

NEW CHURCH *Life*

A bimonthly magazine devoted to the teachings revealed through Emanuel Swedenborg, as they apply to life.

NOVEMBER/DECEMBER 2020



Why The Shepherds?

The Lord could have been born on earth in comfort and splendor. He chose a stable. And the first to hear the news were simple shepherds in their fields. The Rev. Mark Allais says He did this because of what the shepherds represent in our lives. "And their response to the Lord's birth is a response that the Lord is hoping we will mirror in our own lives." (Page 462)

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New Church Life

A bimonthly magazine devoted to the teachings revealed through Emanuel Swedenborg, as they relate to life.

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In This Issue

Editorials (page 447) include:

- *20/20 Vision Revisited* – The Rev. Jeremy Simons looks back on a sermon he preached early in the year – *20/20 Vision: Our Search for Truth* – in light of all the dramatic and unexpected events that have occurred since. He concludes: “Having 20/20 vision isn’t just about being right, or knowing what is true. It is also about being resilient, about resisting discouragement and having hope for the future.”
- *The Call to Children* – We should all relate to the children of Israel, wandering in the wilderness, often losing their way, but finding their leader, following the Lord, and answering the call to become as little children to be worthy of entering heaven.

Most of the usual Charter Day proceedings at the Academy of the New Church were cancelled this year because of the COVID-19 pandemic, but the traditional Cathedral address was live-streamed by Chancellor Peter M. Buss Jr.: *Call Upon Him While He is Near*. Bishop Buss invited students to think about the meaning of Charter Day in terms of their school. “You’re here – some of you physically, some of you remotely. The Academy Secondary Schools and Bryn Athyn College are founded on a Lord-based educational model. One of the things you’re invited to re-discover – through chapels, religion classes, quotes around campus, mentor conversations with teachers, and so much else – is that the Lord Jesus Christ is the one God of heaven and earth. He’s an all-loving God, an all-powerful and all-knowing God, and He’s an ever-present God. That’s what these schools are here to underscore.” (Page 475)

Thanksgiving, in its biblical origins, was associated with sacrifice and burnt offerings. The Rt. Rev. Bradley Heinrichs offers a new context – that the type of offering and sacrifice the Lord really asks of us is obedience: “Cease to do evil, learn to do good.” (Page 456)

“Why the shepherds?” asks the Rev. Mark Allais in a Christmas sermon. Why were these simple people the first to hear the “good news for all people” – the birth of the Savior? There is, of course, meaning for our own lives. “There are many, many truths which are stored up in our memories but there are only a few that recognize the Lord’s birth in our lives. There are a few truths that touch us, that mean more than others do. These are the shepherds.” (Page 462)

The Rev. Jeremy Simons sees in the Christmas prophecies an image of “peace like a river.” Most of these stories, he says, “describe the Lord’s coming, and His salvation, as a discrete event, a dramatic rescue from the darkness of evil. But that salvation might be more accurately pictured as the flow of a river carrying all of us to a better future, or as a rising tide that is lifting us toward heaven.” (Page 467)

Writing “From the Bishop’s Office,” the Rt. Rev. Bradley D. Heinrichs finds a humbling and reassuring message in Mary’s words to the angel informing her that she would become the mother of Jesus: “Be it unto me according to your word.” This should be a constant reminder always to be affirmative to what the Lord says. (Page 473)

The Kempton Project is offering a new edition of the New Church translation of the Word. In *Why a New Translation of the Word?*, the Rev. Andrew Heilman says: “Each word in the Sacred Scripture is like a precious stone given to us by the Lord, each phrase and verse is like a jewel. These words and phrases are beautifully arranged to reflect and transmit the light of heaven from within. The more a translation reflects this arrangement and beauty the more the glory of the Lord can be seen.” (Page 482)

Michael Brown, a retiree living in Arizona, writes about *The Gift and the Challenge of Reading and Understanding the Arcana Coelestia*. (Page 487)

This issue also includes the Annual Report of the General Church Secretary (page 513), the Directory of the General Church Clergy (page 517), and the Index for the 2020 issues of *New Church Life* (page 536).

Church News (page 489) includes:

- Highlights of the September meetings of the General Church Board of Directors
- A report on the General Church Corporation Annual Meeting in September
- A report on recent meetings of the Academy Board of Trustees
- A note on the Bryn Athyn College graduation, postponed by the COVID-19 pandemic until mid-November (Full coverage will be in the January/February issue)
- Back to live schooling in the Academy Secondary Schools and Bryn Athyn Church School
- While most of the traditional Charter Day events were cancelled by the pandemic, there was still the Cathedral Address, plus Distinguished Alumni honorees for the Secondary Schools
- A report from New Church Challenge
- A new book from the Swedenborg Foundation – *The Shorter Works of 1763*
- More features added to the New Christian Bible Study website

Editorials

20/20 VISION REVISITED

On the first Sunday of this year I presented a sermon about our spiritual vision in the year 2020 (*20/20 Vision: Our Search for Truth* – May/June issue). It gave some advice about how to have a clearer view of life. Now from the vantage point of later in that same year I would like to revise my remarks. They were written in the first week of January. The year has not gone as expected.

Unexpected developments are a part of life. No matter how good your vision is, you can't see around the corner. Who could have predicted the pandemic in January, or the twists and turns of the national elections? But what good is 20/20 vision if it is undone by unanticipated events?

The premise of what I wrote in January was solid enough. It was about how this church is founded on a single position, which is that the theological Writings of Emanuel Swedenborg are the truth, the Word of God. As it is put in the Statement of Order and Organization of the General Church of the New Jerusalem: *“The Old Testament, the New Testament and the Writings together are the supreme authority in matters of faith.”*

From there I listed several of the many principles from the Writings that help us to discover and recognize the truth. For example:

1. The Word is the only source of Divine truth.

“The Word is the only source of Divine truth for Christians.” (True Christianity 777)

“The Word is the one and only teacher of how a person should live in the world in order to be happy for evermore.” (Arcana Coelestia 8939)

2. The Word is about spiritual things, not scientific ones.

“The Word of the Lord does not deal with worldly things but embodies Divine matters.” (Arcana Coelestia 1151)

3. The Rule of Two Witnesses

“For one truth unconnected to others does not confirm it, only a number together.” (Arcana Coelestia 4197)

4. Understanding opposites

“It should be recognized that it is in accordance with the laws of order that no one should become convinced of the truth instantaneously. . . . This goes to explain why in the next life as soon as some truth is presented through plain experience to good spirits, some opposing idea giving rise to doubt is presented. In this way they are led to think and ponder over whether it is indeed a truth. . . . This enables their spiritual vision in respect of that truth to be broadened, seeing even into the ideas that are opposed to it . . . for truths take varying forms as dictated by circumstances.” (Arcana Coelestia 7298)

5. Falsity is more easily demonstrated than the truth.

“There is nothing that cannot be defended, and falsity more easily than truth.” (Divine Providence 318)

The reason that false ideas are often more easily defended than true ones is that they are often in line with the way that things appear to be and not the way that they really are.

6. All genuine truth is about love.

“Rational good never fights, no matter how much it is assailed, because it is gentle and mild, long-suffering and yielding, for its nature is that of love and mercy. But although it does not fight, it nevertheless conquers all.” (Arcana Coelestia 1950)

Rational good, or love based on the truth, is said here to “conquer all” because there is no real resolution of issues without love and kindness and a sight of how the path taken leads to them.

The idea behind these six points, and others like them, was that if we can believe in this Divine Truth, study it, and live by it, it will help us to see clearly in this year whose name is all about clarity of vision – 20/20 vision.

This was all good enough, but something was missing and I want to take the opportunity to add it now. This is something that I learned during this year’s Journey program in October. The program was titled “Resilience” and was built around the Joseph story in *Genesis*. The thing I learned was about Joseph’s statement to the butler and baker in prison that “interpretations belong to God.”

The year 2020 has been a strange and unfortunate one in a lot of ways. Some people even talk about the “curse of 2020.” But not everyone sees it that way. Different people can look at the same events – no matter how good or bad they may appear to be – and interpret them in different ways. A person’s resilience depends in part on their ability to interpret life’s events in ways that move in a positive direction. When we realize that the best interpretations belong to God we can be more resilient in dealing with life’s confounding predicaments.

The effort to allow interpretations to belong to God involves two things. The first is to make sure that what we believe is true, along the lines noted

above. But the second is the key. Our natural feelings and emotions cannot be in charge, but need to be closed off, defined or guided by what we know is right and good. This happens when we have principles of behavior and thought that are from the Word, when we avoid hatred, revenge, selfishness, prejudice, immorality and other negative motivations.

The result of our thoughts and feelings in response to the events of our lives is a story that we tell ourselves. Is everything going badly, with each new event another brick in a path leading to our ruin? Or is each setback an opportunity to learn, building towards a cherished happy ending? We can't always control the events of our lives, but we can control the story that we tell ourselves about it. Letting interpretations belong to God means using the two principles just mentioned to fit our story into the one that He gives us.

The world often presents us with narratives that focus on dangers, mismanagement, failures, and impossible dilemmas. But the Lord offers us a different narrative, one in which these issues can be overcome, and in which He leads us to a bright and happy future.

In the Christmas season it is good to realize why it is that Christmas is presented to us as a story and not as an argument or a series of doctrines. Stories engage our hearts, and no story has more successfully caught the world's attention or moved the hearts of the human race than this one. Its portrayal in art, music, stories and everyday acts of kindness testifies to its living presence in our lives. More than that, Christmas has the ability, if we let it, to weave our own personal stories into its narrative, making us realize that everything that is happening in the world is playing it out, and leading to the future that is the promise of Christmas.

Having 20/20 vision isn't just about being right, or knowing what is true. It is also about being resilient, about resisting discouragement and having hope for the future. Letting interpretations belong to the Lord is a big part of this. When we begin to see our own place in His story, and when we realize that everything in life is an extension of the Christmas narrative, we can't wait to see what happens next. Good or bad, it is all part of the story, and it has a role to play in the promised happy ending.

(JFS)

THE CALL TO THE CHILDREN

It can be challenging to remember that the Word is always talking directly to us. No matter how dated or irrelevant the context may seem, the stories in the Word speak to us about our own lives.

Consider the children of Israel. Their story, spread throughout the Old Testament, may not always resonate. We don't readily relate to being freed

from bondage in Egypt and wandering the wilderness for 40 years, seeking a Promised Land. And we would expect these liberated people to be grateful and forward looking. But they were often complaining, doubting, backsliding. They said they would rather be slaves in Egypt again than facing death in the desert. Even as Moses was on Mount Sinai for 40 days and nights, receiving the Ten Commandments, they got impatient and begged Aaron to make them a false god – a golden calf – to worship.

But their story is our story too. We are the children of Israel in our own world. Everything in their experience relates to our lives. The context may differ but the meaning and the lessons endure. It's our Exodus too. It's our own journey of regeneration and deliverance.

The children of Israel were a chosen people. They were blessed to be led by the Lord. But they were often impatient and strayed too readily, distracted by other voices.

And the children of Israel did evil in the sight of the Lord; and the Lord delivered them into the hand of the Midian seven years. (Judges 6:1)

They were punished. They endured many trials. And still they disappointed Moses and the Lord by repeatedly turning away. We may wonder at their obtuseness, but how often do we let the Lord down ourselves by turning our backs and losing our way?

And the children of Israel cried unto the Lord. . . . And the angel assured Gideon, "The Lord is with thee." And Gideon said, "If the Lord is with us, why then is this befallen on us? And where be all the miracles which our fathers told us of, saying: "Did not the Lord bring us up from Egypt?" But now the Lord hath forsaken us and delivered us into the hands of the Midianites. (Judges 6: 6,12-13)

The Lord did not forsake them, and never leaves us either. But we know the feeling of abandonment. We just forget sometimes to look in the mirror.

Elizabeth Barrett Browning, a devoted reader of Swedenborg, said in her epic poem *Aurora Leigh*:

*Earth's crammed with heaven,
And every common bush afire with God;
But only he who sees, takes off his shoes;
The rest sit round it, and pluck blackberries.*

Moses recognized that he was on sacred ground. He saw the fire in the bush, took off his shoes, and answered the call. Do we – we modern-day children of Israel – look on in awe and shed our shoes, or are we easily lured by blackberries?

But whether we are distracted or afflicted we are never abandoned by the Lord:

During our spiritual tests, we are apparently left completely alone, although in fact we

are not alone; at those times God is most intimately present at the deepest levels giving us support. (True Christianity 126)

The children of Israel knew both the consequences of turning away from the Lord and still being supported by Him.

And the Lord's anger was kindled against Israel, and He made them wander in the wilderness 40 years, until all the generation, that had done evil in the sight of the Lord, was consumed. (Numbers 32:13)

Still He sustained them in their journey with “manna” every morning – the “bread from heaven” that was just what they needed to attain their Promised Land. It is what we all need and receive when we pray, “Give us this day our daily bread,” on our journey to heaven.

In his excellent book, *Daily Bread: 365 Readings and Inspirations for Living Well*, the Rev. Derek Elphick devotes one day to: “He took bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to them. Then their eyes were opened and they knew Him.” (*Luke 24: 30-31*)

His commentary says: “It’s quite amazing what we can miss and *not* see when our mind is someplace else. . . . The Lord wants us to open our eyes so that we *truly* see, and ‘see’ beyond this physical world of time and space. We have the ability to do this because we are spiritual beings living (temporarily) in natural bodies.

“Our mind lives in the spiritual world. It controls what we see and don’t see. Fear, anxiety, anger, hurt, past mistakes blind us to the hidden power of the Lord and His Word making it seem as if evil is stronger than good. When we symbolically ‘break bread’ with the Lord by choosing to ‘eat’ only what is good, true, noble and kind, our eyes are opened and we ‘see’ with new eyes.”

So, we may be wandering in our desert, unable to see our way to the Promised Land, and distracted by blackberries. Indeed, we know the feeling these days of evil appearing stronger than good in the world. And we know that an essential part of our journey is overcoming the things in our own nature that hold us back. But the Lord is always leading, if we but open our eyes and follow.

John 17 is all about why the Lord came on earth – to bring people through the desert to Him. The process goes on, every day, with all of us.

Approaching the end of His life on earth, Jesus prayed to the Father:

Father, the hour is come; glorify Thy Son, that Thy Son may also glorify Thee. (1)

And this is the life eternal, that they might know Thee the only True God, and Jesus Christ, whom Thou has sent. (3)

I pray not that the Lord should take them out of the world, but that Thou should keep them from evil. (15)

This is the enduring Christmas gift: salvation. And as He did this for all humanity, He does it very personally for each of us. And so we have a similar mission in our lives: to fight against temptations, to shun evils and to regenerate – to become “born again” as little children. This is why the story of the children of Israel is a metaphor for our own wandering, searching, trials and even despair in our lives. It is a journey that calls on us to free ourselves from slavery to our desires, to determine to live more spiritually, and to follow Him into heaven.

Moses died before he could lead the children of Israel into the Promised Land, but he knew that all along it was the Lord who was leading – as He still leads us. He said to them:

And thou shalt remember all the way that the Lord your God has led you these 40 years in the wilderness, to humble you, and to prove you, to know what was in your heart, whether or not you would keep His commandments. (Deuteronomy 8:2)

And we have the same command Moses delivered before they crossed into that paradise:

See, I have set before you today life and prosperity, death and adversity. If you obey the commandments of the Lord your God that I am commanding you today, by loving the Lord your God, walking in His ways, and observing His commandments, decrees and ordinances, then you shall live and become numerous, and the Lord your God will bless you in the land that you are entering to possess. . . . I call heaven and earth to witness against you that I have set before you life and death, blessing and cursing: therefore choose life, that both thou and thy seed may live. (Ibid. 30:15-19)

Choosing life means choosing to follow the Lord and His commandments. That means being born again – becoming as trusting children in His eyes:

Verily I say unto you, except ye be converted and become as little children, you shall not enter the kingdom of heaven. Whosoever therefore shall humble himself as this little child, the same is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. And whoso shall receive one such little child in My name receiveth Me. (Matthew 18:3-6)

(BMH)

Letters to the Editors

Letters may be sent to the Editor of New Church Life at
Box 743, Bryn Athyn, PA 19009
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In What God Do We Trust?

To The Editors:

It appears to me that science, lust and television have formed an unholy alliance to steal our children away from us and away from their own eternal happiness.

At present, science appears to be universally accepted as the nucleus around which all life is centered and evaluated. For many, that clearly eliminates the Bible as a source of truth, for it seems obvious that all the stories in it are mythical tales that frequently tell contradictory things, often praise terrible behaviors, and portray God as a vengeful, hateful being. According to Swedenborg, once a falsity is confirmed by someone, he/she can no longer see what is true. (*Divine Providence* 318)

People who lust for power, riches, acclaim, wealth, dominion and sexual abuses delight not only in doing and having such things but also in leading others to support and adopt such activities. By means of hypocrisy and deceit such lustful people are often more successful at gaining positions of power in society than are their honest and useful counterparts. (*Ibid.* 215:12)

So now, here comes television, largely operated by people who are mostly selfish, guideless, lustful and scientifically aligned. Naturally, their product is mostly based on naturalistic and materialistic lusts presented in virtually living scenarios that favor all of the above, and they bring these forth for all people from childhood through old age. Because it sells well, the media disseminate what the people want – vicarious fulfillment of their lusts. Little children who can't even talk yet are subjected to television and the internet every day. Is it any wonder that our children and many of our peers find it dreary and difficult to pay attention to the confusing life portrayed in the Bible?

Hitler was quoted as saying, "Give me a child when he's seven and he's mine forever!" I think that our TV sets, cell phones and "social media" are far

more effective liars than Hitler ever dreamed of being. (And it is now coming to light that even our educational system has been subverted into the sphere of self-destructive, naturalistic materialism.) It is well known that if you live, for instance, with people who swear, you will find yourself doing likewise. Never before has it been possible for the entire world to be suckered by mere association into one false, nearly universal groupthink.

But the New Church has one thing going for it. The Lord God is, through His providence, in charge of all outcomes in the sense that whatever happens He will cause it to support good ends. (*Arcana Coelestia*, 6489) I believe the Lord teaches that evil must, in freedom, be allowed to actually take place before it can be recognized and overcome. (*Divine Providence* 278a)

Although the success of capitalism is based largely on selfish ambition and greed, in the United States it, very importantly, has also been associated with *trust in God* and with *individual freedom* to serve the neighbor and the Lord, however one chooses. Let us pray that these saving graces will remain sufficient for God to allow the law and order of the United States to prevail for yet a season while the power of His Divine doctrines takes root throughout the world.

It appears, ironically to me, that the very same modes of electronic communication that have enabled falsity and hatred to gain such ascendancy are showing signs that they could also serve as the means to spread the doctrines of the *New Church* throughout the world.

Martin E. Klein,
Boynton Beach, Florida

Listen to the Science

To The Editors:

I refer to the letter by Ms. Suzy Laidlaw in the July/August *New Church Life*, “*Another View*.”

Since Ms. Laidlaw’s letter is prefaced by the statement that it is in response to my earlier one in March/April, and given the general thrust of her comments, it would seem that she is disagreeing with my comments and is insinuating that I am one of those many environmentalists who do not set their standards by the Word of the Lord and am an extreme environmentalist who has turned truth into a heresy. She stated that, “Every truth can be distorted and turned into a heresy by over-emphasizing it at the expense of other, qualifying truths. It is human nature to do this, and extreme environmentalism is an example.”

I take exception to such a judgment. Neither I, nor Sir David Attenborough, Ms. Greta Thunberg, or the Californian Governor are extreme environmentalists, nor are countless others. Ms. Laidlaw is making moral, spiritual judgments about me and all those others who warn about the impending disaster facing the world. The fact is that I and the vast majority of environmentalists and scientists worldwide are not extreme but merely articulating the inescapable, rational and proven facts. How does one distort a truth at the expense of other truths? A truth is a truth. If not, it is a falsity. One may, of course, ignore the truths, the facts, and live in falsity.

Ms. Laidlaw has not sought to debate what I have said on the basis of rational facts. Instead, she appears to take the view that she has as her standard the Word of the Lord and attempts to portray environmental thinkers, including myself, as not having that same standard or at best as being immoral, as they (we) have as their standard nature or wilderness.

She makes her point by quoting one Alex Epstein: “By what standard or measure are we saying something is good or bad . . . right or wrong, moral or immoral . . . ? I hold human life as the standard of value.” And further: “Many environmental thinkers . . . hold as their standard of value what they call ‘pristine’ nature or wilderness – nature unaltered by man.” In other words, environmentalists do not act from moral standards but she does since she has as her standard the Word of the Lord and must therefore be living it.

I find it most disturbing when anyone judges the scientific facts and rational knowledge, as well as, importantly, the spiritual or moral integrity of others, on the basis that they have the Word of the Lord as their standard and that others do not, and therefore they are right. That sort of attitude may lead to religious sects, to fanaticism, and, taken further, to Naziism, genocide and apartheid.

It really does not matter whether or not environmentalists and scientists have as their standard the Word of the Lord. The Word of the Lord is about spiritual life, whereas scientists and environmentalists are dealing in secular, natural facts. They are not hypothesizing on doctrine; they are presenting the facts. Cold facts. On climate change, on the earth’s finite space and resources.

The Writings do urge us to have a strong, living faith, that is true, but they also say that we must act rationally and that includes everything that pertains to earthly life. To ignore the effects of climate change and over-population, to ignore the importance of wilderness to our own survival, is not acting rationally. And let’s get our science right: to suggest that increasing CO₂ is of no consequence is a most strange statement.

[redacted for online version]
Canberra, Australia

The Sacrifices of Obedience

*A Thanksgiving Sermon by
The Rt. Rev. Bradley D. Heinrichs*

Lessons: Exodus 23:14-19; Isaiah 1:2-4, 10-20; Mark 12:28-34; True Christian Religion 329

*Wash yourselves, make yourselves clean; put away the evil doings from before My eyes.
Cease to do evil, learn to do good. (Isaiah 1:16-17)*

In this season of Thanksgiving we often become reflective about what it is that the Lord requires of us. What sacrifices or offerings does He want? Certainly, this was a question being asked in our recitation from *Micah*, to which the answer was not more burnt offerings but rather to do justly, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with our God.

In our reading from *Mark* the scribe asked the Lord a question that was meant to trap Him, when he asked what the greatest commandment of the law was. If the Lord had said, “You shall not commit adultery,” then the lawyer could argue, “isn’t not murdering just as important?”

Instead He answered by saying that we should love the Lord with all our heart and our neighbor as ourselves. Most of us have probably thought at some time what the Lord requires of us, so that our offerings or what we render will be well pleasing to Him.

Well, here in these lessons, and particularly in our text from *Isaiah*, the answer is given as plainly as can be: cease to do evil and learn to do good. These are straightforward directions, right? In fact, they are so simple you might even say that the Lord has made them foolproof so that anyone can follow them. So, if the directions are that simple, then why do we so often get lost along the way?

Chances are the problem is not with learning to do good. We all like to do nice things for people. Most likely, the problem arises when we have to cease doing evil and sacrifice, or give up, something evil that we delight in.

With this in mind, let’s start with the first part of the Lord’s directions for

meaningful sacrifice: ceasing to do evil. This is easy in concept but considerably harder in practice.

However, there is a good reason for this – that we are born into tendencies toward evil of every kind. Some of us may pity ourselves, saying: “Thanks for dealing me such a rotten inheritance, Dad and Mom.” But before we begin to pin the blame on the heredity we got from our parents, let’s remember that we are not held responsible for any of those tendencies to evil unless we willingly make them our own through perpetual habit. (See *Arcana Coelestia* 308; *True Christian Religion* 521)

This is why the first thing the Lord asks of us is to stop doing evil. It is interesting to note that the very first words in the *Doctrine of Charity* state: “The first of charity is to look to the Lord and shun evils because they are sins” against Him. (*Charity* 1)

How many people today, if asked about the most fundamental aspect of being charitable to the neighbor, would answer: “Oh, definitely, to shun evils as sins.” Actually, it does sound odd to say that shunning evil is the key to charity. We think of being charitable as doing nice things and acting kindly toward people. These are definitely charitable acts, but the simple fact is that they are not genuinely good – unless evils are first shunned as sins.

This is why the word order in our text is so critical. First it says, “cease to do evil,” and then, “learn to do good.” Notice that the Ten Commandments are given first in the Word, long before these Two Great Commandments are given by Jesus: “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind. And you shall love your neighbor as yourself.” (*Matthew* 22:37,39) So the Writings tell us that the Ten Commandments should be “the first things taught in the churches . . . to boys and girls.” (*Apocalypse Explained* 939:3)

And this for the reason that they do not teach what good things should be done, but only what evils should not be done. “You shall *not*, you shall *not*, you shall *not*.” In short, they instruct us how to cease doing evils.

A well-intentioned congregant once bewailed the fact that the Ten Commandments are so negative and asked why we couldn’t instead recite them in a positive way, saying: “You shall build up your neighbor, you shall support marriage, you shall tell the truth, etc.” The answer is that, yes, we should do all those things, but first it is essential to master not doing the evil things that harm others.

Later, Jesus came to earth and explained the Law, and summed up the Ten Commandments in Two Great Commandments stated in a positive way: “You shall love the Lord, and you shall love your neighbor. On these two commandments hang all the Law and the Prophets.” It is only after we cease doing evils that we can really learn to do good and become loving, kind

That we should cease to do evil is clear and it sounds quite easy to do, so why do most of us struggle so hard with this simple directive?

and charitable individuals. And so the *Heavenly Doctrines* teach: “The first thing of charity is to put away evils, and the second is to do goods that are of use to the neighbor.” (*True Christian Religion* 435)

Shunning evil is the first or primary thing we must focus on because we are born into evils of every kind, and our will or proprium starts out completely corrupt and hellish;

or as the Lord called the Israelites in *Isaiah*, “a people laden with iniquity, a brood of evildoers, sons who are corrupters!” Therefore, if we hope to offer sacrifices that are well pleasing to the Lord, then these evils must be removed because evil detests and repels good, or as our third lesson stated: “No one can be adopted by the Lord until he is separated from the devil.” (*Ibid.* 329:2)

That we should cease to do evil is clear and it sounds quite easy to do, so why do most of us struggle so hard with this simple directive? Well, as the *Heavenly Doctrines* succinctly put it: “All evils are born delightful, because a person is born into the love of himself, and that love makes all things delightful that are of his proprium, thus whatever he wills and whatever he thinks.” (*Charity* 2) It’s hard for us to stop doing evil because it is delightful to us.

That number concludes by saying that these evil delights cannot be “subdued unless they are regarded as sweet drugs that kill, or as flowers apparently beautiful that carry poison in them; thus unless they are regarded as deadly.” What a great description of evil delights: “*sweet drugs that kill.*”

In another place our innate love of self, which finds these evils delightful, is called “the deadliest enemy of God,” that hides itself in our interiors and “guards the door” lest we should recognize it and allow the Lord to cast it out. (*Divine Providence* 210)

This is why children should be instructed first with the “you shall nots” of the Ten Commandments, and later the “you shalls” of the Two Great Commandments. Likewise, in the early steps of regeneration, we must first obey the Ten Commandments so that we can recognize and separate ourselves from those “sweet drugs that kill.” Consequently, we’re told that when a person begins to think for himself, “it must be to him the first and chief thing to refrain from doing evils for the reason that they are sins . . . against God . . . and afterward as he grows up and becomes old he must shun them as damned and must turn away from them in thought and intention.” (*Apocalypse Explained* 803:2)

The words, “wash yourselves, make yourselves clean,” in our text

symbolize this removing and cleansing ourselves from evil. Then once those evil delights no longer entice us, we can focus on learning to do good and being charitable to our neighbors.

The importance of first ceasing to do evil and then learning to do good is driven home forcefully in this teaching: “Good works are evil works unless those things belonging to love of self and the world are [first] removed. For when [good] works are performed before these [evils] have been removed, they indeed appear good outwardly but are inwardly evil.” (*Arcana Coelestia* 3147:7) This the Lord taught on earth

when He said: “Blind Pharisee, first cleanse the inside of the cup and dish, that the outside of them may be clean also.” (*Matthew* 23:26)

All that we have talked about has led up to the second part of the Lord’s foolproof directions for inheriting eternal life: learning to do good. This can be a daunting task for many of us. How many times has a man at some point tried to do a nice thing for a woman, only to have it backfire and leave her upset? Like on her birthday when he proudly gives her a gift and says: “Look, Honey, here’s that new dual-bag vacuum cleaner you said you wanted.” Or how about the woman who arranges a surprise romantic night out dining and dancing with her man, only to find out that he would have preferred to stay at home and watch the Super Bowl?

It can be hard to do good and charitable things sometimes because our wisdom is often lacking. So the Lord has made it easy for us. He established this universal and unfailing spiritual law of order: “In proportion as a person shuns evils as sins, in the same proportion he does goods, not from himself but from the Lord.” (*Life* 18) Therefore, “in proportion as a person wills not to do evil to the neighbor, he wills to do him good, and not the converse.” (*Charity* 13)

This law holds true because good is flowing in constantly from the Lord. He is always standing at the door knocking. But we can only make room for His goodness to come in by removing the evil delights and thoughts inside us, which stand in the way and block the door. We are guaranteed that as long as we shun evils, good will flow in from the Lord. In fact, we cannot do anything genuinely good from ourselves but only from the Lord. As He taught in *John*: “A man can receive nothing unless it has been given to him from heaven”

So we can see that the Lord really has made it simple for us. All He requires of us is to cease doing evil and good affections will enter. Obey the Commandments and He will take care of the rest.

This is the type of offering and sacrifice that the Lord really wants, and why He said to the scribe, that to love the Lord “with all the heart, with all the understanding, with all the soul, and with all the strength, and to love one’s neighbor as oneself, is more than all the whole burnt offerings and sacrifices.”

(3:27), and “Without Me you can do nothing.” (15:5)

So we can see that the Lord really has made it simple for us. All He requires of us is to cease doing evil, and good affections will enter. Obey the Commandments and He will take care of the rest. We are told that as far as we detest hatred, charity enters. As far as we detest adultery, chastity enters. As far as we detest lies, honesty enters. (*Apocalypse Explained* 803:2)

Consider this also: The Lord told His disciples, “He who has My commandments and keeps them, it is he who loves Me. . . . He who does not love Me does not keep My words.” (*John* 14:21,24) The *Heavenly Doctrines* point out that this saying is particularly in reference to the Ten Commandments. So even in describing how we should love the Lord – the greatest of all loves – the Word simply teaches us that we should cease to do evil by obeying His

words: the Ten Commandments.

This is the type of offering and sacrifice that the Lord really wants, and why He said to the scribe, that to love the Lord “with all the heart, with all the understanding, with all the soul, and with all the strength, and to love one’s neighbor as oneself, is more than all the whole burnt offerings and sacrifices.” (*Mark* 12:33)

Sometimes all of us can overcomplicate things and lose sight of the basic, fundamental teachings that the Lord gives. First: cease to do evil. Second: learn to do good. The Lord could not have made the directions any easier for us to follow. It’s as though He is saying: “You just shun evils as sins, then I’ll flow in and teach you how to do genuine goods that really benefit your neighbor.”

Let’s all engrave these simple, clear and foolproof directions into our memories. Yes, the Lord’s goal for us is to love Him and serve our neighbors by learning to do good, but it all starts with that first crucial step that cannot be overlooked: ceasing to do evil!

So this Thanksgiving let’s offer the Lord our complete obedience, for He says: “To obey is better than sacrifice, and to heed than the fat of rams.” (I

Samuel 15:22) “Though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they are red like crimson, they shall be as wool. If you are willing and obedient, you shall eat the good of the land.” (*Isaiah* 1:18,19)

Amen.



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Shepherds: Teaching, Leading and a Good Life

The Rev. Mark B. Allais

Lessons: Luke 2:8-20; Arcana Coelestia 6044; Heaven and Hell 51

Why the shepherds? Of all the people the Lord could have revealed His birth to first, why were the shepherds chosen? There were countless other people to whom He could have sent His message of good will. Why not a king, an emperor, a priest or high priest? The Lord chose the shepherds because of what they represent in our lives, and their response to the Lord's birth is a response that the Lord is hoping we will mirror in our own lives.

Let's think back to that wonderful night. We can picture shepherds out in the dark of night huddled around a fire. Their heads are not filled with business and money. They are not men of mighty valour with thoughts of power and importance. Their heads are filled with the worries of guarding and protecting their flock, and of which field they will be leading their flock to tomorrow. These are ordinary people leading simple lives. But within this simple existence the Lord has filled truths and concepts of heaven.

As we imagine the shepherds out in the field and think in wonder of those events that night, we also learn the deeper truths of how the Lord teaches us, how He leads us to respond to His call, and how He is born in our lives.

Let us turn our attention to our everyday understanding of who shepherds are and what they do. When we think of shepherds, we are easily drawn to the idea of caring for their flock, leading them to green pastures and protecting them from harm. These are qualities we also associate with the Lord as a shepherd:

The Lord Jehovah will feed His flock like a shepherd; He will gather the lambs with His arm, and carry them in His bosom, and gently lead those who are with young.
(*Isaiah 40:11*)

We also associate a shepherd with someone who teaches and “feeds the flock” – teaching and instructing people:

And Jesus, when He came out, saw much people, and was moved with compassion toward them, because they were as sheep not having a shepherd: and He began to teach them many things. (*Mark 6:34*)

When we think of shepherds we think of truths and teaching truths. We are most familiar with the relationship between a shepherd and flock as that of a pastor and the congregation. The pastor studies the truths from the Word and thereby leads the congregation to a better life. But shepherds don't have to be restricted to pastors or ministers but to anyone who is teaching truths that lead to a good life, such as parents and teachers do for children.

There are many truths that we could be taught and instructed in, but what kind of truths do shepherds represent in our lives? Which truths first answered the call to come and see the Lord? The shepherds represent spiritual truths; truths that are vessels which can be filled with good, truths that lead to good. In the way the shepherds recognized the Lord's birth, so through these truths we recognize the good that is possible from that truth.

But there is more that underlies the representation of the shepherds. Let's think about teachers for a moment. If you are a teacher, or know a teacher, you know that you need much more than just the right knowledge to be a great teacher. We could attest to the drive that teachers have. They have a passion for the work they do. That comes from a love for children and wanting to see them be the best they can be. It is the essence of love – to love others and want to see them happy. In order to teach truths that lead to good, there is present with the truths an affection for them. Behind everything we do there is an affection or love.

When we act from that love or good affection, we are exercising charity; we are acting with goodwill toward others. Therefore the "shepherds of the flock" in us are the truths from the Lord that are joined to an affection for truth and together look to what is good and useful in life.

It is interesting to note that angels don't go through the same process as we do in learning truths:

Teaching in the heavens differs from teaching on earth in that [in heaven] information is not consigned to memory but to life, since spirits' memory is in their life. They actually accept and absorb whatever agrees with their life and do not accept, much less absorb, what does not agree. This is because spirits are affections,

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and therefore have a human form that resembles their affections. Since this is their nature, they are constantly breathing in a desire to know what is true, for the sake of constructive living. (*Heaven and Hell* 517)

For angels there is a step that seems to be missing. They cannot just learn truths from a general affection for truth. Their affections are more focused on specific affections. In one sense, we can experience this focus of learning truths. Take, for example, if you have a favorite hobby or pastime. It could be arts or crafts, history or philosophy, sports or entertainment. When it comes to your area of interest and you have a love for it, you are able to learn and absorb information, facts and concepts, much

more quickly than in other areas of your life. This is because you have a specific love and the affection joins to its truths every easily.

We are told in the *Heavenly Doctrines*:

The Lord in fact sees to it that we love the constructive activities that suit our gifts. This love is intensified by our hope of becoming an angel. (*Heaven and Hell* 517)

Why would that be? Why would the Lord see to it that we love the constructive activities that suit our gifts and talents? The Lord is trying to inspire in us an affection for being useful. Through constructive activities we learn how our gifts and talents can be used to benefit others. Take an art or a craft in which you invest and express yourself, and delight in making something that is beautiful. When others are exposed to what you have made and get delight out of it, we can see how our life brings delight to others, and together we experience happiness. This is one of the essences of love: we want to bless others and make them happy. Through our gifts and talents the Lord is inspiring us and leading us to an affection for usefulness.

As the love for usefulness grows, the effect is one of becoming more and more united to our love for truth, to the point that all this eventually becomes as if one affection. This is how the angels learn truths. Their affection for truth and for use is united so they immediately see how a truth can be useful in their lives. In our lives the truths represented by shepherds, which first respond to the Lord, are the truths in our minds that have the affection for use in them. We are able to see that through a specific truth, good can be done. When we are able to recognise the good that lies inside the truth, these are the shepherds. These are

the shepherds who hear the angels call to go and see where the young child is and to worship the Lord. We read from the teachings for the New Church:

General facts are not in themselves good, nor do they have any life; but the affection for them is what causes them to be good and to have life, for in that case they exist for the sake of their use. No one's affection is stirred by any fact or truth, except on account of the use it serves. (*Arcana Coelestia* 3049)

There are many, many truths stored up in our memories, but there are only a few that recognize the Lord's birth in our lives. There are a few truths that touch us, that mean more than others do. These are the shepherds.

Perhaps you found the truths deeply appealing about how children are raised and grow in heaven. These truths may have led you to use them in the way you deal with your own children and teach them. Others may be moved by the order and principles of how heaven is governed and use those truths to better govern the church, or in public life. These truths are also the shepherds who responded to the call of the Lord's birth.

We've seen how shepherds represent truths that lead to the good of life, and in order to affect our lives those truths are paired or married to an affection for truth – more specifically an affection for use. It is from the affection for use that we are stirred by the angels and are able to see the application to life.

Seeing how truths can be applied to life is the first step. The shepherds, after hearing the good news from the angels, did not simply sit in awe of what they had seen but made their way to Bethlehem “to see this thing which had come to pass.” The only way we are going to experience the Lord's birth in our lives is for us to act when our affection is stirred and to carry out the good uses that we are able to see in the truths. Truths married to affections are leading us to an end or purpose.

Everything that the Lord creates leads to an end. We learn the truths from the Lord's Word for the end that they are stored in our memory. Memory knowledges lead to spiritual truths as an end. Spiritual truths lead to good as an end and finally good leads to the Lord as an end. So what is our end? What is our purpose?

Everyone, no matter who, must in the next life perform a use; for the sole purpose for which a person is born is that he may perform a use to the community he is in, and

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At this time of year when our thoughts are drawn more to the Lord and His birth in the world, we find comfort and peace in knowing that He is born in us over and over again.

to his neighbor, while he lives in the world, and in the next life may perform a use in accord with the Lord's gracious purposes. (*Arcana Coelestia* 1103)

Our end is to find ways in which to perform uses in this life within our families, our social group, our church community, the broader society, and for our country.

What did the shepherds experience after their journey to find the Lord? We are told: "Then the shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all the things that they had heard and seen."

When we are being useful and of service to others we are exercising true charity and we are also in true worship to the Lord.

True worship of the Lord consists in performing useful services; and such services during a person's life in the world lie in a proper fulfilment of his function by each person, whatever his own position, that is, in serving his country, its communities, and his neighbor with all his heart. They also lie in honest dealings with fellow human beings and in the diligent discharge of duties, with full regard for each person's character. (*Arcana Coelestia* 7038)

Being useful to those around us brings us into the presence of the Lord, and the Lord's presence with us brings us true joy, unending happiness, peace and tranquillity. We are told that the angels get nothing but happiness out of being useful.

At this time of year when our thoughts are drawn more to the Lord and His birth in the world, we find comfort and peace in knowing that He is born in us over and over again. Each time the shepherding truths in our lives are stirred by affection for use, and when these truths find expression in our lives, we find the Lord, draw near to Him and worship Him.

"Let us now go to Bethlehem and see this thing which has come to pass."
Amen.



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Peace Like a River

A Sermon about the Christmas Prophecies

The Rev. Jeremy F. Simons

Lessons: Isaiah 66:7-13, 22,23; Ezekiel 47:4-9; True Christian Religion 303, 642

*Behold, I will extend peace to her like a river,
and the glory of the Gentiles like a flowing stream. (Isaiah 66:12)*

The ancient Greek philosopher Heraclitus famously said, “No man ever steps in the same river twice.” He also said, “everything flows.” The world is continually changing, never the same from minute to minute. The present moment flows into the future like a river, and we are carried along in its waters toward whatever the future holds for us.

Most of the beautiful Christmas prophecies that we love to quote describe the Lord’s coming, and His salvation, as a discrete event, a dramatic rescue from the darkness of evil. But that salvation might be more accurately pictured as the flow of a river carrying all of us to a better future, or as a rising tide that is lifting us toward heaven.

Among the most mysterious and fascinating phenomena of human society are the changes in what people consider to be good, desirable and interesting over time. The river keeps moving and we never know from one year to the next what will be trending. Will belief in God and interest in religion increase or decrease? Will the many factors that influence marriage and happy families lead to improvement or decline? Will racism be overcome? Will morality and sobriety become popular? Will peace come to the world?

Many trends are logical and predictable, and there are people who make a living forecasting them. Many others, though, seem to come out of nowhere and surprise all of us. Hardly anyone imagined, 40 years ago, that there would be such a thing as the internet and the effect that it would have on the world. The question, “*What is going to happen?*” has a hold on the human imagination that is as compelling as any other. We read in *Divine Providence* 178:

Most of the beautiful Christmas prophecies describe the Lord's coming, and His salvation, as a discrete event, a dramatic rescue from the darkness of evil. But that salvation might be more accurately pictured as the flow of a river carrying all of us to a better future, or as a rising tide that is lifting us toward heaven.

Reason's essential delight is to envision from love the effect in thought – not at the time of the effect, but prior to it, or not at the present time, but in a time to come. It is this that gives a person what we call hope, which grows or dwindles in his reason as it envisions or anticipates the outcome.

That is, there is a deep interest in what is going to happen to the things that we care about. Will they win or lose, succeed or fail, get better or worse? The excitement that gambling has for many people is about the delight associated with predicting and then hoping for a particular outcome.

The future is like a river

In most ways, however, the trends that change our society are not discrete events with particular outcomes, but long-term developments that move us all in some direction. They are more like a river than a battle, and the factors and causes of their direction are often so subtle and invisible that we who are

caught up in them have no idea what they are. Several passages describe it this way:

In actual fact there is a kind of field that constantly emanates from the Lord, which pulls all toward heaven. It fills the entire spiritual world and the entire physical world. It is like a strong current in the ocean that secretly carries ships along. (*True Christianity* 652.3)

The Lord does not clearly appear in His Divine providence but draws a person along by it as silently as a hidden current or favorable stream does a ship. Consequently, a person does not know but that he continually has his independence, for freedom and independence are bound up together. (*Divine Providence* 186)

The forces that move society along and affect each one of us are in some ways visible and understandable, but in other ways they are undetectable and mysterious. We seem to do what we wish, but we don't realize the extent to which we are borne along in the stream of our collective thoughts and feelings, responding to factors that we are not even aware of.

This is not to deny that we are free, but freedom is not a simple yes-or-

no proposition. We can be more free or less free, and many things impact our choices and affect our freedom, whether we know it or not.

The field that goes out from the Lord and pulls all toward heaven causes angels to be associated with each person. It opposes our natural inclinations to self-centered behaviors, and it still leaves us in freedom to do what we actually wish to do.

Although we are all free, the *Heavenly Doctrine* assures us that the Lord knows how we will respond to this field, and the extent to which we will allow ourselves to be pulled into its current. We read:

How far someone errs who believes that the Lord has not foreseen and does not see the smallest individual thing with the human race. Or that within the smallest individual thing He does not foresee and lead. When in fact the Lord's foresight and providence are present within the tiniest details of all the smallest individual things with them, and in details so tiny that it is impossible to

comprehend in any manner of thought one in many millions of them. For every smallest fraction of a moment of a person's life entails a chain of consequences extending into eternity. (*Arcana Coelestia* 3854)

Many passages assure us that the Lord does in fact know the future. (*Arcana Coelestia* 1755, *Last Judgment* 74, *Spiritual Experiences* 2271) The Christmas prophecies are truly prophecies of the future. They are certain to be fulfilled.

Does prophecy interfere with freedom?

We may wonder how this certainty can be consistent with human freedom, but anyone familiar with statistics should be able to understand something of how this works. From the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention we know, for example, that on average every day 29 people in the United States die in motor vehicle crashes that involve an alcohol-impaired driver. This is likely to happen

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A confusing factor is that progress and declines are not continuous. They come and go, like the way that waves on the shore mask our perception of whether the tide is rising or falling.

today. This prediction doesn't interfere with anyone's freedom.

We can't even begin to compare this kind of knowledge with the Lord's, but it does illustrate how something can be predicted with some certainty, without in any way affecting anyone's freedom. The Lord sees every factor that impacts our spiritual progress, He knows what our responses to them will be, and so He knows exactly what truths must be revealed, and what turns of fortune are needed to move us so far as it is possible without impeding our freedom.

Christmas prophecies focus on long-term results

Prophecies about the Lord's coming are about the specific event of His birth to a virgin, in Bethlehem, into the house of David, about the appearance of a star, the visit of the wise men, and other details. Their greater focus, though, is on the effects of His coming, as a "light to lighten the Gentiles" (*Luke 2:32*), guiding "*our footsteps into the way of peace.*" (*Luke 1:79*) *Isaiah* predicts:

The earth will be full of the knowledge of the Lord as the water covers the earth.
(11:10)

These are the kinds of things that happen over long periods of time, as the current of the Lord's providence moves humanity forward.

In many ways it is hard to believe that the hand of providence moves people toward peace and justice when we consider how much of history seems to be the result of violence and evil, or when tragedy strikes people we love.

Or it may be easier for us to see it when we know that despite these things there have actually been dramatic decreases in violence, disease, famine and poverty over the course of history.

A confusing factor is that progress and declines are not continuous. They come and go, like the way that waves on the shore mask our perception of whether the tide is rising or falling.

The Word and the English

A few things seem like direct fulfillments of these Christmas prophecies.

For example, the Word has spread far beyond what anyone in 1st century

Palestine might have believed. More than five billion copies have been printed and distributed in almost every language on earth. No other book has even reached one billion. The Bible has been the runaway bestseller every year for centuries. How did this happen?

The Writings make this prediction of the English:

It was perceived that many of the English will receive the *Heavenly Doctrine*, and thereby come into the New Jerusalem; because they are such that they receive the truths of faith more easily than others and see them in interior light.” (*Last Judgment* [pos] 4; *Spiritual Experiences* 5577)

Sure enough, the large majority of the people in the world who have received the *Heavenly Doctrine* are English speaking.

Not only that, it just so happens that, since Swedenborg wrote those words, English has become the most widely spoken language on earth, used by 20% of the world’s population. Almost a quarter of all books published in the world each year are in English, two-thirds of all magazines and newspapers are in English, more than half of all web pages and scholarly journals are in English, and more than one-third of all films.

Not only this, but in sub-Saharan Africa, which the Writings seem to identify as a place where the New Church will take root, and where it is spreading, about 60% of the people are able to speak English.

How did this happen? This is how providence works. Somehow English has spread and is serving to convey the truths of the New Church worldwide, like a river reaching every corner of the world.

This kind of knowledge might inform our marketing efforts. In the *Spiritual Diary* we find this:

It is in the nature of the British that if they read a book that has not been recommended by someone they respect, they see in it only the words on the page and their literal meaning, and not the gist of what is being said. . . . But when they read a book that has been recommended by someone they respect, they are able to rise above the literal meaning and see the import of the work. They then apparently gain enlightenment about the topic under discussion. So the recommendation of someone they respect is needed before this enlightenment can occur. As a result, when a book is recommended, they will buy thousands of copies; if a book is not recommended, no one buys it – almost no one whatsoever in the entire kingdom. The British are all alike in this respect. (*Spiritual Experiences* 5951; JSR’s translation)

Seemingly as a result of this understanding, Swedenborg made many efforts to have the books of the Writings reviewed by trusted writers and respected leaders. He sent them to members of the clergy and nobility. While these efforts appear to have been unsuccessful, over time there have been many testimonies about the Writings by many influential English-speaking writers. The results remain unspectacular, but if we trust in the Christmas prophecies, we can be sure that in time somewhere on earth public sentiment will change.

The point is that these prophecies are not just about the specific event of the Lord's birth, but about the changes that move forward from that event, like a river that affects everything in its path.

Peace like a river

The point is that these prophecies are not just about the specific event of the Lord's birth, but about the changes that move forward from that event, like a river that affects everything in its path. Isaiah describes it as a river of peace. Ezekiel, in our lesson, says that "every living thing that moves, wherever the river goes, will live."

Isaiah says: "Before she was in labor, she gave birth," which means that even as we witness and worry about the state of things in our world, peace is being established in ways that

we do not see. We who love her and mourn for her apparent weakness and troubles can rejoice. The forces that inspire long-term trends are invisible to us, but this is how providence works. The seemingly unlikely result is what we celebrate at Christmas. The Lord says:

As one whom his mother comforts, so I will comfort you; and you shall be comforted in Jerusalem. And it shall come to pass that from one New Moon to another, and from one Sabbath to another, all flesh shall come to worship before Me.

Amen.



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FROM THE BISHOP'S OFFICE

Being Affirmative to What the Lord Says



The Rt. Rev. Bradley D. Heinrich

As Christmas time approaches it is wonderful to think of some of the timeless messages that the Lord includes in His Word – messages that He knew we would be reminded of each year as we celebrate the story of His coming to earth to save us. One of those enduring lessons that I love to revisit every year is Mary's affirmative attitude to the tidings of the Lord.

Remember the angel of the Lord came to her with remarkable news, saying: *“And behold, you will conceive in your womb and bring forth a Son, and shall call His name JESUS. He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Highest; and the Lord God will give Him the throne of His father David.”* (Luke 1:31-32)

Mary responded to this miraculous declaration with a simple, innocent question: *“How can this be, since I do not know a man? And the angel answered and said to her, ‘The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Highest will overshadow you; therefore, also, that Holy One who is to be born will be called the Son of God. . . . For with God nothing will be impossible.’ Then Mary said, ‘Behold the maidservant of the Lord! Let it be to me according to your word.’”* (Luke 1:34-38)

This is an incredible response when you reflect upon what she was really asked to believe. She was told she would conceive the Son of the Most High, be the mother of the Son of God, that He would be given the throne of David, reign over the house of Jacob, and that His kingdom would never end. And that the conception would occur miraculously because the power of the Highest would overshadow her. Imagine being a betrothed virgin in that situation!

Imagine the multitude of thoughts that would rush through your head in a split second. It is a big deal for any woman to become a mother for the first time. The excitement and joy of carrying a child in the womb, wondering what the child will look like, how he will act, how you will raise him. Now imagine if that child was the Son of God. It would be almost too overwhelming to think

about. How could you possibly be qualified to raise the Son of God?

Add to those spinning thoughts in your head the ramifications of being betrothed to a man in that culture, now finding yourself pregnant by mysterious means. Would your betrothed believe you? Would he despise you? Would he drag you out in the public square and humiliate you? Would you have to raise the child on your own with no means of support? All of these thoughts might have been running through Mary's head, yet her humble and willing response was simply: "*Behold the maidservant of the Lord! Let it be to me according to your word.*" (Luke 1:38)

There is a powerful lesson here about attitude. You can have a negative attitude to the Lord's glad tidings – His Word – or an affirmative one. As the Heavenly Doctrine for the New Church puts it: "*The first [attitude] leads to utter stupidity and insanity, the second to perfect intelligence and wisdom.*" (Arcana Coelestia 2568:4)

Mary wonderfully displays for us an affirmative attitude toward the words of the Lord. As impossible as they sounded, and even though they might have caused her some hardship, she believed them. She trusted that just as the angel said, they were good tidings of great joy. This is the essence of an affirmative attitude, to believe that "*things are true because the Lord has said so*" (Arcana Coelestia 2588:2)

It is useful for us to ask ourselves if we honestly embrace this kind of affirmative attitude when we encounter difficult, troubling, or hard-to-understand teachings in the Lord's Word. When we think of some of the "hard" teachings concerning marriage in the Word which are meant to be good tidings of great joy for the New Church, do we say within ourselves: "These words must be true, simply because the Lord said so; let it be to me according to Your Word." Or do we doubt their veracity, question the source, and ultimately deny their validity?

There is so much skepticism today about the Lord's Word that it can chip away at our faith and trust in Him. However, at Christmas the Lord provides us this wonderful story to remind us of how beautiful it is to hold fast to a simple and innocent belief in the words the Lord conveys to us.

May the Lord inspire us all to trust in His words and believe that no matter what difficulties we encounter as we seek to understand His Word, that "*with God nothing will be impossible.*" (Luke 1:37) And then as we seek to do the Lord's will may we respond with the humble and affirmative attitude of Mary when she said: "*Behold the maidservant of the Lord! Let it be to me according to your word.*" (Luke 1:38)

Merry Christmas to you all!

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CHARTER DAY ADDRESS

Call Upon Him While He Is Near

*A Charter Day Address by the Rt. Rev. Peter M. Buss Jr.
Bryn Athyn Cathedral – October 9, 2020*

*Seek the Lord while He may be found;
Call upon Him while He is near. (Isaiah 55:6)*

Connecting with others. I want to speak today to a reality that many of us are discovering and that is the energy to connect – the creative pathways we are adopting to stay in touch with the people in our lives – despite the physical distance forced on us in so many ways. Of course, sometimes we can get together with friends in small groups and that's great. But with travel restrictions, and the ever-present social distancing guidelines, with others we really are distant – sometimes in different states or even countries. Yet we still connect.

I won't pretend to know all the ways you do that, but most of us, even you techno-natives, are expanding your grasp of new tools to bring you together remotely with those in your tribe. It speaks to the human condition, that we are built for connection with each other, and we will find a way to make it happen.

There's a wonderful teaching in the Word of the New Church that takes the concept one step further. It's about something common to us when we can't be physically present, or even connected through technology. It's the phenomenon of thought bringing presence. First it shares the mind-expanding concept of how that works in the spiritual world, which doesn't have fixed space as here: there, people thinking of each other can walk through the door as it were and be with each other. Then it shifts to our experience:

Any one of us can think about a sibling, a relative, or a friend who is in the Indies (think a faraway country), and then focus on those people as if they were present with us. We can also feel love for them on the basis of our memories. (*True Christian Religion* 64)

There is no question that we are invited to embrace consciously the reality that the Lord is with us and is leading us. . . . It's an underlying reason that the school you chose to attend exists.

Connecting with the Lord. I offer that thought about our connection with other people to highlight a similar kind of connection, and striving to be present, with the *Lord*. What's amazing is that the concept of thought bringing presence, and this example of how we can connect with people we love while distant from them, is directly tied to our ability to be present with the Lord. The very next sentence from this quote says: "These phenomena, which are known to us, illustrate the Divine omnipresence to some extent." (*True Christian Religion* 64)

There is no question that we are invited to embrace consciously the reality that the Lord is with us and is leading us. Why? Because it reflects a life-long goal set before every one of us by the Lord – to come to know and believe that He exists, is right there, and has important things to share with us about our happiness. Because it's an underlying reason that the school you chose to attend exists. Because doing so – connecting with the Lord and taking guidance from Him – will help us to feel a deepness and richness in our connection with others in our lives that we wouldn't otherwise experience.

The readings for this service (see below), and parts of the service itself like the recitation, provide a short walk-through of major stories in the Word designed to remind people of the power and presence of the Lord in their lives. The service opened with the words, "The LORD is near to all who call upon Him, to all who call upon Him in truth." (*Psalms* 145:18)

Jacob in a dream heard the Lord say to Him, "Behold I am with you and will keep you wherever you go," leading Jacob to say upon waking: "Surely the Lord is in this place and I did not know it!" (*Genesis* 28:15,16) Joshua had a very similar experience, where the Lord spoke the familiar words, "Be strong and of good courage; do not be afraid, nor be dismayed, for the Lord Your God is with you wherever you go." (*Joshua* 1:9) The prophet Isaiah reported from the Lord to the Israelites: "Fear not, for I am with you. Be not afraid for I am your God." (*Isaiah* 41:10) Then there are the disciples in the resurrection, hearing their version of the same message when sent out to make disciples of all nations: "Lo, I am with you always even to the end of the age." (*Matthew* 28:20) And the list goes on.

True enough, these are single, powerful events in the lives of individuals;

they didn't all happen to the same person. But together they stand as a testimony to the Lord's desire for us to live with the reality of His presence. He gave us the Word to remind us in all these ways how important it is, and how beneficial it is, to know that He is right there – present with us, watching over us, and helping us all the time.

I want to shift the focus for today from the Lord's part to our part. This also comes to us in the prophet Isaiah where we hear: "*Seek the Lord while He may be found; call upon Him while He is near.*" (*Isaiah 55:6*) That's true in a general or life-long sense, for sure. "While He may be found" could mean over the course of our whole life, in that a major spiritual goal is to freely choose to be led by Him.

But think about it today, Charter Day, in terms of your school. You're here – some of you physically, some of you remotely. The Academy Secondary Schools and Bryn Athyn College are founded on a Lord-based education model. One of the things you're invited to re-discover – through chapels, religion classes, quotes around campus, mentor conversations with teachers, and so much else – is that the Lord Jesus Christ is the one God of heaven and earth. He's an all-loving God, an all-powerful and all-knowing God, and He's an ever-present God. That's what these schools are here to underscore. Yes there's academic learning and sports and social stuff and everything else, but above it, around it, by means of it, is that higher invitation –to "seek the Lord while He may be found, and call upon Him while He is near."

Let's take the balance of our time today to explore why we might want to do that. What's the benefit of a life truly connected with the Lord? Some of our readings speak to that in ways that have significant inroads into our experiences.

Crushed. We start with a hard one. Life is not always kind to us. Sometimes very sad things happen to us or people we love that crush us inside. Sometimes anger creeps in and we feel deeply hurt by someone. Sometimes we feel overwhelmed by the burdens before us and stressed to an unhealthy level.

Thinking of those times, listen to what the Lord says:

The LORD is near to those who have a broken heart, And saves such as have a contrite spirit. (*Psalms 34:18*)

He gave us the Word
to remind us how
important it is, and
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know that He is right
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helping us all the time.

What might we experience if we lay out before the Lord in prayer the heavy burdens in our lives? Comfort. The sense that we are not alone in it. Perspective on the issue. Enlightenment on what we might do about it instead of just feeling bad. A reminder, if necessary, of our part in the rift if there is one. A sense of inner peace that acknowledges “weeping may indeed endure for a night, but joy comes in the morning” – because the Lord is with me. (*Psalm 30:5*) I am not alone in the struggle.

Afraid. Another harder part of life that the Lord can help with is when we’re afraid. It could be fear of the unknown – these are indeed uncertain times. It could be the fear of not measuring up to friends, not being seen as good enough or worth the effort. It could be that someone might discover something about us that we wish weren’t true. We have lots of fears, if we are willing to admit it, and sometimes we’re just not as sure of ourselves as we might wish to be.

In that context hear another reminder of the Lord’s presence from *Isaiah*:

Fear not, for I am with you; Be not dismayed, for I am your God. I will strengthen you, Yes, I will help you, I will uphold you with My righteous right hand. (*Isaiah 41:10*)

We are worthy in the Lord’s eyes. He sees the best in us, the potential, the strengths. Yes, He knows our flaws and all of our fears, but He’s here to strengthen us. Think of what it’s like to be with someone who is consistently affirming, who thinks the world of us and makes us shine. How great is that! What a blessing. Well that’s what the Lord offers to each one of us – more so than even the best of our champions, although if we’re willing to admit it, He’s the one who inspires that person to encourage us.

Confused. There’s another part of life that the Lord can help with. It’s when we are confused and don’t know what to do. Say we’ve messed up and said some things we regret and are living in the mess of a very strained friendship. Or what about when we’ve caused a minor accident and we don’t know how to handle it? Or when you really want a relationship to work out but have doubts that you’ll say or do the right thing to make it happen. Or you see someone doing something you know is bad for them. There are so many situations that are confusing, and yet call us to show up.

Well, listen to this one, spoken by the Lord while on earth, who at that time called Himself the Light of the world. He said: “While you have the light, believe in the light, that you may become children of light.” (*John 12:36*)

Light is a symbol for truth, for principles of living from the Lord’s Word that actually work. It may be as simple as treating others the way you want to be treated – that’s the Lord speaking, and it works. It may be that the Lord, because you’re thinking about what He would want you to do, inspires you to

say sorry, to take responsibility for the accident you caused.

The fact is, the school you landed in has an amazing amount of information from the Lord to share with you. The light of enlightenment can shine brightly for you. All that's asked is that you think of the Lord inviting you to live by those principles – that same God who loves you and is your champion. He wouldn't tell you anything that would hurt you. It only helps. As we hear in another part of the Word,

For this commandment which I command you today is not too mysterious for you, nor is it far off. But the word is very near you, in your mouth and in your heart, that you may do it. (*Deuteronomy 30:11,14*)

The fact is, the school you landed in has an amazing amount of information from the Lord to share with you. The light of enlightenment can shine brightly for you. All that's asked is that you think of the Lord inviting you to live by those principles.

Direction in life. Let's take one more example about the Lord's presence and help in our lives. At this time, you're in a figure-it-out phase in terms of your life's direction. What career? What further avenue of schooling? Should I take this sport or that acting ability to the next level? What kind of person am I choosing, for myself, to become, and how is that going to play out for me? It's an incredible time, which is something of what inspires a lot of your teachers to work with you. How cool is it to be in on the conversation as you take some big steps into your chosen future?

Well, true to our theme for today, the Lord is with you in that too. Hear again what He said to Joshua who was embarking on the major mission of his life, to lead the Children of Israel into the Land of Canaan: "Be strong and of good courage; do not be afraid, nor be dismayed, for the LORD your God is with you wherever you go." (*Joshua 1:9*)

That story, or that very message to Joshua has more to it than an underscoring of the Lord's presence in all that lay ahead, vital as that is. The Lord also said to him:

This Book of the Law shall not depart from your mouth, but you shall meditate on it day and night, that you may observe to do according to all that is written in it. For then you will make your way prosperous, and then you will have good success. (*Ibid. 1:8*)

You're in a school, or supporting a school, that's founded on the belief that the Lord is there to help you with it all – every last challenge, every hurt, every opportunity and celebratory success. Beyond everything else that these schools offer you is the invitation to live intentionally in the presence of the Lord.

Not only will the Lord help you figure out your path in life, the things that you're good at that could be your version of contributing to human welfare, but He's providing a reminder of what will bring true success and happiness to life – a life according to His teachings, with a sure knowledge that He is with you.

“Call upon Him while He is near.” So we return to the phase that pulls it all together. “Seek the Lord while He may be found; call upon Him while He is near.” (*Isaiah 55:6*) You already know, from your earliest days, that the Lord hears your prayers, that you're never alone, that He's watching over you every moment of every day. It's in there for most of us.

But sometimes we forget. The phase of high school and college is one in which we are prone to forget. There's so much going on that's really important and formative, and we can get distracted.

There can also be a kind of questioning and skepticism that can enter as we try to figure out what we believe for ourselves.

The trouble is, we're going to have times of feeling crushed by life, we're going to be afraid, we're going to come upon situations in which we are confused and don't know what to do. We're also going to yearn for the kind of friendships that last a lifetime, and for a discovery of our unique path – our contribution to it all. All that's happening.

You're in a school, or supporting a school, that's founded on the belief that the Lord is there to help you with it all – every last challenge, every hurt, every opportunity and celebratory success. Beyond everything else that these schools offer you is the invitation to live intentionally in the presence of the Lord. The offer is to seek the Lord, because He *can* be found here. The urging is to call upon Him while He is near, because He *is* – nearer than even your closest of friends.

The prayer that I have for you, as just one voice of many who love the Academy Secondary Schools and College, is that in this year you discover over and over again: “Surely the Lord is in this place and I did not know it! . . . This is none other than the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven!” (*Genesis 28:16-17*)

Amen.

Readings from the Word:

The LORD is near to those who have a broken heart, And saves such as have a contrite spirit. (*Psalms* 34:18)

Fear not, for I am with you; Be not dismayed, for I am your God. I will strengthen you, Yes, I will help you, I will uphold you with My righteous right hand. (*Isaiah* 41:10)

“Behold, I am with you and will keep you wherever you go, and will bring you back to this land; for I will not leave you until I have done what I have spoken to you.” (*Genesis* 28:15)

“Be strong and of good courage; do not be afraid, nor be dismayed, for the LORD your God is with you wherever you go.” (*Joshua* 1:9)

“Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age.” (*Matthew* 28:19-20)

Divine omnipresence can be illustrated by the amazing way angels and spirits become present to each other in the spiritual world. Because there is no [physical] space in that world - there is only apparent space - an angel or a spirit can be visibly present with another in a moment, provided she or he comes into the same state of love and thought [as that other], since love and thought create the appearance of space.

The reason angels and spirits have this method of being present is that every feeling of love and every resulting thought in the intellect is in space independently of space and in time independently of time. Any one of us can think about a sibling, a relative, or a friend who is in the Indies, and then focus on those people as if they were present with us. We can also feel love for them on the basis of our memories. These phenomena, which are known to us, illustrate the Divine omnipresence to some extent. (*True Christian Religion* 64)

It is acknowledged in every form of religion that God is omnipresent and omniscient. It is for this reason that people pray to Him to hear them, to look upon them, and to have mercy upon them. They would not do this unless they believed in His omnipresence and omniscience. (*Apocalypse Explained* 1216)



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Why a New Church Translation of the Word?

The Rev. Andrew J. Heilman

“**T**he Word in the letter is like a casket, where precious stones, pearls and diadems lie in order. The thoughts of a man’s mind, who regards the Word as holy, and who reads it for the sake of the uses of life, may be compared to one holding such a casket in his hand, and throwing it toward heaven; and the casket opening in its ascent, the precious things in it are disclosed to the angels, who are deeply delighted in seeing and examining them. This delight of the angels is communicated to the man, and effects an affiliation and a sharing of perceptions. . . . Such correspondence exists by creation, to the end that the angelic heaven may make one with the church on earth, and in general the spiritual world may make one with the natural world, and the Lord may conjoin Himself with both at once.” (*True Christian Religion* 238)

From this teaching we learn that each word in the Sacred Scripture is like a precious stone given to us by the Lord, and each phrase and verse is like a jewel. These words and phrases are beautifully arranged to reflect and transmit the light of heaven from within. The more a translation reflects this arrangement and beauty the more the glory of the Lord can be seen.

There are aspects of the Letter of the Word that cannot truly be brought into what we call Standard English, but a translation faithful to the original text in the light of the Heavenly Doctrine can convey to the English reader what the Lord has revealed to man. It is with this hope that the editors of the Kempton Project offer a revised and more definitive translation of the Sacred Scripture to the New Church.

The Letter of the Word is often compared to precious stones in the Heavenly Doctrine, and this is more than a comparison; it is a full correspondence. For precious stones reflect and transmit light in such a way to delight and attract the attention of those who see them. Each stone receives the light in a different way, absorbing, reflecting and directing it so that something of the wisdom and

love to which the stone corresponds is awakened in the minds of those who behold it.

If this takes place with a precious stone, how much more so will this happen with the Sacred Scripture, signified by the precious stones in the breast plate of Aaron. Because of the full correspondence, the stones in the breast plate would shine and flash in such a way to give answers from heaven to those who asked and were prepared by the Lord to receive. From this we can see how important it is to have the Hebrew and Greek of the Old and New Testaments translated in the light of the Lord's Second Coming so that this heavenly light can shine forth like the Urim and Thummim of the breast plate. In this way the reader can behold the fullness, holiness and power in the Word of the Lord.

Just as we find 12 precious stones in the breast plate of the high priest, representing the fullness, holiness and power of the Word, we also find 12 precious stones in the foundations of the Holy City New Jerusalem. For the Letter of the Word is also the basis, containant and support of the interior, internal and inmost truths and goods of heaven.

As the Holy City rests on these foundations, so also the Heavenly Doctrine rests on and is contained in the Old and New Testaments. For precious stones not only reflect and transmit light, but they are harder than normal stones, and endure through the centuries, keeping their shape and color, as have the Old and New Testaments. We read concerning this in the *Arcana Coelestia*:

The literal sense is the basis and support on which the spiritual sense rests, and with which it coheres in the closest conjunction, insomuch that there is not even a jot or point, or a little horn, in the letter of the Word, which does not contain within it the holy Divine; according to the words of the Lord in these passages:

Amen I say unto you, till heaven and earth pass away, one jot or one little horn shall not pass away from the law, till all things be done. (*Matthew 5:18*)

It is easier for heaven and earth to pass away than for one point in the law to fail. (*Luke 16:17*)

From this teaching we learn that each word in the Sacred Scripture is like a precious stone given to us by the Lord, each phrase and verse is like a jewel. These words and phrases are beautifully arranged to reflect and transmit the light of heaven from within.

For precious stones reflect and transmit light in such a way to delight and attract the attention of those who see them. . . If this takes place with a precious stone, how much more so will this happen with the Sacred Scripture, signified by the precious stones in the breast plate of Aaron.

Therefore also it has come to pass through the Divine providence of the Lord, that the Word, especially the Word of the Old Testament, has been preserved in respect to every jot and point from the time when it was written. It has also been shown from heaven, that in the Word not only every expression, but also every syllable, and what seems incredible, every little horn of a syllable in the original tongue, enfolds in it something holy, which becomes perceptible to the angels of the inmost heaven. That this is the case I am able to affirm; but I know that it transcends belief. (*Arcana Coelestia* 9349)

From this we can see that no translation can be a substitute for the Word in the original language which corresponds in every detail, not only to the Word in heaven, but to the Word made flesh, our God and Savior Jesus Christ.

The purpose of this translation is to bring across the sense of the letter, the literal meaning of the Hebrew and Greek. For the Sacred Scripture was written in a sense completely natural in accommodation to the natural mind of the man of this world.

Throughout the work of this translation we have sought to bring out this accommodation as it is found in the Word itself and have avoided making our own accommodation. Without the guidance of the Heavenly Doctrine, without the lamp to lighten our path, we would have toiled in vain. The following teachings from *Invitation to the New Church* show why we need such caution in translating the Letter of the Word:

The correspondences by which the Word as to each and all of its parts has been written, possess such power and strength, that it may be called the power and strength of the Divine Omnipotence; for through these correspondences the natural acts conjointly with the spiritual, and the spiritual with the natural; thus the all of heaven with the all of the world. (# 45)

It shall be shown that the greatest power is in correspondences, because in them heaven and the world, or the spiritual and the natural, are together; and that for this reason the Word was written fully by correspondences; wherefore, through it there is the conjunction of man with heaven, and thus with the Lord. The Lord also in this way is in firsts and at the same time in ultimates. (# 59)

From these two teachings it is clear how much power there is in

correspondences, and therefore how important it is in translating to keep the correspondences that are in the Letter of the Word, so that there can be the most complete conjunction between heaven and earth. The importance of sincerity, humility and reverence when reading the Word cannot be overestimated. But what many do not know is that this state of sincerity, humility and reverence is brought about by the presence of the Lord and the heavens in the Word through the power of correspondence.

The further a translation wanders away from what is actually written in the Hebrew and Greek to what the translator thinks it means, the less powerful is the correspondence and the less strong is the conjunction with the Lord and His angels.

Let us take just one example from *Psalms* 16 verse 7: "I will bless Jehovah, who has counseled me; yea, in the nights my kidneys chasten me."

For those who know the nature of kidney spirits this fits perfectly with the correspondence of the kidneys to the spirits who chastise. But in many recent translations we see this correspondence is lost. Instead of translating the words in the Hebrew, there is an attempt to explain what this must have meant to David when he wrote it. Instead of the phrase "my kidneys chasten me" we find "my heart instructs me," or "my conscience warns me," or "my thoughts trouble me." These all make more "sense" to the average reader, but it is not the sense of the letter, nor does it correspond to the Word in the heavens or to the Lord Himself, nor do these words conjoin the heavens and the earth.

It is for the sake of this conjunction that the Lord has given us the Word, and for the sake of which the Lord has established His Church on earth. Hence there is a need for a translation of the Word which carries across (translates) the sense of the Letter of the original into the languages that the men in the church speak.

In offering this translation we hope that it will be read with reverence, humility, prayer and even delight, and that what might seem unusual is not from us but from the Lord. But we realize it is not a perfect translation and that things could be done differently and still maintain the important use of

The importance of sincerity, humility and reverence when reading the Word cannot be overestimated. But what many do not know is that these states are brought about by the presence of the Lord and the heavens in the Word through the power of correspondence.

the Sacred Scripture to the Church and the world.

Indeed, in one teaching from the *Arcana Coelestia*, we learn that the use of reading and preaching from the Word actually reaches beyond our earth to the universe. We hope that this translation will serve the uses spoken of in the following:

Be it known that the Word on our earth, given through heaven by the Lord, is the union of heaven and the world; to which end there is a correspondence of all things in the Letter of the Word with Divine things in heaven; and that in its supreme and inmost sense the Word treats of the Lord, of His kingdom in the heavens and on earth, and of love and faith from Him and to Him, consequently of life from Him and in Him. Such things are presented to the angels in heaven, from whatever earth they come, when the Word of our earth is read and preached." (*Arcana Coelestia* 9357)



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The Kempton Project is offering a new edition of the New Church translation of the Word. It should arrive in mid-November and be available as a Christmas gift. As well as being well-revised, it will be available in a more reasonable size than the edition that was offered in 2011. This edition is 7"x9" and 1½" thick, one inch wider than the KJV editions printed for the New Church in the past. It is wider to allow us to keep the larger 13-point type that so many have appreciated.

It is a red cloth hard-cover volume. We also expect to make available a limited quantity of leather-covered volumes. Please check our website for pricing and other information. <https://kemptonproject.org/TheWord>

You can also order by e-mail, by phone, or by mail.

Email: TheWord@knks.org

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The Gift and the Challenge of Reading and Understanding the *Arcana Coelestia*

Michael Brown

It took Emanuel Swedenborg eight years to record and publish *Arcana Coelestia Quae in Scripture Sacra, sen Verbo Domini Sunt, Detecta: Una cum Mirabilibus Quae Visa Suit in Mundo Spirituum, et in Coelo Angelorum*.

For starters, how long is this work; how many pages are there? That figure will vary depending on the translation being read. In general, there are 10,325 separate numbered sections. [Some sections are short and some are very long.] All sections will be included in the 15 volumes of the New Century Edition. So far, two volumes are in print. The large Volume One has 759 pages. Of them, Volume One has 447 pages containing the sections 1 to 946 recorded by Swedenborg. Volume Two is 500 pages, with 938 sections.

Where do we go from here? In our daily reading of the Bible, we can open any page at random and find a connection with the spiritual world. Volume One of New Century offers choices about where to begin. The large book edition is heavy. If you open it at random, about halfway through, you might find something like number 637:

“The Lord’s church on earth is like the heart; from it the human race – including people outside the church – receive life. Since no one has the faintest idea why this is so, I wish to explain.”

For a new reader, it may be best to start at the beginning. Swedenborg writes in the opening sentence of Section 1: “The Word in the Old Testament contains secrets of heaven.”

A reader of the Bible might ask: “What is the Word?” A few lines later Swedenborg writes “that every part of the Old Testament holds an inner message.” These inner messages are often referred to as “the internal sense of the Word.”

Those familiar with the Word and its internal sense may continue reading

and meditating. But for all readers there are treasures to be found in pages 1 to 139 – the “Reader’s Guide” and “Introduction” of the New Century Edition.

There are also other English language editions of *Arcana Coelestia*. The Swedenborg Foundation has the *Redesigned Standard Edition*. The Swedenborg Society in London printed the John Elliott translated *Arcana Coelestia Edition*, 1983.

The gift of this work – also known as *Secrets of Heaven* – is the wonder and joy that pops off the page, often when we least expect it. Reading along one day, the teaching, “all good and all truth come from God,” seemed amazing. How could that be? Haven’t we been taught always to tell the truth? And can’t we say, especially to a minister, “That was a really good job you did”?

And suddenly, we understand the inner spiritual meaning when it teaches that all good [ALL seems so amazing] is from the good of the pure Divine Love of God.

But, thank goodness, we are also taught that it must appear to us, and feel to us, that we do the good. At the same time, we must believe and acknowledge that the good we feel we do IS from God – which it is. Thank you, Lord.

The same with truth. All truth has its origin in the pure Divine Wisdom of God. And our earthly spiritual task is to develop and listen to our conscience and tell the truth, especially when we don’t want to, but should if it is the right thing to do in a given situation.

We turn to the heavenly light of the Spiritual Sun and open the inner door to our spiritual soul and mind, allowing the spiritual light of truth to reach us.

The challenge of reading and understanding *Secrets of Heaven* could be many things. It often takes reading the same section many times to begin to understand the deeper spiritual meaning of the literal sense.

It is often a challenge to read all, or even a few, of the references that appear along with the teachings. In Section 1 alone, there are five footnote references and several Bible references.

In the final analysis, the first step offers the biggest challenge. That is: if you think you are ready, then get the book and start the journey that is forever. There is no end to the number of spiritual truths in *Secrets of Heaven*. As we read and meditate we will experience the joy of finding and understanding spiritual truths, both now and hereafter.

Michael Brown graduated from the Academy Boys School in 1956. He and his wife, Lynn, live in Tucson, Arizona. Contact: mikelynnbrown2@gmail.com

Church News

Compiled by Bruce Henderson

GENERAL CHURCH BOARD OF DIRECTORS

Highlights of the September 25, 26 meetings of the Board

President

Rt. Rev. Peter M. Buss Jr.

Bishop Buss provided an update on strategic planning, including a revised Vision and three areas of priority:

- Vision casting with a primary focus on looking to the Lord in worship, learning from the threefold Word, and living a useful/heavenly life
- Redefining and strengthening organizational processes, including relationships of General Church affiliates
- Improving service to constituents by bolstering professional development of church employees

Assistant Bishop

The Rt. Rev. Bradley Heinrichs reported that visiting ministers continue to serve areas desiring in-person worship while balancing safety concerns. The New Christian Bible Study website has uploaded the first six completed volumes of *Arcana Coelestia*, translated into Zulu.

The Rt. Rev. David Lindrooth is working on restructuring the regions he supervises by redefining job descriptions for pastors and regional pastors; strengthening the regional pastor system to better align it with church growth; and developing a system of delivering worship to those regions.

Executive Director

David O. Frazier

Financial results for the fiscal year ending June 30 show revenue at \$5.4 million and expenses at \$5.1 million, with an operating surplus of about

\$310,000. Market impact and contribution levels are positive and stable amid the COVID-19 pandemic at the second financial checkpoint.

Outreach

There's been a shift in focus to accelerate production of the Grand Human Project (GHP) online, which implemented the new Groups feature, making it easier for people to find, join and even start their own groups online.

Six new videos in the *Big Spiritual Questions* series have been added to the new YouTube channel, bringing the total to eight. View them at: <https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCTMFCVvVf401W6gPVhnyJbg>

The *Spiritable Podcast* features religious discussion from a New Church base. These regularly produced YouTube videos average 5-10,000 views each. Check them out at: <https://www.youtube.com/channel/UMC8oWrWoUDfpQW4kemrZG6Q>

General Church Education

Bishop Heinrichs told of developing a process for gathering videos of children's talks from around the Church by various ministers that can be accessed via New Church Vineyard.

Rachel Glenn reported that the Religious Educational Programs team has published the *Jacob's Ladder Level 4 Activity Book*. Teachers and parents can download an entire series at once, as they can from <https://tinyurl.com/y6f4hkaw>.

Rebekah Russell reported that General Church Education, together with Human Resources and Dr. Jeanne DiVincenzo, offered teachers a virtual meeting on current job stressors and how to manage them.

General Church Schools are back in session, with Bryn Athyn and Washington starting virtually. (Bryn Athyn has since gone back to in-school learning.) Kainon in South Africa opened with a hybrid model. All of the others are in-person, with accommodations for space and schedules, plus cleaning protocols and other safety measures.

The New Church Teacher Competencies Program (<https://tinyurl.com/yyzur4j5>) offers:

- Aspects of the human design that make it possible for us to be educated
- Working with groups of threes and applications to education
- A contrast between a secular definition of education with one from Bishop George de Charms
- An exploration of passages to glean content for curriculum

International Committee

The Rev. Jeff Smith, Project Manager for Research and Development, reported that standards were being developed for site selection of church location, risk mitigation and the budget process. Worship has resumed in the two pilot projects in West Africa.

Young Adult Outreach

Jeff Smith reported that for the sake of easier navigation, unnecessary barriers for membership on the *newchurch.org* website have been removed. (See <https://tinyurl.com/y3c97vvb>)

The New Church Career Network is connecting job seekers with job opportunities through a network of New Church men, women and friends. Network congregations include: Bryn Athyn and Kempton, Pennsylvania; Mitchellville, Maryland; Oak Arbor, Michigan; plus connections through the Academy Secondary Schools and Bryn Athyn College.

Human Resources

The team has been extremely busy responding to employment issues arising from the pandemic.

The Human Resources Committee proposed lifting the pay freeze for all United States-based employees, effective July 1, 2020.

Advancement

Mark Wyncoll reported that fiscal year-end giving numbers were up compared to the prior year – for number of donors and number of gifts. The amount contributed was strong and well more than budget projections, despite the pandemic, although less in total than the prior year because of a large one-time estate gift received last year.

Committee and Budget Alignment

Ian Carswell reported that the task force recommended:

- A process to ensure adequate board committee structure every two or three years
- An organized repository for board policies and procedures
- Seven different restructured committees to serve the board more effectively and efficiently regarding financial and policy oversight, program evaluation and governance

GENERAL CHURCH CORPORATION

(Excerpted from a report by the Rt. Rev. Peter M. Buss Jr., Executive Bishop of the General Church)

The annual meeting of the General Church Corporation was conducted remotely on September 26, with 112 devices registered. Several of these included multiple attendees and the Bishop noted: “It has been quite a while since we had 125-plus at a General Church Corporation meeting. The virtual platform successfully provided a means for people to attend who otherwise would not have been able to do so.”

Board election:

Elected to three-year terms on the General Church Board of Directors were: **Kay Alden, Stephen Ball, Jake Brown, Ian Carswell, Alex Coulibaly, Chuck Ebert, Gustav Fornander, Mary Jane Junge, Ethan King, Patrick Mayer and John Berridge.** All are incumbents except for Mr. Berridge, who was elected to fill an unexpired term.

Remembrance:

There was a moment of silence to honor three General Church ministers who had passed into the spiritual world since the last annual meeting: the **Rev. William Ankra-Badu, the Rev. Kurt Horigan Asplundh and the Rev. Eric Messan Souka.**

Strategic Plan:

Bishop Buss presented an update on the General Church Strategic Plan, noting that this will be shared in greater detail with the whole church in an Episcopal Newsletter in the next couple of months. He also spoke to a review of the role of the General Church Board, which had been sent to the Corporation.

Treasurer’s Report:

David Frazier noted that despite revenue numbers being down for the previous fiscal year compared to the prior year, the church ended the fiscal year with healthy contributions and a surplus from operating activities. Net assets had declined as the stock market dropped during the COVID-19 pandemic but have picked up.

Advancement:

Mark Wyncoll reported an uptick in the number of donors and Annual Fund giving but concerns linger about current fiscal year conditions.

Bylaws Amendment:

There was considerable discussion of a proposed bylaws amendment requiring prior notice of all motions from Corporation members, except for officers. Remote voting tested the technological resources but glitches were overcome and the amendment was approved, 269-35.

Board Class Realignment:

The bylaws require three classes of 10 Directors each, with one class elected at each Corporation meeting. With resignations and interim appointments, the classes had become misaligned; 9, 10 and 11. The Corporation approved changing **Jamie Uber's** current term from three years to two, which realigns the classes with 10 Directors each.

ACADEMY BOARD OF TRUSTEES

Highlights from the September 3 videoconference and telephone meeting.

Jessica Edmonds and **Scott Brickman** were welcomed as new trustees.

The Bryn Athyn College Board Committee will be chaired by Scott Brickman, with **Chris Carter** as vice-chair. Governance guidelines will be presented at the next meeting of the Board for discussion and approval.

Bryn Athyn College opened to in-person instruction in a HyFlex environment made possible, in part, by newly installed technology. Enrollment was adversely affected by the pandemic. With the help of federal funds the College met its budget reduction goals for 2019-2020 and expects to meet its goals for 2020-2021 with a further reduction in the deficit. There is “substantial optimism” for admission next year given robust brand, marketing and recruitment programs underway.

The Academy Secondary Schools opened the school year in a virtual-only teaching environment. (This changed to in-school learning in mid-October.) The Schools have formed a Diversity, Equity and Inclusion Team, which is examining all aspects of operations through the lens of racial parity. The team has conducted interviews, implemented changes and established a plan for improvement.

In-person programs are stirring back to life – with limitations – at Glencairn Museum and Cairnwood. Glencairn is reaching out to schools, using its programs to offer support and programming. Annual festival programs will be a combination of virtual and outdoor events.

Highlights from the October 10 videoconference and telephone meeting

The Bryn Athyn College reopening has been uneventful, thanks to the implementation and strict enforcement of health safety measures. Managing

classrooms is a huge challenge, with more mentoring and training to come.

The College completed its 50-page Self-Study Design document for accreditation. Now work begins on the self-study itself. Central to the accreditation process is the question, “how do we carry out the mission,” with the focus of governance, innovation and sustainability.

Many growth and program opportunities are emerging, such as distance learning, enlarging the master’s program, granting certificates, pop-up classes, class sharing, mini-terms and teaming up with other New Church entities to assist in career development and placement of interns while still attending college remotely.

The Board approved the Secondary Schools plan to reopen on October 13 under a 16-page plan. The Schools continue to work with an admissions consultant to identify and engage students who fit with the Academy mission.

The treasurer reported year-end financial results, which were aided by government loans and funding, a rebounding endowment, and enrollments better than expected but still flat. An anonymous donor recently contributed \$1million in gratitude for the education received at the Academy.

The Board approved a new governance structure for the College Board Committee, which includes a Faculty Council representative, and an amended Committee Charge.

An Ambassador Program is being re-imagined with possible recruitment of Corporation members as ambassadors and possibly changing the *Corporation Connection* newsletter to a *Campus Connection* with a broader distribution.

BRYN ATHYN COLLEGE GRADUATION

When the Bryn Athyn College commencement was cancelled by the COVID-19 pandemic last May, President **Brian Blair** promised the graduates a traditional ceremony in the fall. After a few postponements the ceremony finally took place November 14 in the outdoor Pavilion. We will publish a list of the graduates, photos from the event, and the Commencement Address by *Brian Henderson* in the January/February issue of *New Church Life*.

BACK TO SCHOOL

The administration of the Academy of the New Church Secondary Schools announced on September 28 that it would be reopening the campus for in-person learning effective October 13. Their letter stated: “We believe the mitigation efforts that we have established and the fact that statistics in Montgomery County are trending favorably means that we can safely and sustainably provide in-person education, unless or until something

significant changes.”

The re-opening includes the dormitories and dining hall.

The Academy opened the school year with online teaching and was operating in six-weeks increments. With that first period winding down the Pandemic Administration Team decided on -in-school education for the second six-weeks.

The plan all along was to provide virtual education between Thanksgiving and Christmas. Then, barring any significant changes, in-person learning will resume January 4.

BRYN ATHYN CHURCH SCHOOL

The Bryn Athyn Church School began its year remotely but with a promise to re-evaluate at the midterm marker in early October. At that point the administration decided it was safe to return to in-school teaching on October 19.

A number of factors contributed to this decision. A high percentage of non-public schools which had opened in September have experienced no surge in coronavirus cases. Other schools that began remotely are reopening. Nationwide data shows the level of infection among teachers and students in classrooms has been low. And surrounding school districts now are able to supply busing for students outside of Bryn Athyn.

A long list of safety protocols is in place and in-school teaching – as well as general infection rates – will be closely monitored to keep everyone safe.

CHARTER DAY

Most of the traditional Charter Day events for the Academy of the New Church Secondary Schools and Bryn Athyn College were canceled because of the COVID-19 pandemic. But there was a modified academic procession to the Bryn Athyn Cathedral. (See photos on pages 501 to 504) The **Rt. Rev. Peter M. Buss Jr.**, Chancellor of the Academy, delivered a live-streamed address from the cathedral, *Call Upon Him While He is Near*. (Page 475)

Class reunions were postponed to 2021 but the Class of 1950 went ahead with a remote celebration of its 70th reunion.

The Girls School and Boys School of the Academy also continued the tradition of honoring Distinguished Alumni. Since 1992 honorees have been invited to talk to the senior classes about how their Academy experience has influenced their lives and careers.

This year’s Distinguished Alumni:

Academy Girls School:

Shannon Smith Good grew up in Bryn Athyn. She, like her parents and grandparents, attended the Academy of the New Church, from which she graduated in 1980 -- earning the Theta Alpha Award. She got her Associates in Arts from Bryn Athyn College, where she again received the Theta Alpha Award. She then earned her bachelor's degree in General Social Sciences and Secondary Education from James Madison University, followed by a Master's in Library Science, with an emphasis on school libraries, from Catholic University in Washington, D.C.

Shannon then married and moved away from Bryn Athyn for 23 years, living first in the Washington, DC, metro area, where she was a high school librarian for four years, then for 20 years in central Pennsylvania, where she was a librarian for an elementary school for learning disabled and emotionally disturbed children.

During this time her two children were born: Brianne (now 27) and Brandon (now 25). She homeschooled her children until her daughter graduated, then she and her children moved back to Bryn Athyn where her daughter earned her Education degree from Bryn Athyn College and her son first attended the Boys School, then earned his Psychology degree from Bryn Athyn College.

Shannon is a librarian at Bryn Athyn Church Elementary School. She also owns and operates a bed-and-breakfast, Bryn Ellis Guest House, in her home in Bryn Athyn.

Dr. Stefanie Davis Niles graduated from the Academy of the New Church Girls School in 1990. She holds a bachelor's degree from the University of Virginia, a master's degree from Indiana University-Bloomington, and a Doctor of Education degree from the University of Pennsylvania.

She oversees the Offices of Admission, Financial Aid and University Communications in her role as Vice President for Enrollment and Communications at Ohio Wesleyan University. In her 23-year career in enrollment management, she has served in leadership positions at Dickinson College, Bryn Athyn College, Hollins University and DePauw University.

She was the 2018-2019 president of the National Association for College Admission Counseling (NACAC), the leading national organization for college admission professionals. She led the organization's board during the U.S. Department of Justice inquiry into the organization's Code of Ethics and during the Operation Varsity Blues scandal which captured the attention of the public and mainstream media. In 2017, she received a Fulbright grant to

study higher education systems in France. Stefanie has also completed the American Academic Leadership Institute, co-sponsored by CIC and the AACSCU, and the Harvard Institute of Educational Leadership.

Academy Boys School:

Edward K. Asplundh graduated from the Boys School in 1950 and from the Wharton School of the University of Pennsylvania in 1954. He then spent three years as a pilot in the United States Air Force, flying all over the world for the Military Air Transport Service.

He married **Gwen McQueen** in 1954 and they have five daughters.

After military service he joined the family firm, The Asplundh Tree Expert Company, which was founded by his father and uncle in 1928. He worked for the company for 36 years – the last 10 as president.

In retirement Edward has worked with a number of charitable organizations, including the Academy of the New Church, Abington Hospital, Morris Arboretum, and others.

Andrew J. Sullivan graduated from the Boys School in 1990, then graduated in three years from New York University's Tisch School.

He founded Refinery, an interactive agency which created websites for Fortune 500 companies. Andy was CEO for 13 years and under his leadership the company grew to 180 employees and \$25 million in revenue. Refinery was one of the 10 largest independent agencies in the country and the only independent interactive agency able to show revenue and growth and remain profitable before, during and after the tech bubble.

He oversaw the interactive marketing strategies for more than 100 independent feature films. His accolades include: INC. 500 Fastest Growing Companies (three years in a row); 50 Best Places to Work in Pennsylvania (three years in a row); CEO of the Year; Young Entrepreneur of the Year; and Ernst and Young Entrepreneur of the Year.

After Refinery, Andy pursued his first passion, filmmaking. His first feature, *Bokeh* – a cerebral sci-fi film set in Iceland – which he co-wrote and co-directed with his partner **Geoffrey Orthwein**, was acquired by Screen Media Films and released theatrically in March 2017. Netflix bought the exclusive global rights and opened the film in 191 countries. Andy was in preproduction on his second film, *Run Deer Run*, when the pandemic struck.

He and his wife, **Shada**, live in Huntingdon Valley, Pennsylvania, with their two children.

Student Scholarship Golf Outing

The 26th annual Student Scholarship Golf Outing took place on October 19 at the Huntingdon Valley Country Club with a record 151 golfers participating in perfect October weather. This year just over \$50,000 was added to the Student Scholarship Fund for Bryn Athyn College and the Academy Secondary Schools, bringing the 26-year total to approximately \$625,000.

The COVID-19 pandemic forced several accommodations. There was considerably more pre-planning. Raffle winners, for instance, received their prizes at check-in, rather than after the event. There was no post-tournament dinner for participants and guests, at which prizes are usually awarded. Instead, winners were announced in an email the next day, with their prizes redeemable in the club's pro shop. Several food stations served golfers out on the course.

That the event was so successful under the circumstances was a tribute to the planning led by Managing Director **Jim Adams**, Charter Day Events Coordinator **Kaylene Glenn**, and her team of **Nicole Bau-Madsen** and **Jahanna Henderson**.

NEW CHURCH CHALLENGE

James P. Cole, President

New Church Challenge is a relatively small organization of people within the General Church dedicated to providing assistance and support to individuals and families living with disabilities.

In this period of uncertainty and ever-changing school and employment environments, children and young people (or older adults) with autism, ADHD, developmental disabilities, or other learning or physical differences may be overwhelmed and find their daily patterns disrupted.

New Church Challenge offers several areas of support (and) we are interested in hearing from families in church congregations and schools about other ways we might support New Church people living and learning with disabilities.

The Family Grants Fund has been very well funded by generous donations of our members and several patrons. The Family Grants Committee's deliberations are confidential and applicants' privacy is assured. The committee does not require that all applicants be baptized but a recommendation from a General Church minister is required.

The mission of New Church Challenge is to provide services for people with special needs, enabling them to live, learn and socialize in the environment

of a New Church community as far as possible, regardless of disabilities. If you have questions about how Family Grants can be used contact Nina Kline, chair of that committee: ninakline@comcast.net.

In 2000 the General Church received a bequest from the Carlson family in Sweden for the assistance of a young adult with disabilities to learn a profession or handwork that makes him or her feel like a living member of the community. New Church Challenge was asked to administer the fund and determine appropriate distributions.

We would welcome any interested inquiries about our activities, or suggestions or requests for other areas that would be useful to New Church families living with disabilities in these challenging times.

To see the Family Grants Application, plus other information and resources, go to www.NewChurchChallenge.com under the Activities tab.

A NEW BOOK FROM THE SWEDENBORG FOUNDATION

The Swedenborg Foundation has published the latest in the *New Century Edition* translation series: *The Shorter Works of 1763* translated by the **Rev. Dr. George E. Dole**.

The NCE team announced a major milestone last year when Latin translator **Lisa Hyatt Cooper** completed the translation of all 15 volumes of *Secrets of Heaven*. That means all of Swedenborg's published theological works have been translated under NCE guidelines, but there is much still to be done. At www.swedenborg.com you can read a blog by Series Editor the **Rev. Dr. Jonathan S. Rose**: *New Century Edition – Where We Are and Where We're Going*.

The Shorter Works includes: *The Lord, Sacred Scripture, Life, Faith and Supplements*. It also offers an Introduction by Mr. Rose: *Seeking Greater Engagement – Swedenborg's Shorter Works of 1763*.

You can purchase print editions or download free e-publications from the Foundation's online bookstore: www.swedenborg.com/bookstore

NEW CHRISTIAN BIBLE STUDY

Steve David, head of the New Christian Bible Study website, reports that a new version of the Swedenborg Reader app is available in Google's Play Store and Apple's App Store at <https://newchristianbiblestudy.org/mobile-app>.

Steve says: "If you want to be able to read and search Swedenborg's works on your phone or tablet – when you don't have a reasonable web connection – this is the way! It comes with available user interfaces in English, Spanish,

French, Chinese and Korean (so far), and you can choose from hundreds of translations in 20 languages. You can read, listen, print, share, cite – lots of good new features. Give it a try. And tell your friends!”

There is also “lots of new stuff” on the main site – www.newchristianbiblestudy.org – including *Commentaries on the Gospels of Matthew and Mark* by the **Rev. Dr. Ray Silverman**, and on *Psalms* by the **Rev. Julian Duckworth**.

A COVID CHARTER DAY PROCESSION – BRYN ATHYN COLLEGE

Photos by Serena Sutton



CHARTER DAY SCHOLARSHIP GOLF OUTING

Photos by Serena Sutton



Kayleen Glenn greeting golfers



Warming up on the putting green



Adam Sutton



Brian Horigan is ready to go



Heading back to the clubhouse



Swinging away on the driving range



The official ANC golf ball



The A Team: left to right, Kayleen Glenn, Jahna Henderson, and Nicole Bau-Madsen



Photos by Holly Adams



Life Lines

SILENT NIGHT

The shepherds watched over their flocks in silence. Bethlehem echoed in daylight hours to jostling travelers come to answer the decree of Caesar Augustus. The noisy commotion dwindled with the deepening darkness and Bethlehem slept. In the quiet simplicity of a stable, and in a silence more eloquent than words, He came.

In silence still He comes to us. Pause in the tumult of the day and He is there. The world bombards us with distractions, but in the midst of it all He can always be found. The insistent clamor of a demanding civilization cannot drown out the softest whisper.

He is present in all of His creation yet seems closest in silence: the hush of a church, the peace of early evening, the solitude of one's own room and one's own mind. In talking and doing, listening and watching, we find the security of companionship. In the silence of the night we are alone – but never quite alone. In that silence and darkness – when we can escape other people's expectations and just be ourselves – that is when we have to be most honest with ourselves.

He came to us in silence – and bids us return to Him in silence. It is in the quiet interludes of life that we are most receptive to His gifts – and most aware of where they come from. It is in quiet moments that we mold our character, our understanding, our wisdom. And in silent retreat from the hubbub of the season, we become aware that these, too, are part of the gift.

Silence is the chapel of prayer. It invites reflection. Reflection enhances our awareness of life – and the force that sustains it. Prayer is silent. It is a private communication which is not defiled by the garish displays that shout our triumphs – and our needs.

Silence is also a prologue to progress. Most of us, caught up in the currents of life, contribute little from the ruts of routine thought and action. It is only when we stop and reflect upon the nature of our world – and how to make it a better place – that real progress is achieved.

And silence is the prerequisite to the peace we hunger for. There is no peace in the hostility of human emotion – between nations, within cities, around conference rooms and dinner tables. Calm the souls of the people and

then there can be peace. But how do we reach the soul of the demagogue, the self-seeker, the warrior? His fellow man pleads in frustration. Only God has a chance to reach us – in silence.

That is the constant challenge for peace – to open the minds of men and women to a light beyond themselves. With our world forever plagued by war and terror and tension, we chant the message of Christmas as though saying it enough times will make it come true: “Peace on earth, good will toward men.”

Now, in the culmination of frenzied preparation, come the moments of silence we treasure. We wonder at our own exasperation, wishing for a respite from the siege of shopping and decorating and wrapping and cards. Then it dawns on us: This isn’t the real preparation. That is a quiet, subtle process. If it is real preparation, it goes on all year – in acts of kindness, compassion, sincerity, goodwill. It is remembering that the needy, the lonely, the homeless and the hopeless need our support every day – that we cannot let them be forgotten and forlorn again once the trees come down and the spirit dissipates. It is striving quietly each day to live up to the gentle qualities of the One whose birth we celebrate.

He came in silence to Bethlehem with the greatest gift of all. In silence still He comes to us, with the same gift. It is not tied up with ribbons or memorialized in TV jingles. It is given in silence. And it is not taken away if we do not choose to use it. It is always there. We may find joy under the tree, because of the love that is there too. But after the malls are dark and the frenzy quiets, we find the real gift of Christmas – in its “Silent Night.”

(BMH)

BEHOLD THE HANDMAID OF THE LORD

It is no wonder that Mary is beloved among all women in the Word. She was a simple woman – betrothed and a virgin – chosen to be the earthly mother of Jesus. And she rose to the calling.

The Angel Gabriel broke the news to her gently: “Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God.” And then came the impact: “Behold, you will conceive in your womb and bring forth a Son, and shall call His name Jesus. He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Highest . . . and of His kingdom there will be no end.”

Imagine your quiet, unassuming existence overtaken so swiftly and dramatically. This would forever change her life. But she did not shrink from the role chosen for her. She did not say, as many might be tempted: “Can’t you find someone else? I’m not ready for this.”

No. She bowed with grace and humility and said: “Behold the handmaid of the Lord. Be it unto me according to Thy word.”

This was extraordinary but should not be surprising. It is why she “found favor with God.” It’s why she was chosen.

What a powerful image and lesson for all of us who are called to love and to serve – in less dramatic but no less essential ways. It is no wonder that Mary has been elevated to sainthood by the Catholic Church and many Christians. But Swedenborg told of this encounter with Mary in *The Last Judgment* 68, within the *Posthumous Theological Works*:

The *Virgin Mary*, the mother of the Lord, was seen. Mary appeared . . . in a snow-white garment, only as she passed by; and then she stopped a little and said that she had been the mother of the Lord; that He indeed was born of her; but that He became God and put off all the maternal human; and that she therefore adores Him as her God; and that she is unwilling that anyone should acknowledge Him as her son, because in Him all is Divine.

Mary’s enduring gift is the humility and acceptance of her unique role – what it was and what it was not. She is not a saint, especially in her own eyes. But she surely was saintly.

(BMH)

THE CHRISTMAS NARRATIVE

The Lord from eternity, who is Jehovah, came into the world to gain control over the hells and to glorify His own human nature. If He had not done this, not one mortal could have been saved; those who believe in Him are saved. (*True Christianity* 2)

The Christmas story is more than a story; it is a narrative about the world’s salvation. Its importance cannot be overstated. The narrative itself has more power to make good things happen in this world than you might ever suspect.

Here is what a contemporary British writer, George Monbiot*, has to say about the power of stories:

The only thing that stands between us and the better world that we might want is a lack of political will. To achieve that radical change, we need to come up with a new story. We are creatures of narrative. The trick that we have learnt – in fact, more than learnt – which is hard-wired into our brains, is to look for a story that explains our situation, whatever that situation might be, which tells us where we stand, how we got there, where we’re trying to get to and how we’re going to get to that place.

And it’s not just stories in general that we are attuned to but particular narrative structures. There are a number of basic plots that we use again and again. And in politics, there is one basic plot which turns out to be tremendously powerful. I call this the restoration story. It goes as follows: disorder afflicts the land, caused by powerful and nefarious forces working against the interests of humanity. But the hero will revolt against this disorder, fight those powerful forces, against the odds overthrow them and restore harmony to the land.

You’ve heard this story before. It’s the Bible story. It’s the “Harry Potter” story. It’s

the "Lord of the Rings" story. But it's also the story that has accompanied almost every political and religious transformation going back millennia. In fact, we could go as far as to say that without a powerful new restoration story, a political and religious transformation might not be able to happen. It's that important.

(*George Monbiot is a British writer known for his environmental and political activism. He writes a weekly column for *The Guardian*, and is the author of a number of books, including *Feral: Rewilding the Land, Sea and Human Life*; *The Age of Consent*; and *Heat: How to Stop the Planet Burning*.)

Monbiot is saying here that political will is built on the widespread acceptance of particular narratives. When people believe that a story both explains the current situation, and the way to change it, they can be inspired to take action. But they must first believe the narrative.

This is why so much of the mainstream news is formed around popular themes, with news items serving as evidence for some particular issue or threat, and often suggesting some political direction as a solution. Wildfires and hurricanes, for example, are evidence of climate change and call for measures to mitigate it. Demonstrations and riots are evidence of injustice and demand various proposed solutions. The narratives typically follow the pattern described by Monbiot above.

For those who accept the narratives they are motivating and unifying. They are a significant factor in building the political will to overcome obstacles and enact changes. For those who do not accept the premise, the evidence, or the solution presented, these narratives provoke strong opposition and counter-narratives. The resulting struggles are what are called the "culture wars," indicating a conflict between deeply held beliefs and values.

The Christmas story is the ultimate narrative. The Lord came into the world to save it. He came as an infant born into an impoverished setting, He was threatened from His very birth, and yet He accomplished this promised salvation, which continues today. For those who believe, it has proved to be extraordinarily motivating and unifying over the past 2,000 years.

In the Western world, however, the story is no longer universally accepted, even though the celebration of Christmas continues to grow in popularity worldwide. The very premise of the narrative is questioned, and every aspect of the story and the movement springing from it is doubted.

The New Church offers a solution to these doubts, and a fresh narrative that confirms, explains, and extends the original.

Following the format of Monbiot's example, here is a New Church version of the narrative:

The world has been thrown into disorder due to the fall of Christianity, or its failure to follow the teachings of the Word. The result has been a lack of goodwill, continuing injustice, racism, inequality, sexism, atheism and immorality. The Lord's

Second Coming has brought an answer to this disorder and these powerful forces in the teachings of the New Church. Against all odds an allegiance to these truths will overcome these powerful forces and restore harmony to the world.

This is a narrative that restores the Christmas story to its rightful place. It describes the mission and the goal.

Whatever is going on in the world, our spirits can be refreshed by the Christmas narrative. It is endlessly repeated in carols, stories and films. It is celebrated with music, decorations, gifts, food and festivity. Its promise brings excitement and joy to children, and to those with childlike hearts. *“Joy to the world, the Lord is come! Let earth receive her King.”*

(JFS)

TELL ME A STORY

Through the ages it's been an invitation to preserve history and unlock the imagination: Tell me a story.

Long before the printing press, long before books and diaries and theater, family lore and the dramas of civilization were handed down in stories. Indeed, one of the reasons the Lord came on this earth was because of the written word. All that He taught could be preserved in the Word.

Much of what the Lord teaches there is rooted in stories and parables that invite us to reflect on their meaning. Almost everyone knows Adam and Eve, David and Goliath, Noah and the Ark, Samson and Delilah, Jesus and John the Baptist. Just to know those stories is to begin to understand something of their meaning in our own lives – even without the internal sense.

That is the power of stories, in whatever form they come to us. We recognize attributes that we can aspire to, qualities that repel us, moral challenges that make us think about our own choices. It all contributes to the formation of our character.

In the day-by-day reflections in his book, *Daily Bread*, the Rev. Derek Elphick says: “Stories are the most enduring and engaging form of communication because they speak to us on so many levels. They contain drama, conflict, pain, happiness, uncertainty, hope, resolution, promise – the whole spectrum of human emotion.”

And this, he says, “is why the Lord’s Word is written in story form. It introduces us to people who aren’t very different from us – people who have the same hopes and dreams, the same concerns and fears, the same questions.”

We are asked to read the Word as though it is speaking to us about our own lives, even if we may not relate to their ancient circumstances. We see ourselves in their trials, their weaknesses, their hopes and despair. We see the Lord’s promises to them offered for our own lives as well

Everyone has a story. And if the stories in the Word are really about us and our own lives, how does that all play out in our own Book of Life? We may reflect on all that is being written there with some misgiving, but we are constantly given the opportunity to revise, to correct, to repurpose – even to change the ending. But it’s a cooperative effort. As Derek poses the challenge: “Are you ready to let the Lord write more of His story onto your heart?”

(BMH)

THE EGO VIRUS

The coronavirus has been a curse throughout the world, killing and sickening hundreds of thousands, and disrupting countless lives. Several sermons and commentary in *New Church Life* have reflected on the spiritual aspects of the virus as well.

Mary Smuts, a long-time member and active supporter of the Aurora New Church Society in Perth, Australia, kindly shares a quote from Philip Groves – noted scholar and a student of both Swedenborg and “Fourth Way” philosopher George Ivanovich Gurdjieff – contending that “viruses have sinister correspondences”:

Virus comes from the Latin virus = poison. Also from the earlier Sanskrit visha = poison. A virus is composed of DNA or RNA with a protein coat. Viruses are non-living – not alive. There is no chemical metabolism there at all. There is something weird about viruses. The virus commands our body cell machinery to make more viruses – so we get the flu or HIV, etc.

The virus does not help the organism it invades. A virus is only concerned with its own welfare and multiplication; this corresponds to the totality of self-love, that is – egocentricity, self-concern, total self-love. An egotistic person is like a virus. Egotists enter communities and rob them of their integrity and standards. Notice: a virus is non-living. The essence is dead. When ruled completely by ego one is spiritually dead. All have ego to some extent.

Which, we may assume – with some misgiving – is why we are all at risk with this virus.

(BMH)

A LIGHT BURDEN

In his memorial address for Hyland Johns in September, the Rev. Kurt Hy. Asplundh offered an example of Hyland as a man of action. He noted that Hyland was greatly impressed by a six-part series published in the 1986 *New Church Life* by the Rev. John Odhner: *A Light Burden*.

Well, if Hyland was impressed and found it useful, he was going to make sure others had that opportunity. So he wrote a letter to the editor, exclaiming

that the series was “well organized, doctrinally documented, interestingly written, and should be read by everyone.” He added: “This whole series should be reprinted and available for our continued use and reference. To me, really great stuff!”

Hyland, of course, did not leave it there. He arranged to have the series turned into a booklet, available for anyone interested. That was typical of him – to share what he thought was valuable, as he did for so many years with his mutual fund group and other interests.

Well, this recommendation of John Odhner’s series did not stop 34 years ago. It encouraged me to go back and reread the series and to find it still a wonderful reminder that for all the troubles we are laden with throughout our lives, the Lord’s yoke indeed is easy and His burden light. John assured then that “the Lord wants to make regeneration as easy as possible for us,” and the teachings still apply. The series is worth rereading; it has so much hope and guidance to offer us still.

There are so many such gems to be mined in past issues of *New Church Life*. Many faithful readers have their own collections but all issues of the *Life* can be searched at www.heavenlydoctrines.org. It’s a treasure worth exploring.
(BMH)

HAPPY NEW YEAR?

We come to the end of a troubling year, yearning for deliverance. COVID-19 turned our lives upside down, but there is hope for a vaccine and mitigation. Even more disturbing have been the rioting and chaos plaguing American cities. Amid burning buildings and shattered glass, attacks on police and virulent anger, is a sense of helplessness and hopelessness. Too many of the aggrieved generation seem to be turning away from God.

Is this the inevitable outcome of religion driven out of public schools and the public square? But it seems to be happening in homes and families as well, which is even more alarming. We cannot count on the traditional Judeo-Christian worldview and values being passed down anymore. Pop culture reigns in the counterculture. We used to look inward for solutions: What can I do to make myself a better person and this a better world? Now the instinct among the radicalized is to look outward and blame others. Where is love?

In the New Church – as in virtually all religions – we are called to follow God and His commandments in a personal journey of regeneration, or atonement. We know what comes first.

Remember therefore from whence thou art fallen and repent, and do the first works.
(*Revelation 2:5*)

Wash you, make you clean; put away the evil of your doings from before Mine eyes; cease to do evil, learn to do well. (*Isaiah 1:16-17*)

Seek ye first the kingdom of God. (*Matthew 6:33*)

We first must see and understand evil, then shun it and do good. We aren't witnessing much shunning in the cascade of mayhem all around us. But all the good that is also happening, all the unseen workings of providence, do not make the nightly news. We just know that the Lord is always present, leading to a good end. We need that hope and that faith more than ever.

There is nothing really new to all this chaos. History is replete with people wandering in the wilderness, lashing out at flaws they don't see in themselves but that loom large in their world.

The fallout of the Last Judgment still plays out around us. But it offers the ultimate salvation – that image of the Holy City New Jerusalem descending from God out of heaven, establishing a church that will forever withstand the assaults of hell:

Be of good cheer. I have overcome the world. These things I have spoken unto you, that in Me you might have peace. In the world you shall have tribulation, but be of good cheer; I have overcome the world. (*John 16:33*)

Happy New Year indeed.

(BMH)

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"For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also." Matthew 6:21



New Church

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