

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

BY THE REV. GRANT ODHNER

**Part Two: Gaining Spiritual Meaning From the Word**

Let us recap a few ideas from the first part of this paper. The purpose of the Word is to establish a relationship of mutual love (conjunction) between the Lord and human beings. Written revelation serves to initiate and foster such states of love. More wonderfully, when that love is present on our part, the written Word becomes an actual means of conjunction! We also presented the view that the Word for the New Church consists of the Old Testament, the New Testament, and the Writings. And we suggested that the principles which the Writings give us that bear on the nature of written revelation and our approach to it apply to the new revelation as well.

We will now take a look, specifically, at the principles taught in the Writings about how to approach the Word for spiritual meaning or sense. In doing this we will see how these teachings apply to the Writings themselves and at the same time what the Writings’ special function is. (The main principles are given bold headings.)

The Writings characterize the Lord’s essence as love and wisdom—inseparably married. These are His spirit, the essential Word, and are within our written book, making it what it is. These two things *together* are the “spiritual sense” (properly the spiritual and celestial senses) that we seek when we go to its natural pages. But how do we find the Lord’s spirit, His love and wisdom, in what, “on the surface,” seems to be a jumble of assorted and loosely-related documents and ideas?

**The first step is to approach *the Lord* there**

The Lord is the Word, for the Word treats of Him alone....

Therefore those who do not immediately approach the Lord cannot see any truth from the Word. (*Apocalypse Revealed* 958)

Man cannot discover a single Divine Truth, except he approach the Lord immediately. (*Invitation to the New Church* 22)

Approach the Lord and you will be enlightened. For He is the Word, that is to say, the very Divine truth in it. (*True Christian Religion* 634e)

The effect of approaching *the Lord* in the Word is that He gives us light to understand it: “Approach the Lord and you will be enlightened” (ibid).

### **Approach with holy regard**

I don’t know of a passage that directly makes regarding-the-Word-as-holy a condition for enlightenment, but I have been increasingly impressed with how often reading it in this spirit is linked with deriving “life” from the Word and being conjoined with heaven and the Lord.<sup>1</sup>

It is a wonderful thing that where the Word is read with reverence (*sancte*) and the Lord is worshipped from the Word the Lord is present together with heaven. (*Divine Providence* 256:2; cf. 260:3)

The Word gives life to those who devoutly (*sancte*) read it. (*Doctrine of the Sacred Scripture* 19)

### **Approach affirmatively**

Implicit in our approach to the Word must be holding an affirmative conviction that the Word is from the Lord, that He

<sup>1</sup> *Arcana Coelestia* 4027.2, 6789.2-3, 3735.2; *de Verbo* 2, 6, 8.2, 11; *Sacred Scripture* 19; *Divine Love and Wisdom* 280; *Divine Providence* 256.2 (260.3); *Apocalypse Revealed* 200, 245; Lett. 8.

speaks to us there, that it is the source of truth.<sup>2</sup> Without this how could we find its light?

**Approach from the Lord and not from self**

We can get light from the Word's truths (which are "the Lord's with us"<sup>3</sup>) only in the measure that we are approaching it from affections that are "the Lord's with us." Good affections are given to every human being. From them we have the capacity to consider what the Word says, to see and understand its truth, and to be affected by it, at least temporarily. The Writings call these gifts "remnant" states.<sup>4</sup> They are not our affections but the Lord's affections with us.<sup>5</sup>

From these affections we can be affected by the Word merely intellectually, and "now and then." But the real light comes only in the measure that we are applying its truth to our lives. Hence the next few headings.

**Be in the effort to love truths and practice them**

Enlightenment is from the Lord alone, and exists with those who love truths because they are truths and make them of use for life. With others there is no enlightenment in the Word. (*Doctrine of the Sacred Scripture* 57; see entire section; another good reference: *Arcana Coelestia* 9382)

**Be in the effort to shun evils as sins against the Lord**

Every person who possesses a spiritual affection for truth, that is, who loves real truth because it is true, is enlightened by the Lord when he reads the Word. ... The person who receives enlightenment is one who refrains from evils

<sup>2</sup> *Arcana Coelestia* 2568, 2588, 128, 6479

<sup>3</sup> *Apocalypse Revealed* 200, 222.3

<sup>4</sup> cf. *Arcana Coelestia* 530.2, 560, 977.2, 1707.3, 5894, 10110.2, 4

<sup>5</sup> "remnants" are the Lord's alone with us: *Arcana Coelestia* 8, 575f, 1050, 1906.3.

because they are sins and are against the Lord and opposed to His Divine laws. In such a one and in no other the spiritual mind opens, and in the measure that it opens, in the same measure the light of heaven enters (all enlightenment in the Word being from the light of heaven). (*de Verbo* 12)

### **Summary so far**

All the points about our approach to the Word mentioned so far are true of our approach to the Writings. If we want to see the Writings in genuine light we must be approaching them as the Lord's books (as holy) and be seeking Him there. And we must be in the effort to apply their truth to life.

Because the next clear teaching has been the focus of much debate and difference of view, I will spend more time on it.

### **We are to approach the Lord and find enlightenment and doctrine *in the Word's literal meaning***

*The Doctrine of the Church must be taken from the sense of the Letter of the Word, and be confirmed by it. ...the Word in the sense of the Letter is in its fulness, its sanctity and its power; and since the Lord is the Word, for He is the All of the Word, it follows that the Lord is eminently present in that sense, teaching and enlightening man from it. (Doctrine of the Sacred Scripture 50)<sup>6</sup>*

In Part One of this paper we suggested that while the Writings say that they themselves are doctrine drawn from the letter of the Word (meaning the Old and New Testaments), their practice is to lead us from the doctrine of heaven. There is no real contradiction here. The angels themselves are said to be instructed from the Word in ultimates, yet the appearance with them is that they are instructed from their own heavenly Word,

<sup>6</sup> *Sacred Scripture* 50-61, 44.3, 48e, 97.3; *Arcana Coelestia* 9905.4, 9824.5, 10548.2-3; *de Verbo* 20

and they take their doctrine from that. Hence the Writings proclaim to us the doctrine of heaven, and they speak of doctrine from both senses.<sup>7</sup>

A number of ideas are embodied in the principle that we must go to the letter of the Word for doctrine. Some are broader and some more specific.

1. The Lord wants people to go *to the body of truth that He has revealed on earth*. It is the source and foundation of the church on earth and of heaven.

Was Swedenborg speaking of the Old and New Testaments when he wrote that we are to go to the sense of the letter for doctrine and light? I believe so. Does this principle extend to the Writings? It must, because they are now part of the revelation that's been given for "the doctrine of life and faith for the New Church" (*Apocalypse Explained* 670:4). The church must go to the Writings to open the Old and New Testaments, to open their meaning. So if the church does not include the Writings in the body of natural truth given to the church on earth, it will not be led by the Lord.

2. The Word, including the Writings, *provides an ultimate foundation for truth in the human mind* in this world and to eternity.

A study of the teachings on "ultimates" as a necessary foundation for heaven shows that this term can be applied not only to the Word in its letter, but to the human race on earth in general, to the natural plane in general, to natural thought, to natural knowledge and delight, to the natural memory, to the

<sup>7</sup> *Arcana Coelestia* 9375; *Apocalypse Explained* 587

corporeal-sensual level of the mind, to our actions and speech, to the material substances of creation.<sup>8</sup> In fact, unless we are clear that all of these things are necessary for making the foundation, we are not getting the proper picture. The “bottom line” is actually natural “matter.” All things terminate in that. But this cannot be a foundation for heaven unless it enters the senses of a human being’s mind, and becomes a vehicle for presenting the Word there. Continuing this line of thought, we can see that to make the full connection the foundation must include natural (and its highest level, rational) thought and affection, thus *understanding and life in harmony with it*.

*Implication:* Broadly speaking, the Writings are part of the “ultimate” foundation for the Word in heaven. In speaking of the importance of the Word as the foundation of heaven’s wisdom, *Spiritual Experiences*, nos. 5607-5617, mentions many of the above facets of “ultimates.” In this context Swedenborg states: “...when [angels are turned] to those things which are in my thought from the heavenly doctrine, then they are in greater clearness than in any other case” (n. 5610). The foundation is complete when a person is in natural thought from the Heavenly Doctrine in connection with the Old and New Testaments.<sup>9</sup>

3. The Lord does want us *to bring the rational truth revealed in the Writings into relationship with the Old and New Testaments*, to see it reflected there both directly and in corresponding forms. In this way His truth is most fully expressed, is most affecting, and most powerful.

Our thought from revelation becomes a complete foundation when it is from all three revelations. But the Old and New

<sup>8</sup> A few general references: *Heaven and Hell* 304.2; *Last Judgment* 9; *Apocalypse Explained* 726.5-10

<sup>9</sup> Compare the teaching that conjunction with heaven through the Word is brought about especially when a person is able to think from something of the internal sense: *Arcana Coelestia* 4027.2, 8972.2; *Heaven and Hell* 310

Testaments form a *distinctly more ultimate* part of this foundation by virtue of the natural and sensual appearances in which they were (largely) written. They employ terms which directly bring into the mind the most ultimate objects in creation: water, stones, leaves, garments, roads, etc. These objects of our outer senses are the building-blocks of our physical and mental lives.<sup>10</sup> As such they are the base, containant, and support for all higher mental operations and realities.

Our need for finding fullness of expression in sensory forms remains with us to eternity. Sensory images and actions—the sight of a sunrise, the smell of a loved one, a kiss or touch of the hand—are capable of encompassing and expressing more interconnecting feelings and insights than can ever be expressed in rational language. For this reason angels must still have bodies and an outer world, to every appearance like ours, and their speech and mental life (especially their understanding of the Word) are expressed by continual “representatives.”<sup>11</sup>

4. In terms of human development, *we must have a foundation in the Old and New Testaments in order to be led into the rational truths of the Writings*

It is virtually impossible to enter into the ideas of the Writings without first entering into those of the Old and New Testaments (or—in the case of those not educated in the Christian Word—into ideas equally sensory and natural). Little children receive and respond to nothing else! Thus all the love and wisdom that we ever acquire *begin from* and *return to* that apparent source and rest there—consciously while we live in this world, and

<sup>10</sup> *Arcana Coelestia* 3309-3310, 10252.2-3, 1486, 6077; *Divine Love and Wisdom* 71.

<sup>11</sup> On the importance of representative sensory imagery to angelic life: *Arcana Coelestia* 3342, 2249.1-3, 1876.1-2, 3376, 7153; *de Verbo* 14.4; *Heaven and Hell* 270.5

unconsciously after death. Our very identities are formed and fixed in ultimates by mediate influx entering through our senses!<sup>12</sup>

### **The Function of the Writings in relation to Old Testament and New Testament**

As we have noted before, the Writings distinguish the kind of explanations that they give of the spiritual sense (which they call a “natural sense from the spiritual”) from the “Word in the letter,” which they identify with the Old and New Testaments. In this connection they say:

The angel (in Revelation 17.9) did not explain the vision (to John) in the natural sense from the spiritual, because his explanation constitutes the Word in the letter; and the Word in the letter must be natural, in every particular of which the spiritual sense must be stored up; otherwise the Word would not serve the heavens as a basis; nor would it serve the church as the means for its conjunction with heaven. (*Apocalypse Explained* 1061)

The Writings *by themselves* cannot serve the function of providing an ultimate base, containant, and support for the spiritual meaning of the Word. They are written largely in rational language.<sup>13</sup> This rational language is still completely natural. It is based on sensory ideas, like all natural language.<sup>14</sup> And this rational language, and our thinking from it, is a discrete

<sup>12</sup> *Divine Wisdom* 8; *Divine Providence* 220; *Arcana Coelestia* 8701, 7056.3; *Divine Providence* 28, 44; *Married Love* 122

<sup>13</sup> cp. *True Christian Religion* 25.1; *Married Love* 42.2; *Apocalypse Revealed* 544, 148, 936; *de Verbo* 3.4; *Sacred Scripture* 4; *Apocalypse Explained* 1065.3.

<sup>14</sup> The words of language are from ultimates (*Divine Wisdom* 8.5). Our natural thought (based on natural words) consists of “material ideas,” which correspond to “immaterial ideas.” We enter these latter consciously only after death. See *Arcana Coelestia* 10551.2, 5, 10604.2-5, 7089.2. All of our ideas even to the deepest arcana of faith are founded on and attended with sensory ones, though we are not aware of this being the case (*Arcana Coelestia* 3309-3310, 10252.2-3, 1486, 6077; *Divine Love and Wisdom* 71).

degree below spiritual thought, in which the Word's spiritual meaning itself is fully grasped. Therefore the letter of the Writings clearly *corresponds* to its spiritual counterpart. Nevertheless, it is plain to see that the Writings' general character is markedly different from the previous revelations, and serves a different function. All their ideas find a more ultimate seating and their proper context in the New Testament ideas and images, as these in turn find their ultimate seating and proper context in the Old Testament.

In revealing the doctrine of genuine truth, a knowledge of correspondences, and other supporting truths, the Writings help us to enter into the Word's spiritual meaning in a natural way, in our natural thought and affection.<sup>15</sup> They speak in clear, direct terms of the Lord, His essential nature, His purpose, and our response to Him. They unveil the appearances of the letter of the Old and New Testaments. They speak in rational terms to the mature mind. And the rational is that part of the natural mind which receives the spiritual most nearly (*Apocalypse Revealed* 911e, 936) so that "the spiritual self and the rational self are almost the same" (*Arcana Coelestia* 3264.2).

For every person by truths scientifically and naturally understood acquires for himself a rational into which the spiritual can flow and operate. For through the rational which belongs to his understanding a person receives the light of heaven, which is spiritual light, and through the rational enlightened by the spiritual he surveys cognitions and knowledges, selecting from them such as are in accord with the genuine truths and goods of heaven and the church, which are spiritual, and rejecting those that are not. Thus it is that the person lays the foundation of the church in

<sup>15</sup> The Writings are clear that while we live in the world our conscious thinking remains in natural light: *Arcana Coelestia* 10551.2, 5; *Heaven and Hell* 356.2; *Apocalypse Explained* 625.4-5; *Divine Love and Wisdom* 238, 252, 257; et al.

himself. (*Apocalypse Explained* 654:16)

This passage notes later that rational things “enter into ultimates and are in them,” just as spiritual and celestial things do (*Apocalypse Explained* 654:19). “Interior truths” collected from the Word by people of the church who have enlightenment—which would answer to the interior truths revealed in the Writings—are also said to “close in the ultimate truths of the external sensuous, and are all together there. . . . All interior truths are together in the truths of the sense of the letter of the Word, for these truths... are the ultimate ones” (*Arcana Coelestia* 10028:2).

Yet the Writings are not strictly spiritual and celestial; they are intermediate. That is how they serve as a bridge:

The spiritual sense of the Word has been disclosed by the Lord through me.... This surpasses all the revelations that have hitherto been made since the creation of the world. *Through this revelation a communication has been opened between men and the angels of heaven, and the conjunction of the two worlds has been effected*; because when man is in the natural sense the angels are in the spiritual sense. (*Invitation to the New Church* 44, emphasis added)

Note that the effect of this revelation is that the “angels” are in the spiritual sense, not “man.” People in this world are in a natural sense from the spiritual and are thinking naturally in correspondence with the angels.

To interpret the spiritual sense from truths of doctrine, opens heaven, because that is the sense in which the angels are; and so man by means of it thinks together with angels, and thus conjoins them to himself in his intellectual mind.... (*de Verbo*:7:7)

In our communication and conjunction with heaven by means

of the Word, the Writings function both as a literal sense and the spiritual sense. Without the *natural letter* of the Writings—with all of the new vocabulary and concepts they make possible—we could not think about the spiritual sense in relation to the Old and New Testaments and thus could not think with the angels and be linked with heaven.

### **Another summary**

We return now to our list of principles regarding how we are to approach the Word to find connection with the Lord and heaven. We have mentioned the following:

- The first thing is *to approach the Lord* there
- Approach *with holy regard*
- Approach *affirmatively*
- Approach *from the Lord* and not from self
- Be in the effort to *love truths and practice them*
- Be in the effort to *shun evils as sins against the Lord*
- We are to approach the Lord and find enlightenment and doctrine *in the Word's literal meaning*

In our concluding part in this series we will mention three more principles for approaching the Word for spiritual meaning.

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