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Exodus 25:10-13, 30:7-8, 30:23-29

Matthew 2:1-11

## The Gifts of Magi

### The Christian Church and The New Church

The Christian Church was established by the First Coming, which was the arrival of Jesus Christ on earth. It happened about two thousands years ago in Israel. The New Church, or the Swedenborgian Church, is established by the Second Coming, which happened at the time of Emanuel Swedenborg, which was around 1756 A.D. How should the New Church celebrate the First Coming, the arrival of Jesus on earth? Can we celebrate Christmas, as other Christian churches do?

The New Church understands the Bible most meaningfully through the spiritual sense about which Swedenborg wrote a great deal in his theological works. That means that the New Church seeks to understand the spiritual significance of Christmas that is discovered by the symbols in the biblical narrative. Therefore, the New Church celebrates Christmas differently based on the New Church perspective.

Let us explore the spiritual meaning of Christmas that is explained by Emanuel Swedenborg.

With the arrival of the magi from foreign countries, the birth of Jesus Christ was commemorated. Many Jewish prophets, such as Isaiah, and Micah, prophesied the future arrival of the Messiah in chaotic times of the kingdoms of Israel and Judah. Yet, what is strikingly noticeable is the fact that the magi from the East neither worshipped the God of Israel nor were Hebrews. It is intriguing that priestly professionals of “a foreign religion” in a “foreign land” knew beforehand about the arrival of Messiah for Hebrews, and came to commemorate the birth of Jesus Christ in the land of Canaan!

The reason why those magi from the foreign lands were able to rejoice in the birth of the Christ baby was that those magi knew what would happen and what they would do upon the birth of the Messiah from ancient wisdom. That is why they brought gold, frankincense and myrrh, three gifts, which signified the three essential elements of Jesus Christ as the Messiah. We find what these three gifts represent from Swedenborg’s theological works.

Firstly, what does gold symbolize? Gold is the most precious object among the three gifts. Swedenborg states that gold represents celestial love, which is the love of the Lord. Do you love our Savior, Jesus Christ? Swedenborg insists, if He had not come to earth, human beings would have perished. Do you know the fact that without his coming, all of us would not be here? He came and died for us from His love toward humanity. Swedenborg explains that Jesus Christ endured the most grievous temptation to save human beings from His Divine Love. Swedenborg says, in True Christian Religion 581 “‘The kingdom of God is at hand, repent and believe the good news.’ (Mark 1:15) The good news meant is that they could be regenerated and so saved. This could not have happened if the Lord had not carried out the redemption, that is, if He had not taken the power away from hell by struggling against it and defeating it, and if He had not

glorified His Human, that is, made it Divine.” The Innocent Scapegoat was crucified for our sake. Do you love Jesus Christ?

Secondly, what does frankincense signify? According to Swedenborg, frankincense signifies spiritual good, which is love for our neighbors. Swedenborg states that loving your neighbor does not mean loving your neighbors themselves but loving “the goodness” in them. We should not love neighbors themselves, as humans themselves are not good. We should love good, which is from the Lord and present within our neighbors. Swedenborg states, in *Doctrine of Faith* 20 “the neighbor is good, and as service is good, the neighbor in this sense is service. That service is the spiritual neighbor must be acknowledged by everyone. For who loves a human being merely as a person? We love him for that which he has in him, and which gives him his character; thus from his quality, for this is the man. And this quality that we love is service, and is called good, so that this is the neighbor.” This is what it truly means to love our neighbors.

Thirdly, what does myrrh represent? Swedenborg states that myrrh represents natural good. Here is a passage from *Secret of Heaven* that explains the natural good.

Natural good is born with the man... they who are in natural good can be as easily carried away by falsity as by truth, provided the falsity appears in the form of truth; and they can be as easily led by evil as by good, provided the evil is presented as good. They are like feathers in the wind. (*Secret of Heaven*, 7761)

The lowest good, natural good, may seem not trustworthy, but this is where we begin our spiritual journey.

In other words, these three goodnesses symbolize Divine Love and Divine Wisdom and Divine Use. First, we should have good intention. Second, we should transform our good intention into concrete plan through our intelligence. Third we should make it happen in this real world.

If you are a businessperson, you have an intention to contribute to the community through your business. You make a plan for your business. And you contribute to the community through distribution of useful commodities or services.

Swedenborg explains that these three gifts represent three kinds of goodnesses of Jesus Christ. As the Lord is the source of all that is good, these three kinds of goodness “together form the source of all worship.”

Without God there is no good. We are only receivers of good, which flows from Jesus Christ, the incarnate God. We should know that we cannot do even the smallest good by ourselves without God. We are empty beings without God’s support.

Swedenborg states that we receive love and wisdom from the Lord and we return service to the Lord. Our duty is that after receiving love and wisdom from the Lord, we should exercise service from love and wisdom. By doing so, we can serve God. Love and wisdom are gifts from the Lord and we give service to God in exchange. In the natural environment, we breathe in oxygen and breathe out carbon dioxide. Leaves breathe in carbon dioxide and breathe out oxygen. It is a perfect circulation of natural substances. In the spiritual environment, we breathe in love and wisdom from the Lord and breathe out service. And the Lord breathes in service and breathes out love and wisdom. It is a perfect circulation of spiritual substances. Not only through worshipping the Lord on the Sabbath, but also through doing service in six days, we serve and worship the Lord.

We cannot know with much specificity what travails the world was experiencing about two thousands years ago, but now we are living our time in the world, and we can look around in 2011 and feel there are so many problems on the earth. Overpopulation, food shortages, and

environmental problems, just to name a few. It sounds like this planet is coming closer to the end.

Yet, all these problems are caused by evils of humankind – greed, self-centeredness, and arrogance. That is why if there is no good that is from the Lord, this world would be filled with all evils and human civilizations will come to a ruin.

Jesus Christ came as the Messiah, thus there is salvation for humanity through him. Without Him there cannot be any good or truth available for us. All the problems can be redirected, if we truly worship the Lord and obey His teachings.

In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, it may appear that the scientific understanding of humans controls everything in the world, but this is merely an appearance. The Lord is the source of everything. Our scientific rationality might appear to have a huge power, as we are living in a technologically advanced society. Yet we should not forget the truth that the Lord created humans and all material substances in this universe. Without God we do not exist, so it is with this natural universe. This is why God should always come first, and our scientific rationality should follow after the will of God. We should not invert this order. Swedenborg emphasizes that when we invert this order, evil and falsehood are produced.

Let us rejoice the anniversary of the First Coming from the New Church perspective.

Please note that for Swedenborgians, June 19<sup>th</sup> could possibly be the date of the Second Christmas, as Swedenborg explains that the Second Coming of Christ in the spiritual world was completed on that day.

There is only One God with three aspects, whose name is Jesus Christ in this universe.  
We worship Him and praise His name, from all our strength and existence.

Merry Christmas, from the New Church perspective! Amen.