of faith—that is, on spiritual issues relating to heaven—because spiritual freedom has been restored. In fact, everything in the heavens and the hells has now been brought back into order. And it is from the heavens and hells that all thinking in favor of and in opposition to the Divine flows. . . .

Since spiritual freedom has been restored to us, the spiritual meaning of the Bible has been opened up, and deeper divine truths have been revealed by this means....

I have had several conversations with angels about the state of the church from now on. They have said that they do not know what is going to happen—only the Lord knows that. But they do know that the captivity in which members of the church have been caught until now has been removed, and that the freedom that has thus been restored has opened the way to a better perception of deeper truths—if we want to perceive. The way is also open to becoming more inward people—if we want to. (*The Last Judgment #73, 74*)

Sermon

How things have changed and are changing! If we had accompanied Swedenborg in 1710 to London, we would have cruised with him in a slow sailing vessel for many weeks from Gothenburg to reach the mouth of Thames River.

Today we can reach the same city from San Francisco, many thousands of miles away, in a bare twelve hours. We can talk to people in any major city of the world in a matter of minutes. It won't be long, the technicians say, till we also will see those to whom we talk.

Technology has freed man from the shackles of space and time. With the help of science and machinery, we have shrunk space to an incredible extent—at least in relation to each other.

We have freed ourselves from the limitations of the body by acts of the mind. This is very important to remember. It is the human mind and its ideas, its will, its complex urges, that has liberated man to a certain extent from the boundaries his environment has set him. This is an argument for the preeminence of the spirit over matter.

Freedom is an attribute of truth. And truth is the substance of God. We are promised by the Lord in the Holy Scriptures that it is the truth that will set us free. It is the right understanding of life that liberates us from the shackles that seemingly hold us down. The more truths we acknowledge as such, the freer our spirit is.

New Church people have accepted a unique declaration of our spiritual mentor, Emanuel Swedenborg. It was given to him to see the great spiritual liberation of human spirits in the middle of the eighteenth century.

It was at that time that a new age was born. For at that time, the Lord executed a judgment of cosmic proportions. It was not the judgment on a half destroyed earth that many Christians expected, but a judgment on a dark and terror ridden humanity at the end of a time that historians have called the Dark Ages.

In New Church theology we find a unique interpretation of the so called "Last Judgment" that is so vividly portrayed in the Book of Revelation. It is not a coming of the Christ in fiery chariots, accompanied by clouds of angels. No, this ultimate judgment was executed on the moral and spiritual conditions of mankind. And the first sentence of this judgment from on high was, "And you will know the truth, and the truth shall make you free."

Hitherto the church had oppressed men and truth. It had burned men at the stake for holding divergent opinions. It had denounced scientific discoveries, such as those of Galileo—whom the church forced to recant the truth about the movements of the earth, in suppression of the facts. The church had not allowed any new thoughts to be voiced if they did not agree with its age old dogmas.

Truth was in prison. And the first act of this divine judgment was to let it out of its prison. The new age began when men could, without fear of being killed, investigate all matters of interest to them, and make known their results.

Swedenborg often talks about the new church that was about to be instituted in his time by the Lord. He saw it as an act of liberation on the part of the Lord: permitting people of all faiths to make their own inquiries into the truth without being accused of heresy and deprived of life or liberty.

Since we, in this time, are much used to liberties of all kinds, we cannot quite understand the great desire for liberty so prominent in the latter part of the eighteenth century. But we can see the tremendous effects of such an urge in the nations in Africa, which are gaining their political freedom in our times.

The new age is still in the making! We are witnesses of a tremendous mental and spiritual change in all of humanity. The upsurge of new nations; the downfall of empires; the overthrow of governments; the establishment of new ones. It is as if the whole body of humanity were in a fever to rectify its weaknesses and gain new strength by the ordeal of revolutionary fire, political earthquake, and social storm.

Part of this new age is already visible. In political matters we see the gradual, or sudden, disposal of the king-type government. Often this had been a tyrant, a fuehrer, a dictator. But such people do not last long anymore. There is a trend visible as people become more educated—freed from ignorance. They demand a share in government . . . and they get it.

In scientific matters, we see that all our inquiries into the mysteries of the universe are useful and constructive. They are beneficial to humanity—if they are coupled with a love for man. They are not destructive of religious faith—if that faith is also permitted to be investigated and corrected. Through science, there is still much to be done to deliver man from the tyranny of hunger, cold, and disease.

We are not free from the fear of misery and death. There is still a great lack of food. Almost every day we are called upon to help here or there to relieve famine and epidemic.

This opens up a second feature of the new age: social responsibility. A tremendous social responsibility has been assumed by the free man. Now, he must shoulder the responsibility for the well-being of the neighbor. He cannot any longer blame disasters like hunger and disease upon God or the king. As God has freed man from tyranny of unreasoned faith, so man must accept the duties that go with this freedom and rationality.

Thus, we who live in this century face grave moral obligations. Freedom is so much desired; but are its liabilities considered? For example, men became rich by scientifically applied truth in the industrial revolution of the nineteenth century. But these captains of industry forgot to share their gains with those who created them: the laborers of the factories, mines, and farms.

Those laborers rose up to demand their share. The last one hundred years are filled with the struggle of capital vs. laborer as it has become known, of Capitalism vs. Socialism.

To be sure, the new riches are part of the new age. At first only a few men had them. Out of their unwillingness to share, there arose the revolution of Marxism, Socialism, and Communism. Political revolutions convulsed the East and West. Even to this day the struggle is not ended. In the spiritual world, the laws of freedom and of social responsibility stand side by side—but not on our earth as of yet.

The Christian Church has much to do here to turn the love of self into the love of the neighbor through social reforms. We must seek to apply our Christian convictions of divine love to all men; to all in the social and economic structure of mankind.

It hurts a Christian to read that even at this day, laborers in our California fields and orchards do not receive a just hire. They must fight for a little increase in their hourly wage—instead of being given it, willingly and lovingly, as a share in the riches of God's own property, of which we are only stewards. We are not yet acting in conformity with the ideals of the new age in sharing God's riches according to the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

This new age, in the very beginning of which we live, will bring forth a new social order that will be much more similar to that of the heavenly societies of which Swedenborg so eloquently speaks in his unique book *Heaven and its Wonders and Hell*.

The truth that God is the Creator, and therefore the rightful owner of what we call “our possessions,” will have to be acknowledged more fully. If we finally do confess that only our selfishness has created the social inequalities of our times, we will then want to correct them.

Some have already entered this new age. They share with their employees the rewards of the labors of all—both management and labor. Far greater happiness and productivity pervades such an establishment, to the benefit of all. For each should receive his rightful share in proportion to what he has put into the production of whatever it be: grain or goods, grapes or planes.

The third characteristic of the new age is the highly accelerated rate of communicating with each other. The sharing of thoughts and events is almost instantaneous.

A few days ago many of us saw the inauguration of our president many thousand miles away. When General Washington “ascended the throne of our Republic,” how many people shared this event with him? A few hundred. Last week, millions saw and heard the event. Time and space was of no consequence. Every morning we read what is wrong throughout the whole world. Our anxieties and our responsibilities have increased an hundredfold.

We hear both good news and bad almost as soon as it has happened. The spiritual world is not much different in this lack of space barriers to our minds. But are we the better for it? Do we understand each other better?

The psychologist is laboring to bring about a better understanding of man—of himself, of his fellowman—and so are the minister, the rabbi, and the priest. We have so much greater means to know each other more; but are we any closer to each other? There is indeed a great field of labor—of spiritual labor—to be entered where the ground must be plowed with truth, and the seeds of understanding planted with love.

Often we get a feeling that almost everything we can think of is already done and accomplished. But this is a fallacy—especially on the moral and spiritual levels. We have pointed out how little has been accomplished in the proper distribution of food for all mankind. How little education actually is accomplished in the millions of men, most of whom have never seen a book, or heard of another people but themselves. And many new nations have suddenly found out how difficult it is to establish a just, equitable and socially fruitful government.

To begin to understand each other better is an unfinished— yes, not even much begun job. For example, what do we who sit here together this morning know of each other? Very little. How much do we communicate with each other? Very little, beyond polite phrases. But the new age that has now begun will demand much more communication with each other.

This communication will not begin unless we begin to love each other more, as the Lord loves us. After all, communication is a sharing of thoughts; and we will not share thoughts unless our affections incline to each other.

The ageold truth is coming to the fore again: self love destroys our ability to communicate with each other; love of others opens up the channel. Unless you trust that the person to whom you confess your failings loves you and wants to understand you, you will not communicate your deepest troubles to him. But for the sake of our spiritual health; for the establishment of justice and equality; for all the wonderful spiritual things the new age has in store, we must communicate our concerns more with each other.

The heavenly norm, as Emanuel Swedenborg saw it, is that every thought of every angel is shared with all in his heaven:

One can see how great the delight of heaven must be from the fact that it is the delight of everyone in heaven to share his delights and blessings with others. And as this is the character of all who are in the heavens, it is clear how immeasurable is the delight of heaven.

It has been shown above that in the heavens there is a sharing of all with each and of each with all. Such sharing goes forth from the two loves of heaven, which are love to the Lord and love towards the neighbor; and to share their delights is the very nature of these loves.

Love to the Lord is like this because it is a love of sharing everything it has with all, since it wills the happiness of all. There is a similar love in everyone who loves the Lord, because the Lord is in them. And from this comes the mutual sharing of the joys of angels with one another. (*Heaven and Hell #399*)

These three things will mark the man of the new age:

- An inner urge to pursue the truth, till it is captured and made to work.
- An urge to concern oneself deeply with the needs and wants of all men.
- An urge to communicate and share one's affections for each other.

To love freedom; to respect the liberty of all; to help make hunger, want, and illness as rare as can be; to share one's joys and happiness with others affectionately allied: these are the ends, purposes, and goals of life of the angel in heaven—and of the men and women of the new age on earth.

Prayer

O God of the new age that is dawning upon this earth, we thank you that you have created us to live in this exciting time of new discovery and new understanding. We thank you that you have given to the people of our earth a new freedom to explore both the physical and the spiritual world. We thank you that you have revealed new and deeper truth to us in the pages of your Word, through the enlightened teachings of the New Church.

We pray that each one of us, and all of us together, may accept the new and greater social responsibility that this new freedom and deeper insight gives us. We pray that we may work together to rebuild our communities here on earth more and more in the divine pattern of your heavenly kingdom. Amen.

Rev. Othmar Tobisch