

WHY PEOPLE DO OR DO NOT RECOGNIZE EACH OTHER AFTER DEATH

By Malcolm Smith

When someone close to us dies—a close friend, a child, a parent, a spouse, a sibling—we want to know whether we are going to see them again. The New Church teaches that friends and family members do meet again after death—they rejoice at seeing each other and congratulate each other and talk together (*Heaven Hell* §494). Based on this, people sometimes picture that, when they die, they will meet up with all of their friends and family and live together in a big community, like they did on earth. But this is not what actually happens. Other passages say that, in the spiritual world, “a father does not recognize a son or a daughter, nor a brother a brother or sister, nor even a husband a wife, unless they have been in similar good. They indeed meet when they first come into the other life, but are soon dissociated” (*Arcana Coelestia* §3815). Statements like this can make heaven sound like an awfully cold and lonely sort of place to be for eternity. Why do things work this way?

This paper will explore the reasons why people who knew each other in the world do or do not recognize each other and live together after death.

Different States After Death

There are a couple of sets of teachings that can help us understand this topic. The first has to do with the states or stages that we pass through in the spiritual world after we die. “There are three states that man passes through after death before he enters either heaven or hell. The first state is the state of his exteriors, the second state the state of his interiors, and the third his state of preparation” (*Heaven and Hell* §491). The state that a person is in changes who they recognize and want to associate with. *Conjugal Love* explains how this works with people who had been married during their earthly lives,

but the same changes occur, regardless of the relationship that people had previously had.

A person comes first into the external state, and afterwards into the internal one. It is during the external state... that they meet, recognize each other, and, if they lived together in the world, associate and live together for a time. And when they are in this state, one partner does not know the other's feelings toward him, because these feelings keep themselves hidden inside.

Later, however, when they come into their internal state, the feelings manifest themselves. And if these feelings are concordant and congenial, the partners continue their married life. But if these feelings are discordant and uncongenial, they end it.

(§47r)

While people are in the state of externals, they associate with everyone that they were externally connected with in the world and they recognize everyone by external things like their face and way of speaking (*Heaven and Hell* §457). Once people move into the state of internals, however, they then only associate with and recognize people who love the same things that they do (*Heaven and Hell* §427). There are two reasons for this. The first is that, although when a person first enters the spiritual world his face and voice look and sound like what they did in the world, after that “his face is changed, and becomes entirely different, resembling his ruling affection or ruling love, in conformity with which the interiors of his mind had been while he was in the world and his spirit while it was in the body” (*Heaven and Hell* §457). And so Swedenborg reports, “I have seen some that have recently arrived from the world, and have recognized them from their face and speech; but seeing them afterwards I did not recognize them” (*Ibid*). The second reason why people only associate with and recognize people who love the same things as them after they move past the state of externals has to do

with how spiritual relationships work.

How Spiritual Relationships Work

In the Gospels, when the Lord was told that his biological mother and brothers were outside looking for Him, He responded, “Who is My mother, or My brothers?’ And He looked around in a circle at those who sat about Him, and said, ‘Here are My mother and My brothers! For whoever does the will of God is My brother and My sister and mother’” (Mark 3:33-35; *cf.* Matthew 12:46-50; Luke 8:19-21). This indicates the sort of relationships that the Lord is interested in and the sort of relationships that exist after death.

Arcana Coelestia §3815 gives the general principle that “in the spiritual world or in heaven no other kinships or relationships by marriage exist except those of love to the Lord and of love towards the neighbor, or what amounts to the same, those of good.” *Arcana Coelestia* §4121 gets more specific: it says that, in the other life,

it is good and truth that produce that which on earth is called relationship by blood and by marriage... for regarded in themselves goods and truths acknowledge no other father than the Lord, for they are from Him alone. Hence all who are in goods and truths are in brotherhood; but still there are degrees of relationship according to the quality of the goods and truths. These degrees are signified in the Word by “brothers,” “sisters,” “sons-in-law,” “daughters-in-law,” “grandsons,” “granddaughters,” and by other family names.

All spiritual relationships have to do with what goods and truths we love. All good and truth have the Lord as their Father—that is, come from the Lord alone—and so we are related to each other

in terms of how we are related to the good and truth that comes from our Father. Some goods and truths are so close that the two people who love them are married; other goods and truths are more distant from each other and so the people that love them are more like third cousins.

It is a little strange to think about, but it could happen that a person who had been the biological father of another person, after death, ends up being the correspondential grandson of that person, because of the goods and truths that each of them love.

In summary, it is because spiritual relationships are based on what goods and truths people love that, after they have moved beyond the state of externals, “a father does not recognize a son or a daughter, nor a brother a brother or sister, nor even a husband a wife, unless they have been in similar good. [And] ...are soon dissociated” (*Arcana Coelestia* §3815). There are, however, at least two interesting exceptions.

Some Exceptions

From the passages quoted above one gets the impression that most members of a family go their separate ways after meeting after death; but Swedenborg learned that some biological family groups still live together after death. “I have heard from angels that people who used to live in very ancient times, today in heaven continue to live household by household, family by family, and nation by nation, similarly to the way they had lived on earth, and that scarcely anyone is missing from any household” (*Conjugal Love* §205). This example does not break any rules. These people are still associated with others people on what goods and truths they love; the people that they are associated with just happen to be their extended family.

It is, of course, not just a coincidence that all the people in a given family love the same goods

and truths. The children “inherited inclinations toward the conjugal connection between good and truth, into which they were easily introduced more and more deeply by their parents through their upbringing and education, and into which they were afterwards led by the Lord as though on their own when they came into their own right and judgment” (*Conjugal Love* §205). This makes it seem very plausible that, even today, a father and son might end up living together in the same part of heaven, given that the son inherited the same inclinations that his father had.

The first exception is easy to understand it in the context of the teachings we have already gone over. The second exception, however, seems to not follow these general teachings. Swedenborg describes waking up one morning and seeing two angels coming down from heaven, one from the southern part of heaven and one from the eastern part of heaven.

When they were below under the heavens, they ran to meet each other, as if they strove which should be first, and mutually embraced and kissed each other. I heard that these two angels, when they lived on earth, had been conjoined in interior friendship; but now one was in the eastern heaven and the other in the southern heaven. In the eastern heaven are they who are in love from the Lord; but in the southern heaven are they who are in wisdom from the Lord. (*Apocalypse Revealed* §875)

After the angels met, they talked together about various topics, particularly about whether heaven is love or wisdom in its essence. And then, after talking for a while, they each went back to their own heaven.

These two angels were from very different heavens—one was from the south, where they are

more focused on wisdom, and one was from the east, where they are more focused on love¹—and yet, they still recognized each other and still had a strong connection to each other. How was this possible? Why did it happen? We do not know, but it is fun to speculate.

It seems significant that it was only once they were “below under the heavens” that they were able to run to meet each other. They did not live in the same place and they probably could not have visited each other's heavens without having difficulty breathing (*cf. Conjugal Love* §50). But, if they went down to the world of spirits, where people can be in the state of externals, they were able to meet and talk together.

It is interesting to wonder what the nature of their “interior friendship” was that still joined them together, despite their other differences. Because they both came from heaven, it cannot have been a disorderly “friendship of love” that *True Christian Religion* talks about.² It must have been more like the positive “inmost friendship” that married partners can have (*cf. Conjugal Love* §180). Does this interior friendship still continue today and do these angels continue to meet with each other below heaven? It could be that these meetings are an important part of how the Lord continues to perfect these two angels. It could be that the Lord needs there to be these connections between angels from separate

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- 1 We might wonder whether they were even from different kingdoms of heaven (*cf. Heaven and Hell* §§20-28). This would make it even harder to understand how they were able to associate with each other, given that *Heaven and Hell* §27 states that the angels of the celestial and spiritual kingdoms “are not together, and have no interaction with each other” and are only able to communicate with each other “through intermediate angelic societies.” But *Heaven and Hell* §148 indicates that, within the spiritual kingdom and within the celestial kingdom, there are angels that are in the east (more in love) and angels that are in the south (more in wisdom). Therefore, it seems far more likely that these two angels were from different parts of the same kingdom of heaven.
 - 2 *True Christian Religion* §446 does call a “friendship of love” an “interior friendship,” which is what these angels are said to have had. But, the passage qualifies what kind of interior friendship a friendship of love is: it is “such that not only is the man's external man loved but his internal also, and this without scrutiny into the quality of his internal or spirit, that is,... as to whether these spring from love towards the neighbor and love to God,... or whether they spring from a love opposed to the neighbor and a love opposed to God.” And a later passage explains that, when a good spirit is internally joined to an evil spirit, “both are thrust down to hell, where the good spirit suffers severely, but finally, after a lapse of time, he is released, *and only then begins his preparation for heaven*” (§448, emphasis mine). The angels had already been prepared for heaven and so cannot have been in a friendship of love.

heavens in order to have communication between different parts of heaven as a whole—like the tissue that connects the heart and the lungs. It could be that this meeting was something that only happened once so that Swedenborg, the angel from the south, and a new spirit who was also there for the conversation could learn from the angel from the east about why love is the essence of heaven.

Regardless of the reason for this meeting, this exception and the one before it illustrate that people can form spiritual bonds on earth that last to eternity and that the Lord does allow what look to us like exceptions to the general rules about how people associate and recognize each other after death.

Why it Would Not Work Any Other Way

Though there are these seeming exceptions, the majority of people probably do not stay connected with the same people that they were connected with in the world. This might seem unfair or sad but there are a couple of reasons why it has to work this way and why it is better that it works this way.

For one thing, there is the practical question of which family you would live with after death. Would you live with your wife and your parents and your siblings or your wife's parents and siblings? Both? Would your children live with you as well? What about your grandchildren and your grandparents? Pretty soon it becomes an enormous group of people and, if you think about your extended family, you would probably only want to live in the same house or community with some of them. And so that is what the Lord does; He lets each person live with the people that he wants to live with, not based on something as arbitrary as the DNA of his physical body, but based on what he fundamentally loves.

The Lord does not force people who were friends or family in the world to separate once their

internal differences become clear; they choose to separate. And the wonderful thing is that, when a person finds other people who love the same goods and truths as he does, he immediately feels a close relationship with those people. “Angels who are in like good and truth recognize each other, as relatives by blood and marriage do on the earth, precisely as if they had been acquainted from infancy” (*Heaven and Hell* §205).

In heaven we will not feel lonely and disconnected; we will recognize and feel incredibly connected to the people we love most, as part of a spiritual family with the Lord as our Father.