

## **USES & USEFULNESS**

**An address for the 50th Anniversary District Assembly  
of the General Church of the New Jerusalem  
in Dawson Creek, British Columbia Canada**

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This morning we have had the pleasure of hearing (and seeing) two presentations on our New Church teachings about Influx and Correspondence. Now I would like to share a few thoughts about uses and usefulness as the complement or expression of things that flow in and correspond.

The word "use" is a noun, that is, a thing. I can do, or perform, a use for someone. But the uses themselves really are verbs, that is, actions. So if you take a typical sentence from the Scriptures, such as that Moses went up on Mount Sinai, or that Abraham went up to Mount Moriah, the nouns in that sentence may be "translated" so that we understand them to represent spiritual things instead of natural people or things, but the verbs essentially stay the same. There is no "translation" in the usual sense, since "going up" still means "going up," that is, from a lower state to a higher state.

Well, OK, this is not quite true, since technically there is no "up" or "down" in spiritual things, only more or less interior. But the point is that the verb expresses an action, a change of state, and that change is of the same nature whether it is on the literal or on the spiritual plane. It simply connects the subject with the predicate, or the doer with the thing done.

Consider a couple of other examples. One useful thing that we can do in this life is to build something. Just here, we have the illustration of a new front entrance for our church. In the Word, people built altars for worship, houses, and temples—all sorts of things. But whether you are talking about natural or spiritual things, the idea of building is pretty much the same: it is to raise

up, to form, to prepare or put together, or in some cases to renew or restore. In other words, if a church corresponds to worship of the Lord, then to build a church means to build a form of worship—to put it together. Here in Dawson Creek we are not just putting together concrete, wood, glass, shingles, and other “stuff,” we are putting together a warm, welcoming introduction to the worship of the Lord, hoping that it will be an inspiration for many to participate with us.

Another useful thing we can do in life is to buy, sell, or trade material goods or services, or in our case in the Canadian northwest, to exploit the natural resources we find in or on the land. But what is it to buy, sell, trade, or otherwise exploit things on a spiritual level? Basically, it is the same activity, just applied to spiritual things instead of natural things. So we can “buy,” “sell,” “trade,” or otherwise exploit the goodness of love, knowledge, insight, wisdom, or truth instead of gas, oil, forest products, groceries, books, or machines.

In fact, whereas the teachings on influx and correspondence show us the relationship between spiritual and natural things, the teachings on uses or usefulness are all about the relationships between one spiritual thing and another or between one natural thing and another.

So there are natural uses and there are spiritual uses. I can be useful to you on a natural level, or I can be useful to you on a spiritual level—or perhaps both.

A dramatic illustration of this arises from the twenty-fifth chapter of Matthew in the New Testament. There the Lord gives His parable of the day of judgment, which He compares to the separation of sheep and goats. The sheep, on His right hand, are the ones who have ministered to the hungry, the thirsty, the stranger, the naked, the sick, and the imprisoned, and they inherit the kingdom of heaven. The goats, on the other hand, are the ones who have not ministered to others with these needs, and so they go to hell.

This parable has long been used in Christian history to support what we sometimes call the social gospel, that is, the responsibility of every Christian to minister in these natural ways to the needy of this world. Yet throughout His ministry, the Lord warned people not to be concerned about their natural needs, but rather to forsake all and follow Him, seeking first the kingdom of God. So if you ask me, this is a pretty broad hint that the Lord's statements about the judgment were not meant to be taken literally, but were meant essentially to communicate the importance of compassion, compassion which is only intensified and made more urgent when it is applied to people's spiritual lives.

So it is that for the New Church this parable is not just about natural life. It is about the spiritual states that have to do with eternal life. And in that sense we are taught that the hungry correspond to "those who long for good", the thirsty to "those who long for truth", and the stranger (or visitor) to "those who are willing to be instructed." Likewise the naked correspond to "those who acknowledge that there is nothing of good and of truth in themselves," the sick to "those who acknowledge that in them-selves there is nothing but evil," and the prisoner to "those who acknowledge that in themselves there is nothing but falsity" (*Arcana Coelestia* 4956). These are the truly needy of this world —not that those with such physical needs should be dismissed, but the natural only exists for the sake of the spiritual, and if the spiritual is lacking then our lives are quickly drained of any meaning.

To make this clear let us consider just the first and last circumstances in this list. We know how it feels to be hungry, though I suppose few of us know how it feels to be starving. But even a starving man can have hope of eternal life when his suffering is over. On the other hand, imagine that you are starving for the spiritual food that is the good of love, which is to say you do not have any, you are acutely aware of this fact, and you therefore fear for your eternal life! Is not this worse than the lack of

natural food? And yet there are people in this situation all around us: either they fear for their eternal life or they have just given up, perhaps becoming atheists or cynics in the process—which really does put their eternal lives at risk.

Now think about how you can help these people. Yes, compassion on a natural level may not only feed a person's body but may also provide a real sense of the goodness of human love. So the natural use and the spiritual use may work together. But if a person is hungry primarily for spiritual food, will you give him only what is natural? Of course not! You will try to give him hope, encouragement, inspiration, and most of all confidence in the Lord's Divine love, wisdom, and providence! Perhaps you will share with him something about the spiritual sense of the Word so that he can find meaning in the Bible after all, or perhaps something about influx or the presence of spirits in temptation. In any case, you will do your best to help that person feel the Lord's love so that his spirit is really nourished and sustained.

But what about the person who is "a prisoner"? You can perhaps picture yourself behind locked bars in a jail somewhere. You realize you are trapped, and you long to be free. Again, it is a sad situation, and a person in that situation will naturally want visitors. But what is the spiritual counterpart of this? Our doctrines explain that it is the state of being confined and limited by falsities, which actually is a far worse problem than being kept in a natural jail. Indeed, I know a man who elected to stay in prison rather than lie (by confessing to something he did not do) in a plea bargain to get out, and of course, many are in prison because others have lied about them. In fact, the lie, the falsity in that case is the real problem, not the physical confinement.

Now apply this to the things of religion and eternal life. The Lord said that "the truth shall make you free," but He was not talking about worldly information, He was talking about His WORD: "If you abide in My Word you are My disciples indeed.

And you shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free” (John 8:31-32). In that same context He also said that “whoever commits sin is a slave of sin” (John 8:34). But what about “the prisoner”? Is this not the person who is constrained by false ideas about the Lord, His Word, His providence, and many other things? Not only do these restrict a person’s spiritual life but in some cases they destroy it altogether—as we see in the growing tendency of young and old to treat religion as irrelevant to their lives and to reject the Bible as a meaningful influence in their lives since they cannot understand or relate to it. This quite easily and normally leads to a general neglect of any real spiritual disciplines such as prayer, reading, self-examination, church attendance, and so on, as the focus turns to practical matters of employment, food, clothing, shelter, and of course recreation.

Now the Lord in His parable teaches that we should “visit” these people. And again, “visit” is a verb, an action word, a word that describes a use, or useful service. So like other verbs it does not really change in meaning when we apply it to spiritual subjects. But it is interesting that in the spiritual sense it does imply a form of examination and judgment, just as one of the uses of any ordinary visit is to see how things are going so that you can offer appropriate help and support.

And in this context, there is a most interesting passage from the *Arcana Coelestia* about the exercise of true charity in the ancient church. We read (from the 1990 Elliott translation),

“Teachings that existed among the Ancients specified all the genera and species of charity. They also taught who the neighbour was towards whom charity should be exercised, and how one person was the neighbour in a different degree and different respect from another, and consequently how charity was to be exercised in different ways according to the individual needs of the neighbour. The Ancients also made classifications of the neighbour and gave names to each of these. Some people they called the poor, the needy, the wretched, and the afflicted; some they called the blind, the lame, the maimed, as well as orphans and widows; and others they called the hungry, the thirsty,

strangers, the naked, the sick, the bound, and so on. From these classifications, they knew what they ought to do for each kind of person. But, as stated, such teachings have perished, and with them any understanding of the Word, too. They have perished so completely that no one at the present day knows anything else than this, that when the poor, widows, and orphans are mentioned in the Word none but those who are literally called such are meant. The same applies whenever mention is made of the hungry, the thirsty, strangers, the naked, the sick, and those in prison. But the truth of the matter is that these names are used to describe charity—what it is like in its essence and what the exercise of charity ought to be like in a charitable life”. (*Arcana Coelestia* 4955)

That these terms are used to describe spiritual states and not only natural ones is made abundantly clear from the rest of the passages in that series—as we have noted. So the most important, and unfortunately today, the most often neglected uses are those that look to a person’s eternal life. Yet this, and this particularly, is where the New Church and every member of the New Church have the most to offer!

I do not mean to be at all dismissive, but really, any church or social agency can offer help and support to the physically needy (and it is really important that they do). But only the New Church can offer in addition that which nourishes the spirit from the internal sense of the Word. And so it seems to me that this is the particular use that we have the greatest mandate to serve. And we can do it individually along with the natural uses and external charity that we choose in our private lives, or we can do it as a church body, which is where I think we have a special responsibility—perhaps not exclusive of natural uses, but certainly on a higher level of priority.

After all, what is the church other than that special organization within which the Lord may be known, acknowledged, worshiped and obeyed? Its sole reason for existence is to support and nurture spiritual love and wisdom. As individuals therefore (again) we can apply that love and wisdom

in whatever ways we deem best, but as a church we need to stay focused.

All right. Now let us consider some of the ways we can be useful in a spiritual sense as individuals. First of all, since love to the Lord and love toward the neighbour go hand in hand—so that we really have no genuine love to share unless we get it from the Lord—one of the most useful things that we can do for others is to work on improving our own relationship with the Lord. This includes the very disciplines I mentioned earlier: prayer, reading of the Word, self-examination, church attendance, and so on, most of all including the simple effort to shun any evils toward which we are drawn, not just as evils but as offenses—sins—against Him.

Another very useful thing we can do, that will affect everyone we meet or deal with, is to cultivate a thankful, positive attitude about our whole experience of life. This actually is a practical way of affirming the Lord's Divine providence in every least detail of it, and it helps us stay in the stream of His providence (see *Arcana Coelestia* 8478). For if we become cynical or bitter, convinced that “life” has not treated us fairly, what is the difference between that and believing that the Lord does not care or does not know what He is doing? In any case, it makes us difficult to be around and has a negative impact on others, all of which is decidedly not useful.

Personally I will never forget a little incident that I witnessed over thirty years ago in a plumbing supply shop in Toronto. It had a powerful effect on me then, and it still inspires me today. I was in line for parts at the service counter while a fellow in front of me fairly raged at the retailer about something that had gone wrong. He was really angry, and he let everyone know it. When he finally left, I made some comment expressing sympathy to the retailer, expecting him to be grateful for the acknowledgment. Instead he amazed me by sympathizing with the irate customer—which he had no need to do since the person

was gone and nobody else knew him. To me that was an act of genuine charity (without thought of reward), and it was certainly useful to me.

Which of course brings us to the famous teaching in the little work on charity about shunning evils as sins against the Lord, and doing whatever we do “sincerely, justly, and faithfully” (*Charity* 158). The point is that if we act “sincerely, justly, and faithfully” in the work of any “office” or “employment,” we actually become forms of charity, thus agents of genuine spiritual usefulness. If on the other hand we do not bring these qualities into our work, others may still benefit, but that work in itself will not be genuinely charitable (see *Divine Providence* 250:3).

This now begs the question, what actually is a “use” in heaven? What, for example, do angels do all day...every day... forever? If we knew this surely we could better prepare ourselves for the next life, and maybe even find some spiritual joy in what we do now!

So, are you ready for this? They do whatever they like. No, seriously! They do what they love to do, and what they love to do is serve others, that is, to provide services in keeping with their individual talents and perspectives that promote the general welfare of others and of the kingdom of heaven as a whole. The book, *Heaven and Hell* begins its chapter on the employments of angels by saying, “It is impossible to enumerate (them), still less to describe them in detail...for they are numberless, and vary in accordance with the duties of the societies (there)” (*Heaven and Hell* 387). They also vary in accordance with the particular loves of every angel.

Some examples are given, such as taking care of little children, teaching children or adults, protecting people from evil spirits, attending to people at their resurrection from death and so on. Preachers continue to preach (since everyone needs encouragement, and there is always more to learn), judges continue to

judge (since some are wiser than others), and civil servants continue to serve in civil matters. As well, lest you think all the work of angels is academic or social in nature, there are all sorts of industries and crafts—even though, as it says, all the necessities of life including food, clothing and shelter are provided freely and instantaneously by the Lord (*True Christian Religion* 78, 794, *Canons* 7, *Last Judgment Post* 12, 331, *Divine Love* 12, etc.).

Now this is an interesting concept. If everything is provided by the Lord, what is the point of all these industries and crafts? Well, it seems to me that there are two things going on here: first of all we are being taught that in heaven there is no need or incentive for anyone to work for pay. It is all done for the love itself of “the use.” But second, and equally important, the teaching makes the point that all our efforts simply take advantage of things that the Lord supplies. HE brings them into being, HE changes them from one form to another, HE makes things appear or disappear, just as in this world, but there it is all done in perfect “timing” with the states and activities of the angels. In any case, everything in the spiritual world is spiritual, so again, a house is not a building of wood or concrete but a representation—a form—of the mind of an angel, or of an angel couple. And all sorts of angels contribute to the formation of that house, just as the person living in it contributes to the lives of other angels in other ways.

In the same way, every natural employment or occupation corresponds to something spiritual—something that has to do with goodness and truth, love and wisdom. This is why, when it comes to the elderly or disabled in this world, we can easily see that even though they may not be able to do the physical work we normally associate with useful service, they can still be extremely useful, as they can and do contribute spiritually every day—for good or for ill.

Of course what is useful to one person is not useful to another, so discernment is provided, and discretion advised. But every single thing that is done is done to provide a benefit for someone else, and when that is done, both the person providing and the person receiving the benefit get the reward of feeling joyfully fulfilled. This, then, not only provides for the happiness of heaven, but also explains why it is so rewarding to have new people constantly arriving there: each one is different and every one contributes something unique and valuable to the lives of others. Thus, “the more the merrier.”

Now then, do you enjoy doing what you do? Why or why not? What **DO** you do that makes you feel really good?—really fulfilled? Whatever it is, do you not find that it involves making a real contribution to the lives of others? So that you feel needed?—valued?—appreciated?

But take note! The things you do that give meaning and purpose to your life, these things that contribute significantly to others’ lives, may not be the things you are paid for! In fact much of what we do in our daily working lives could seem rather tedious and unimportant, not to mention frustrating! But, therefore, our real use may simply be in the way we do them, that is to say, with what attitude, focus or concern. And, given that we often just do what we have to do in order to make a living, our real use could have little or nothing to do with our job and everything to do with our relationships at home or in some other sphere.

Again, our use is all about our effect—ultimately our spiritual effect—on other people, based on our reception and application of true love and wisdom from the Lord. This is why we are here—for each other—and this more than anything is what we have to offer the world if we all do our part.

Thank you.