

Universal Truth: A Testimony to the Theological Writings of Swedenborg

Prescott Rogers

I want to tell you a story from when I was in graduate school in the 1970's. The background is this: I was at Temple University in the graduate program of *Religious Studies*.¹ At Temple University, the liberal arts building was circular, with a different department on each floor. Each department had a common area in the center—having couches, coffee machines, etc.—with offices and classrooms around it. All of the graduate courses were scheduled at the same time—either in the morning, afternoon, or evening. The reason for this was so that there would be a mingling of people before and after classes, and also during breaks. At break time we'd all be in the common area, and there would be lots of give-and-take.

The story is this: There were two courses in one term that I wanted to take. One was called *Systematic Theology*. The other was *Hebrew Prophets*. I really wanted to take both, but I knew that *Hebrew Prophets* would be more appropriate for my Ph.D. work. So I signed up for that. Two of my friends signed up for *Systematic Theology*.

When break time came, the *Hebrew Prophets* class let out first. I was sitting on a couch in the common area with a cup of coffee in my hand. I was reading a magazine. All of a sudden, a man who I'd never met came over and sat down next to me. He was excited to meet me.

As it turned out, he was the professor of *Systematic Theology*. His name was Dr. Barrett. Dr. Barrett was a world famous systematic theologian. (I later learned that in the previous year he had won the *National Book Award for Religious Studies* for a book he'd written on systematic theology. In other words, he was one of the leading experts in his field.)

I later learned from my two friends that Professor Barrett had started off his course by defining systematic theology and giving illustrations of it. He defined it in this way: Systematic theology is the disciplined study of a religion's faith to determine its extent, its depth, and its consistency. It asks the following questions, among others:

1. How *broad* is it—to what extent does it address all of religion's questions?
2. How *deep* is it—are its statements complete?
3. How *consistent* is it—do its teachings hold together?

Systematic theology rejects paradoxes (i.e., two teachings that can't both be true, and yet both are claimed to be true). It also rejects statements that are to be accepted on faith

¹ Italics indicate official titles or words emphasized by P.R. in a recorded version of his testimony.

without reason (i.e., claims that a statement is a mystery not to be questioned). What systematic theology wants to know is, “To what extent is there a logical basis to a system of belief?”

After Dr. Barrett defined systematic theology, he went on to say that the greatest examples of systematic theology are, in the West, Roman Catholicism, and in the East, Mahayana Buddhism. He said that both of these religions are huge in number and that they’ve existed for two thousand years or more. Whenever there’s a big theological problem, they gather the best minds together and work it out.

Then Dr. Barrett paused, and he said to his class, “But if you want to read the greatest example of systematic theology in the history of the human race, read Emanuel Swedenborg. This one man—in a matter of thirty years—came out with a theological system that is so broad, so deep, and so consistent.”

At that point, one of my friends in Dr. Barrett’s class told him about me—a practicing Swedenborgian²—and said that I was taking a course at the same time that his class met. That was when Dr. Barrett located me in the common area during break time and came over to talk with me.

I won’t bore you with the whole conversation, but what intrigued me most was this: He said, “Every graduate school of religion, and every theological seminary in the world, ought to teach Swedenborg.” He said that the writings of Swedenborg are unlike the theology of any other religion. He said that every religion’s theology is bound by the culture that produced it. And so theologies change over time, or they change as they move from one culture to another. For example, the theology of ancient Israel is one that changed over time. It changed and became the theology of Judaism; and it has continued to change over the last two millennia. The theology of Catholicism is an example of one that has changed as it has moved from one culture to another. Catholicism in Central America is not the same in emphasis or interpretation as in Italy or in Indonesia. Dr. Barrett concluded by saying that Swedenborg wrote about *humanity*, such that what he wrote applies to all cultures. Because of that, and because what he wrote is a systematic theology, it has the ability to speak to all peoples.³

² Pronounced *Swee-den-borg-ee-an*.

³ And by implication, for all time.