

Do Angels Have Wings?

by the Rt. Rev. George de Charms

A strong prejudice against the representation of angels having wings has grown up in the New Church. This prejudice arose from opposition to the false ideas that angels are ghostly supernatural beings, created by God in the spiritual world without ever having lived on earth, or that they are the disembodied spirits of men floating in the clouds, waiting to be re-incarnated in their natural bodies at the time of the Last Judgment. In opposition to this, the Heavenly Doctrines clearly teach that all angels are human beings who have lived on earth, and who were immediately resurrected to life in the spiritual world on the third day after their deaths. They are not ghosts, but have all the sensations, faculties, and abilities which they had possessed on earth, but these are increased a hundredfold. We are taught that all angels arose in a spiritual body, so similar to the one they had earth that they could not discern the slightest difference. Therefore, they could not have wings.

On the other hand, the representation of angels having wings did not arise in the Christian Church. It dates back to most ancient times. The Old Testament records instances of angels flying through the air as they descended to the earth from the heavens, or rising from the earth as if on extended wings. The prophets often speak of flying angels. Ezekiel speaks of winged creatures surrounding the throne of God. The Apocalypse is replete with accounts of flying angels. And in the Heavenly Doctrines Swedenborg tells of seeing angels descending from heaven as if flying through the air on a number of occasions. Although wings are not mentioned, the angel who appeared to the shepherds on the night of the Lord's birth was seen as if in mid-air, with a host who sang, "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth, peace, good will to men." In the face of all this testimony of Divine Revelation, how can we dismiss the idea that angels have wings?

Human beings are not birds, either during life on earth, or after they enter the spiritual world. They do not have wings. They are created in the image of God, that is, in the human form. Yet humans have minds that can soar far above the earth, "as on the wings of eagles." This mental ability is represented by all the birds that fly in the air and make their nests, even in the tallest trees. The Lord created birds to perform this use of representation.

The human mind is capable of marvelous flights of imagination. It is capable of understanding abstract truths, intellectual concepts, and even spiritual truths far removed from the material things of time and space. More than this: it is capable of love; compassion; and merciful protection of the weak, the needy, the suffering, and the innocent. For this reason, "wings" mentioned in the Word have a dual meaning. They represent intellectual insight, on the one hand, and Divine protection, on the other. For this reason, the golden cherubim placed over the Ark of the Covenant in the Holy of Holies in the Tabernacle, were the center from which Jehovah spoke to teach and guide His people, Israel. So also the cherubim (human figures with outstretched wings) were woven in gold thread in the Veil that marked the division between the Holy Place and the Holy of Holies. Cherubim were also woven in the covering that formed the ceiling of both the Holy Place and the Holy of Holies. These represented the Divine Providence protecting the church with people. In a similar way, in the New Testament the Lord said, "O Jerusalem,

Jerusalem, the one who kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to her! How often I wanted to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but you were not willing!” (Matthew 23:37)

It is important that the human mind’s ability to imagine, understand, and perceive truth should be represented. This ability is a human quality, which distinguishes man from animals. The appearance of angels with wings in the spiritual world is not designed to make them seem less human, but, on the contrary, to emphasize the intelligence and wisdom of which the human mind is capable.

When angels and spirits are seen, as if at a distance, many human qualities are represented by their appearance. We read of celestial angels appearing as little children adorned with garlands of flowers, to represent their state of innocence. When they draw near, however, they are seen as adults. On one occasion Swedenborg describes seeing a single angel in a chariot descending from heaven, but when he drew nearer he saw a conjugal pair (*Conjugal Love* 42). Spirits were seen, as if at a distance, in the form of animals that corresponded to their internal state. But when they drew near, they were seen as men. In the fourth chapter of the Apocalypse we read about the “four animals” who surround and guard the throne of God. They represent the higher heavens of angels, who protect against any approach except by the good of love and charity (*Apocalypse Explained* 277). Both in the letter of the Word and in the Heavenly Doctrines, we find numerous instances in which angels and spirits are seen as animals or birds, representing particular affections or qualities of the human mind.

If the appearance of angels with wings, flying in the air, is rightly understood, it does not detract in the least from the teaching that angels are human beings. It merely illustrates the intellectual faculties and abilities of the human mind, in a way not otherwise possible. This being the case, we would suggest that the prejudice against any representation of angels with wings is not justified. Such a representation is sanctioned by Divine Revelation, and it performs an important use which should by no means be disregarded.