

RESPONDING TO THE LORD'S WORD
Approaching written revelation to be led to the Lord

BY THE REV. GRANT ODHNER

Part One: A New Word

New Church people are faced with a new body of written revelation. The Lord reveals Himself to us through the Old Testament and New Testament, as He did to Christians, but now also through the Writings. These three “books” sit before us on our shelves. How are we to respond to their threefold witness?

The Old Testament and New Testament are bound together, and though they do not explicitly reference themselves as a united work or call themselves “the Word,” the Writings do (following Christian tradition in this but redefining its canon). The Writings claim that their doctrines are drawn from this Word, and they continually point to it as the basis for the church and for our communication and conjunction with the Lord and with heaven.

The Writings stated purpose is to “reveal” the “doctrine of genuine truth” and with it the Word’s spiritual or internal meaning (*Sacred Scripture* 25,56). This doctrine is from the Word as it is understood in heaven, which is why it is called “Heavenly Doctrine” (*Heavenly Doctrine* 7). Yet in the Writings this doctrine is not given in a spiritual form but in a natural form. Its explanations of the spiritual meaning are presented in natural light, being a “natural sense from the spiritual” (*Apocalypse Explained* 1061). They are natural-rational explanations of the spiritual meaning as understood by angels.

The Writings exist in natural form, in fixed time, space, matter. They are not simply a spiritual-rational revelation that affects our minds without reference to the material world. They have a body. They exist in books, penned by Swedenborg. And these

books are not Swedenborg's: they are the Lord's¹. They indeed claim that their doctrines are drawn from the Old and New Testaments, and are founded on that basis (and of course I do not dispute that this is true in a very important sense). Yet they clearly have their own basis as well. They abound in terms and concepts utterly foreign to the previous revelations – ones that are historical, political, scientific, and cultural (e.g. classical mythology). And most importantly, they articulate concepts that have no clear origin in Scripture: Discrete degrees, correspondence, various components of the mind, the structure and form of the spiritual world, teachings about providence and regeneration and the Lord's glorification. These concepts can indeed, with faith and imagination, and in some cases with the Writings' direct suggestion, be seen reflected in the narrative and details of the Old and New Testaments, but clearly we have in the Writings something new.

It is these facts about the Writings' outward form that have helped people in the church to acknowledge that they are "the Word" with a letter, a letter that can be distinguished from their essential message, their spirit. This has also been the chief reason for the variety of doctrinal understandings in the church (just as the Old and New Testament letters have been the source of doctrinal variety in the Christian church at large).

The New Church has a three-fold *written* revelation. The Lord speaks to us through *text*. Being led by the Lord through this revelation requires that we face the age-old issues inherent in this.

The purpose of the Word

The purpose of the Word is to bring about a knowledge of the Lord and to enable Him to draw us to Him. This conjunction does not happen through the Word itself (as a book): it happens when we respond to that knowledge of the Lord by living in

¹ See *Spiritual Experiences* 6101; *Ecclesiastical History of the New Church* 1

harmony with Him – by shunning the evils that are contrary to His will and by choosing to be directed in our thought and behavior by love for Him and for our neighbor. No conjunction through the written Word happens apart from this actual love and life. Yet the written Word has the power to establish communication and perpetually rekindle our love and life²—harmony with the Lord. It is, in some special way, His presence with us.³ By it He can reach us directly in this material world, because it rests in an ultimate, objective form. We can approach this Word in our natural state and be affected by Him there. It all begins from this approach and from our drawing knowledge from it.

The Writings do have a special function in relation to the Old and New Testaments, and the Old and New Testaments have a special function in relation to the Writings. However, the general purpose of the Writings is one and the same as the rest of the written Word in the natural world: to bring a knowledge of the Lord to us in our natural state by which conjunction with Him can be brought about. In our reading of the Writings the Lord can touch us directly—as generations of people now bear witness!

To summarize thus far: What are the Writings?

The Writings are part of the Word for the New Church. They are part of that body of Divine teaching by which the Lord leads us to Himself and brings about relationship (conjunction). They sit beside the Old and New Testament on the shelf. The Lord *speaks to us* when we read them—not just in the language of

²*Arcana Coelestia* 1776, 10355:5-6, 9382:3, 9152; *Spiritual Experiences* 5961; etc.

³In glorifying His Human He became the Word in its natural sense or sense of the letter (*Apocalypse Revealed* 466; *De Verbo* 20:1; cf. *True Christian Religion* 261) but what does this mean? He certainly did not become the words and letters but some “essence and life” within them which affects us (*Apocalypse Revealed* 200).

previous revelations, but in their own distinct language.⁴

Swedenborg's testimony and practice

Swedenborg's testimony often appears to contradict his practice (what he actually did in gaining and presenting the truths of the second coming). He continually directs us to "the Word"—clearly meaning the Word of the Old and New Testaments—as the source of the doctrine that the Lord has revealed through him. It is where we should go to be taught, enlightened, conjoined with the Lord. His argument is usually supported by the idea that conjunction with heaven/the Lord takes place through the ultimates provided by the natural and sensory images of these testaments. In one passage he distinguishes this "merely natural sense," which brings about conjunction with heaven, from the explanations he has given in "a natural sense from the spiritual," which do not (*Apocalypse Explained* 1061).

Yet when it comes to the ideas we have in the entire body of revelation for the New Church, which bring doctrinal light, which teach us clearly about the Lord, which most directly guide our thinking in matters of regeneration and life, where do they come from? Speaking for myself, they come from the Writings. (And from seeing them there I can in turn see them in delightful, powerful, and edifying ways in the stories of the Old and New Testaments.)

People of the New Church who have believed that the Lord speaks with authority in the Writings have—consciously or unconsciously—always taken the Writings as the main source of doctrine for the New Church. And this is why people have

⁴It is significant that the Writings exist as books in the spiritual world (*Apocalypse Revealed* 716, 875: 15; *True Christian Religion* 461e; *Spiritual Experiences* 5946; *Marriage Love* 416; *Ecclesiastical History* 1; cf. Letters 18). This is a testament to the fact that they have their own contribution to make to heavenly thought, and are not merely a "spirit" of the OT and NT Word that, being one with the doctrine of heaven, disappears when we get to that level. The revelation given in the Writings was also given in heaven (*ibid.*; *Apocalypse Explained* 641: 3); they must have their own distinct ultimate basis in the natural world.

called them “the Word.” And it is why they have believed that it was legitimate and necessary to draw doctrine from them.

Swedenborg indeed declares: “I affirm in truth...that from the first day of that call I have not received anything whatever pertaining to the doctrines of that church from any angel, but from the Lord alone while I have read the Word” (*True Christian Religion* 779). Yet clearly Swedenborg drew not just “light” from heaven, but also ideas. In effect he drew from the Word in heaven.

This [New] Church is...instituted and established...through the revelation of the spiritual sense, and through the introduction of my spirit, and, at the same time, of my body, into the spiritual world, so that I might know there what heaven and hell are, and that in light I might draw immediately from the Lord the truths of faith.... (*Invitation to the New Church VII*)

In order that true Christian religion might be manifested, it was absolutely necessary that someone should be introduced into the spiritual world, and draw from the mouth of the Lord genuine truths out of the Word. (*Invitation* 38)

The manifestation of the Lord, and intromission into the spiritual world, surpass all miracles.... To me it is granted to be in both spiritual and natural light at the same time. By this means it has been granted to me to see the wonderful things of heaven, to be together with the angels like one of them, and at the same time to draw forth truths in light, and thus to perceive and teach them; consequently to be led by the Lord. (*Invitation* 52)

We can understand these statements to be saying that Swedenborg enjoyed the light of understanding through being fully in the spiritual world, and in that light he saw the genuine doctrine while reading the Word that he had in the world. This is undoubtedly what he was thinking.

Yet so much of the “light” that he enjoyed, the genuine truth

that he saw and shared—the vital ideas, guidance, direction that the Writings give us—was not (and could not be) presented in Old Testament and New Testament language and imagery. Clearly he *did* get ideas from the Lord through his interactions with angels (*Spiritual Experiences* 1647 states very clearly how the Lord led him in this). And these ideas (expressed in natural language) are clearly part of the purpose and form of the new revelation.

It is interesting that the word “draw” is used of ideas that Swedenborg gained from his experience in the spiritual world and recorded in the Writings.⁵ And he recommends to his readers to “draw” this knowledge from his works to use in understanding other things that he was teaching (*Apocalypse Explained* 1125:3).

Why this apparent contradiction?

Why does Swedenborg stress the importance of going to the Old and New Testaments for doctrine, yet consistently lead us from the Writings and the doctrine of heaven?

First, and most importantly, I think the Lord wants us to go to the Old and New Testaments to see how the Heavenly Doctrine (the spiritual sense revealed in the Writings) plays and works *in particular ways* in the more ultimate revelation. There is greater power, holiness, and fullness there.

In the second place, Swedenborg understood that the doctrine he gained through angels and spirits from the Lord was in fact from the literal meaning of the Word.

All who are in heaven are instructed by the Lord *from the truth Divine that is with man*, thus from the Word. The reason is that man is in the ultimate of order, and that all interior things terminate in the ultimate, the ultimate being as it were a support for the interior things, on which they subsist and rest. (*Arcana Coelestia* 9430:2)⁶

⁵ cp. *Divine Love and Wisdom* 201; *Marriage Love* 73:2; *Intercourse of the Soul and Body* 19

⁶ emphasis here and elsewhere is added by Grant Odhner

This does not mean, of course, that the angels read and study the literal sense in the form that we have it.⁷ It is simply a statement about the organic relationship between Divine truth in its most ultimate form and the Divine truth in its higher forms. In saying that doctrine is to be drawn from the letter, Swedenborg is not thinking that it cannot be drawn from the new revelation of the angelic Word.

In the third place, I believe that Swedenborg could not know what the full relationship was between the books he penned and the Word of God in the natural world. I don't believe that, given his role in generating them, the fact that he moved so easily between worlds, it was possible for him to see the full extent of what the Lord intended his writings to be. He was too close to it. This is consistent with the nature of all revelation. It is given in time through finite human minds. Swedenborg clearly glimpsed the miracle of the revelation he was involved in. He said many clear things about it. He had as full a sense of participation in the revelatory process as it is humanly possible. Yet even he recognized that things which he wrote had dimensions that he could never fully grasp (cp. *Spiritual Experiences* 2265-2270). They were the Lord's works, not his.

I don't believe Swedenborg was able to see that what he wrote would need to function in the church in a similar way as the rest of Scripture. As part of a written Word, his writings would not be the self-evident rational ideas that they were to him (that people could somehow accept without analysis), but a body of ideas that would need to be weighed and measured by generations of people in a growing, global human race. The Lord designed them to serve people of new eras who would need to be led in freedom by a letter that required them to look deeper and to accept their truth from a higher basis than mere reason. The Lord wanted people to exercise their own judgment to

⁷ *Arcana Coelestia* 64, 1876; *Heaven and Hell* 259; *Sacred Scripture* 70ff

distinguish the clear and universal truths from truths that were not so universal and readily clear.

Principles that apply to all written revelation

The principles given in the Writings about how to approach the Word must apply to the Writings. These principles are what enable us to rightly approach all written revelation and be led by the Lord through it. They enable us to honor and safeguard its place in the church. We can apply these principles to the Writings without destroying the unique function of the third revelation.

- The Writings are holy, because revelations from the Lord through heaven, given in ultimate text, must be respected as such
- The Writings must be read, their words and ideas translated and understood in the context of each new generation, through study and reflection
- They can only be rightly understood by our approaching the Lord there, in a holy manner, in a spirit of “affection for truth for the sake of use”
- They can only be rightly understood by our discerning the *essential doctrine* that expresses their true spirit (through knowing genuine truth and comparing passages)
- We must use this clear doctrine to shed light on the other ideas
- The doctrine we see there can have no power unless we see it confirmed in plain statements
- The Writings will be understood differently by different people because they do have a letter that all are working from
- Statements from the Writings can be misunderstood and misapplied

- If essential ideas are made paramount and charity is maintained the things we understand differently will not divide the church

These things, considered as generalities, reflect the approach that the General Church has in fact taken to the Writings. Our very differences in view have also confirmed the truth of this characterization.

Historical Perspective on the revelation given to the New Church

The Rev. Don Rose wrote an article many years ago in which he playfully got people to consider what it would have been like as an early Christian trying to convince a Jew that the Gospels were the Word. His purpose was to try to express why General Church people persist in believing the Writings are the Word in the face of objections raised by those who hold that only the Old and New Testaments are the Word (yet who accept the Writings as a revelation)⁸. This article compellingly shows that there is nothing that could really prove to a Jew that the Gospels were sacred scripture—that they fulfilled in any logical or convincing way the predictions made about the Messiah, or that they were in clear harmony with the teachings of the Law as accepted by Jews. An abundance of objections could be advanced from the letter of the Old Testament which, taken literally, would be insurmountable. The Gospels represented a wholly new approach and spirit. A person simply had to “get” this—be touched by it, believe it on its own merits. And once one did this, then there were many things that could be found in the Old Testament to confirm it.

⁸ “An Insight into the General Church View of the Writings” *New Church Life* 77:106ff

The New Testament was a new revelation of truths, truths interior to those of the Old Testament.⁹ The doctrinal framework for the Christian church did not come from the Hebrew Scriptures, though it was inwardly contained in it and founded on it. We read:

When the end of a church is at hand, then *the interior things of the Word, of the church, and of worship, are revealed and taught. ... Moreover, the interior things of the Word, which are revealed at the end of the church, are serviceable for doctrine and life to the new Church that is also then established.* That this is so is evident from this, that when the end of the Jewish Church was at hand the Lord Himself opened and taught the interior things of the Word, and especially revealed those things in the Word that had been foretold of Himself; and when these had been opened and revealed the externals of the church were abrogated....(*Apocalypse Explained* 641:2; cf. 670:2)

When the Lord came into the world, the Word was opened interiorly; for when the Lord was in the world He revealed interior Divine truths *that were to be for the use of the new Church about to be established by Him and that did serve that church.* (*Apocalypse Explained* 948:2)

The Writings make this point about the Christian church in order to make a similar point about the New Church which the Lord was establishing.

The like has been done at the present time; for it has now pleased the Lord to reveal many arcana of heaven, especially the internal or spiritual sense of the Word, which has heretofore been wholly unknown, and with that He has taught the genuine truths of doctrine. This revelation is meant by “the coming of the Lord” in Matthew 24:3,30,37. *A revelation is necessary at the end of the church in order... that by means of it the good may become separated from the evil, and a New Church may be established.* (*Apocalypse Explained* 641:3)

⁹*Apocalypse Explained* 641:2-4, 670:2, 948:2-3, 195:15, 701:15, 624:7; *Arcana Coelestia* 3398:4, 3480:2, 3900:8, 4904:2-3, 8972:2, 9026, 9209:3, 9212:7; *Apocalypse Revealed* 166; *Apocalypse Revealed* 932; *True Christian Religion* 670; *Coronis* 42; cp. *True Christian Religion* 409; *Arcana Coelestia* 3690:2-4

The like is done at the present day. This church, which is called Christian, has at this day come to its end, therefore the arcana of heaven and the church have now been revealed by the Lord, *to serve as the doctrine of life and faith for the New Church*, which is meant by “the New Jerusalem” in Revelation. (*Apocalypse Explained* 670:4)

For like reasons the Word has been opened interiorly at this day, and still more interior Divine truths have been revealed from it *for the use of the New Church*, that will be called the New Jerusalem. (*Apocalypse Explained* 948:2)

“Still more interior truths” have been revealed for the New Church, and this revelation is given “to serve as the doctrine of life and faith for the New Church.” We will see this doctrine in relation to the former revelations. We will use it to see the spiritual sense of the Old and New Testaments. That is clearly what we are being encouraged to do! But our doctrinal framework will come from the new revelation. This is where we have gone and must go for that doctrine. In the light of this effort we will see the genuine truth in the Old and New Testaments and will be able to see the doctrine in greater fullness, holiness, and power there.

The Word is Inwardly Full of Life

The words that I speak to you are spirit, and are life.
(John 6:63)

The life that flows in from the Lord through the Word is the light of truth that flows into the intellect and the love of good that flows into the will. This love and that light together make the life of heaven in a person, which is called eternal life. The Lord also teaches:

...the Word was God.... In Him was life, and the life was the light of men. (John 1:1, 4)

De Verbo II