

The Books of the Word (pt. 2 of 2)

A sermon by Rev. Michael Gladish
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“Hic Liber est Adventus Domini, Scriptum ex Mandato.”
 (“This Book is the Advent of the Lord, Written by Command.”)
(Em. Swedenborg, 1769)

Last week we addressed the challenging question of which books in the Bible are actually fully inspired, Divine revelations written by the Lord *through* human instruments. Today we are going to consider whether Swedenborg’s revelations qualify as part of the Lord’s Word, and specifically how much of his writing is his own and how much is the Lord’s through him.

As you may know there are two or three fundamentally different ways people tend to regard the spiritual writings of Swedenborg, setting aside for the moment those who don’t value them at all. Some see them as inspired directly from the Lord through the Swede, using his knowledge and insight in a tightly controlled process that ensures reliable communication of Divine Truth. Others say that they contain information given TO Swedenborg, who then did his best, given his intellectual and cultural limitations, to describe what he had learned, but that this process necessarily includes some mistakes. Still others see them pretty much as commentaries drawn from his particular study, insight and visionary experience. In this case they don’t really carry any Divine authority, but may be useful for expanding our own understanding.

Among those who hold the first view, and maybe to some extent the second, these doctrinal teachings are recognized as part of the Lord’s Word, and some even refer to them by the title “the New Word” or “the Third Testament.” However, this is problematic to others because in Swedenborg’s books the term, the Word, is usually reserved for the inspired books of the Old and New Testaments. Besides, if the books of the Word are written in pure correspondences having a continuous internal sense that treats inmost of the Lord, how does a reasoned doctrinal presentation fit into that framework? Aren’t these books really more like the Epistles?

Now admittedly, this sermon could easily get very deep and complicated because, frankly, it’s not a simple matter. But taking off from where we were last week with the inspiration of the books of the Bible it is important to have some clarity about where we stand on this new revelation and how it affects our lives. For we can’t have it both ways: – either they are authoritative or they’re not, and if they *are* then we had better treat them with the utmost respect, even in those passages that seem odd or incorrect by modern standards.

So let’s begin with our opening lines found with a small book called A Brief Exposition of the Doctrine of the New Church, written by Swedenborg in 1769. In his handwriting on the inside page of a wrapper enclosing the book we find the words, *“Hic Liber est Adventus Domini, Scriptum ex Mandato.”* which is Latin for “This Book is the Advent of the Lord, Written by Command.” The book appears to be an introduction to The Christian Religion, which followed it a year later, and in THAT book, toward the end, he says, “This Second Coming of the Lord is not in person, but in the Word, which is from Him, and is Himself” (TCR 776). And then, clarifying, he writes, “This Second Coming of the Lord is effected *by means of a man* to whom He has manifested Himself in person, and whom He has filled with His spirit, to teach the doctrines of

the New Church *through the Word from Him*” (TCR 779). And again, “I testify that from the first day of my call I have not received anything pertaining to the doctrines of that church from any angel, but from the Lord alone while reading the Word” (Ibid.).

Well. What a powerful series of statements. But what do they mean? Is the Second Coming of the Lord *in the Word*, or is it *in the doctrinal books* Swedenborg wrote? Let’s see.

First of all, is everything Swedenborg wrote “doctrine”? After all, he says many times that he gathered information from angels, and several of his books declare in the titles that they are “Angelic Wisdom” concerning this or that. Angelic wisdom isn’t perfect wisdom, so there’s a question right off the bat. Along the same lines many of the stories we read about his encounters in the spiritual world, what we sometimes call “memorable relations,” are not really doctrinal teachings but descriptive personal testimony, though they almost always have a doctrinal point. Are these part of the Lord’s Second Coming, or are they just Swedenborg sharing what he heard and saw? Here’s what he himself says about this in two books: –

“I anticipate that many who read the following descriptions and the accounts at the ends of the succeeding chapters will believe they are figments of my imagination. I swear in truth, however, that they are not inventions, but actual occurrences to which I was witness. Nor were they witnessed in any condition of unconsciousness but in a state of full wakefulness. For it has pleased the Lord to manifest Himself to me and send me to teach the doctrines that will be doctrines of the New Church, the church meant by the New Jerusalem in the book of Revelation. *To this end He has opened the inner faculties of my mind and spirit.* As a result, it has been made possible for me to be in the spiritual world with angels and at the same time in the natural world with men, and this now for twenty-five years” (CL 1 & TCR 851, first written in 1768; see also DP 135 & AE 1183).

OK, so his spiritual eyes were opened. But does this mean he saw everything perfectly, without any bias or limitations? And what about his descriptions? Were they 100% accurate? Here is what he says about THAT at the end of the opening passage in the book, Heaven and Hell: –

“The man of the Church at this day knows scarcely anything about heaven and hell or about his life after death, although they are all set forth and described in the Word. Indeed, many people born within the Church even deny them, saying in their hearts, ‘Who has come from that world and told us?’ Lest, therefore, such a negative attitude, which prevails especially with those who have much worldly wisdom, should also infect and corrupt the simple in heart and the simple in faith, it has been granted to me to associate with angels and to talk with them as man with man, also to see the things in the heavens as well as in the hells, and this for thirteen years. Now, therefore, from what I have seen and heard I am permitted to describe these things, in the hope that thus, ignorance may be enlightened and unbelief dispelled. ***Such immediate revelation is now made because that is what is meant by the Coming of the Lord***” (HH 1, written in 1758).

Alright. Now we are coming to the crux of it. The word here translated “immediate” means direct. So ALL of this is being characterized as a direct revelation, not just a revelation *from* the

Lord but a revelation *of* the Lord. In other words, like the Old and New Testaments it **IS** *all about Him*, whether it is written in the symbolic, correspondential style or not.

This brings up another critical issue in our thinking about the Word. Obviously different writers, from Moses and the Prophets to Luke, John and now Swedenborg, all had different styles of writing and they communicate to us on different levels. The Old Testament was written originally in Hebrew, a very concrete language almost devoid of abstractions. Even heaven is really just the sky, and hell is Sheol, an underworld beneath the surface of the earth. Anger is represented as heat and snorting, the heart is a physical organ and what is often translated “the mind” is really the reins, an old-fashioned word for kidneys! Spiritual battles are *represented* by natural battles, and spiritual wealth by natural wealth. This concrete, sensual language was necessary in this revelation to contain the deeper truths in images that would stick in the mind and forever be accessible even to those with a completely sensual way of thinking.

But the New Testament, which is preserved in Greek, a language full of philosophical abstractions, raises the bar of revelation to a higher level, the moral or imaginative level. Now it’s not just adultery that matters, it’s the lust and selfishness that lurks within it. Now it’s not just murder that condemns, but the anger and arrogance that leads to murder. The New Testament is different from the Old in that the Lord here asks us to go deeper and reflect on our motives along with the deeds that we do – or don’t do. Still, it’s written in the symbolic or correspondential style since it is all about events and circumstances – and parables – set in the natural world.

Now, finally, in the Heavenly Doctrines, we reach a still more advanced level of consciousness where we can see truths in the light of inner wisdom and understanding, wisdom drawn from principles, concepts or ideas more than just worldly events or circumstances, and understanding drawn from an awareness of how the human mind works and how the spiritual world (the world of our spirits) is organized and governed by the Lord. In these doctrines we can come to grips with the real nature of God, how He creates and sustains the universe, and how He provides for our spiritual freedom, responsibility and happiness. These are BIG IDEAS, things that the simple fishermen of New Testament times could not possibly have understood. But then, they didn’t NEED these concepts then, as their faith in the Lord’s miracles was sufficient to guide their lives. NOW the world has changed. Everyone’s a skeptic. Almost everyone understands that things are seldom what they appear to be, especially in the realm of religion. Deeper thought is required to sustain one’s faith, and the doctrines of the New Church provide for this deeper thought.

Are they written in a symbolic or correspondential style? – No, evidently not (except that everything that appears in the spiritual world appears in a natural form corresponding to its use, so the descriptions of life in that world do involve correspondences). Still, if the doctrines are a revelation of and from the Lord they surely must contain infinite levels of truth within them. The challenge at this level is that *the next level up* is such that it requires insight or perception based on personal progress in regeneration, that is, *actually living in the light of heaven*, and while this is not only possible but highly desirable, it is NOT transferrable from one person to another. So we can’t really teach at that level; each one of us has to get those deeper meanings for ourselves.

What we are left with, then, as a basis for our common understanding and our common effort to achieve a healthy, mutually rewarding life, is a series of revelations from the Lord to our natural minds, first at the lowest level of sensory awareness, then at the higher level of motive and

imagination, and finally at the highest level of intellectual concepts. (Of course three levels of emotional content are also involved in these revelations, but since it is the understanding that guides the will and helps to reform it we are focusing mainly on the intellectual content.)

So we ask again, are the Writings of Swedenborg part of “the Word”? Of course that term can be applied in a very restrictive sense to include only the inspired books of the Bible – and Swedenborg himself uses it that way most often. But it can also be used to refer to any revelation of the Lord – and he also uses the term in this more inclusive way (AC 1540, 3712, 5075, etc.).

In the end we are all free to decide for ourselves what we will CALL these revelations, but the real key is what we will do with them. The Old Testament originally was not a book, it was a Covenant with the Almighty (an invisible God), and yet the books of Moses, the Prophets and the Psalms testify of that covenant. The first Advent of the Lord was not a book, *it was an event* through which God became *visible* and accessible *in the natural world*, yet it was recorded in a book and we refer to that book as “the Word.” Now the Second Advent is much the same, but in this case the books are the means by which the event took place, and they now make the Lord visible to our intellectual, spiritual sight ***not only in themselves but in all the previous revelations as well.*** This is why it is sometimes said that the Second Coming is “in the clouds of heaven,” that is to say, in the literal sense of the Word where the pure truths of heaven are veiled in appearances arising from the natural world, but where the glory of the Lord can shine through when the spiritual meaning is understood.

Are there mistakes in these new revelations? It depends on what you mean by mistakes. This is a rational revelation and it is tremendously consistent throughout the course of more than 18,000 pages. But minor literalistic flaws do occur. There are spelling and transcription errors, cross-outs and insertions, revisions and remarks that seem quite frivolous, like “Pardon the addition of the following to fill the remainder of the sheet” (DP 340). And there are statements that *seem* wrong by modern social or scientific standards – *until we understand what is really meant by them.* The thing is, none of this really matters against the backdrop of what is actually revealed.

Is the Second Coming of the Lord a book? No, of course not; not literally. *It is the content of the book.* And more than that, *it is the Lord Himself appearing to us when we read and understand the book.*

The question is, are we ready for this? Are we willing to read it and wrestle with it, and think deeply about it? Are we *willing* to consider it and be convinced and really apply what it says to our lives? It’s not just a matter of thinking good thoughts and being nice, you know. There’s a lot more at stake. The Lord didn’t give us 35 volumes of new information for nothing. These books teach us how to change, live and grow on the *spiritual* level. They prepare us for heaven. What could be more important than that, or more worthy of our deepest consideration?

Amen.

Lessons: Matthew 24:3-14, 29-31
Children’s talk on The Glory in the Cloud

John 16:1-20 and True Christian Religion 776:1 & 779