

Emanuel Swedenborg's View of the Ten Commandments

An Introduction

The process of life change and spiritual transformation you're currently exploring is based on the Judeo-Christian scriptures as explained in the writings of Emanuel Swedenborg. This brief article describes Swedenborg's unique view of the Ten Commandments, how it developed over time, and what to expect as you read Swedenborg's full-length explanation of each commandment.

There are four places in Swedenborg's writings (four different books) in which Swedenborg fully explains the Ten Commandments. These four books are, in chronological order:

- *Secrets of Heaven*¹
- *The Apocalypse Explained*²
- *The Doctrine of Life*³
- *True Christianity*⁴

Within these books, Swedenborg explains each commandment on *three* levels of meaning. First there is the *earthly* level of meaning, or what Swedenborg calls the *earthly sense*. The earthly sense of a commandment is its literal meaning. It has to do with outward conduct or behavior, also human feeling and emotion. Next, there is the *spiritual* level of meaning, or what Swedenborg calls the *spiritual sense*. The spiritual sense of a commandment has to do with our relationship with the human spirit in other people and also in ourselves. Finally, there is the *heavenly* level of meaning, or what Swedenborg calls the *heavenly sense*. The heavenly sense of a commandment has to do with our relationship with God.

As an example, consider the commandment, *You shall not murder*. According to Swedenborg, the *earthly* meaning of this commandment is that we are not to murder or maim a person's body, also that we are not to murder his or her reputation (character assassination). In addition, we are not to harbor feelings of resentment, hatred, or revenge. The *spiritual* meaning (or *spiritual sense*) is that we are not to murder a person's *spirit*, which happens when we turn him or her away from God, crush her spirit, or belittle the ideas or concepts that he believes in, cares about, and loves. And finally, the *heavenly* meaning (or *heavenly sense*) is that we are not to hate God or wish to blot His name out of existence.

¹ Volume 10 of that work, paragraph nos. 8853-8912

² Volume 5 of that work, the second half of paragraph nos. 932-1028

³ The full title of this work is *The Doctrine of Life for the New Jerusalem from the Ten Commandments*. It is found in a larger work by Swedenborg titled, *The Four Doctrines*. Within *The Doctrine of Life* Swedenborg explains the commandments on *Murder, Adultery, Stealing, and Bearing False Witness*. He does not explain the other six commandments in *The Doctrine of Life*.

⁴ Volume 1 of that work, paragraph nos. 282-335

In addition, Swedenborg's understanding and explanation of the Ten Commandments developed and crystallized over time, such that the division of each commandment into three succinct levels of meaning happens most clearly in the work, *True Christianity*. For this reason, the first time you read Swedenborg's explanation of a given commandment, you may do well to look at the explanation in *True Christianity* first, and circle back from there to earlier works. Alternatively, you could go through Swedenborg's explanations in chronological order, knowing that clarity and understanding will develop as you go.

In summary, Swedenborg explains each of the Ten Commandments on three levels of meaning—*earthly*, *spiritual*, and *heavenly*. These levels have to do with the literal meaning of a commandment, our relationship with the human spirit in people, and our relationship with God. And finally, Swedenborg's explanations of the commandments develop and crystallize as you proceed through his writings in chronological order.