

Swedenborg and the Spirit of Truth

a sermon by Rev. Michael Gladish
January 29th, 2012

Last Friday one of my colleagues asked the students a very important question in morning chapel. He asked what we would do if we had a very important message to give somebody, but that this person just wouldn't listen. What would YOU do?

Reflecting on this, one thought that came to mind was to "turn up the volume!" Another was to appeal to the person with reasons and explanations. Still another was to be patient, and wait until the person is really ready to listen.

Well, this surely is just the problem that the Lord Himself had in communicating the vital truths about Himself and the spiritual life to His disciples – and now of course to us. But even when we do seem ready to listen, the truths that the Lord has to share with us are often so different from what we are expecting, and so out of our ordinary sphere of perception, that they are hard to understand.

This is precisely why near the end of His earthly life the Lord said, "I still have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now. However, when He, the Spirit of Truth, has come, He will guide you into all truth" (John 16:12-13).

Sadly, throughout the history of the Christian Church this and other references to the Spirit of Truth have often been misunderstood. Why? Mainly because of the translation of the teachings from Greek into English – which in turn is a result of some preconceived notions about the Holy Spirit. You see, the assumption going into the translation process is that the Holy Spirit is a Person, a Spirit in the same sense that an angel is a spirit (or, in the old translations, a ghost), thus the old idea of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit as a Trinity of separate Persons somehow unified in one "Godhead." But the truth is that the Greek pronoun for "he" is the same as the one for "it," or in other words, the original text does not distinguish between the masculine and the neuter gender, so the use of the word, "He" is a choice – not necessarily a bad choice, since it is the Lord Himself who promised to come again in this spiritual form, but still one that can be misleading if we're not careful.

In fact the Spirit of Truth is not a separate Person at all but the power, energy and work of the Lord's truth IN us as it affects us. It is the *sense* or *sphere* of truth, the real meaning of it as it applies to our lives. THIS is what the Lord promised to provide when His disciples were really ready for it, and this is what He HAS provided in the revelation of the *spiritual sense* of His Word. We'll come back to this in a moment.

For now, think again about what YOU would do if you had an important message to communicate but the person who needed to hear it just wouldn't listen, or perhaps couldn't understand. One way of turning up the volume is to become more and more insistent, urging and pressing the person to hear. The appeal to reason is another way we try to get attention, offering analogies and explanations to convince. But in the end we have to realize that if the person doesn't WANT to hear he won't, or if he does he'll soon forget, or go defiantly some other way. And so we have to wait until the time is right, which often comes as a result of some personal crisis or felt NEED.

Now consider again the Lord's problem. How in the world can He get His vital message across to people who just don't get it – or the importance of it?

Oversimplifying, there are two main groups who need this message: those who have the Word but don't understand it properly, and those don't have it or don't think they need it. The Lord's initial followers were especially in the first group: they actually heard Him speak and saw His miracles, but still they didn't really understand what He was about. And many Christians today are also like this, and we may be, too, if we're not paying attention. But the Lord is patient, and waits for all of us until we're ready to listen.

For the disciples who followed Him in the world the Lord's first opportunities came after His resurrection when they were, as He had predicted, discouraged and scattered, fearing for the loss of their inspired, charismatic leader. But when He revealed Himself to them in His glorified body they were overwhelmed with joy and relief and were so convinced of His power that they took His message fearlessly throughout the Roman world. Then gradually, through the ages afterwards, the impact of His teachings became diluted, and mixed with all sorts of pagan ideas like the sacrificial blood atonement, corrupting the truth. So it was necessary for the Lord to come again – as He also had predicted, but HOW? What could He now do that He hadn't done before to get through, to help people understand, to make a lasting impression? And what could He say that would get the attention of unbelievers, or the worldly minded?

Well, in order to be sure people really were and are ready to listen, rather than appearing in a bolt of lightning or an overwhelming vision, we believe He appeared in the age of enlightenment to a specially trained and talented individual who could present His teachings in a calm, dispassionate and yet compelling manner so that anybody who is genuinely interested can get the message. That man, of course, was Emanuel Swedenborg, whose birth date happens to be today, and that message is the Spirit of Truth, *the spiritual sense of the Word*.

And when you think about the nature of this revelation you'll see that it does exactly what any one of us would do in order to get through. First, it turns up the volume of the communication by presenting *volume* after *volume* of appeals to the reader – some 35 volumes in English, not counting 30 or more volumes of what we sometimes call the scientific or philosophical works that set the stage for the deeper spiritual concepts involved. If one book or topic doesn't appeal to the reader then there are others – many others with many different approaches to the same theme – that offer opportunities for us to hear. In addition there is relentless repetition of key concepts from book to book, so that if we miss something the first time we are sure to see it later, and when we see it later then we can then integrate it with what we've learned before.

Among all these presentations are, more than anything, the most urgent and interesting appeals to reason. Every chapter and paragraph of every single book is written with a view to explaining what it is about in a logical progression of thought that flows from generals to particulars, from principles to applications, from over-riding concepts to the details of everyday life. In fact, the style of the revelation is so formal and so carefully constructed that we may at times find it tedious, especially if we're not in the mood for it. On the other hand, the style is so consistent that we can skim just about any book and get the gist of it by simply reading the first paragraphs of each chapter and the first few lines of each passage. The rest is all supporting evidence and illustrations.

Then again, the illustrations can be stunning, often heart-warming, and they, too, are given to help convince but from the burden of experience. So in one passage we find Swedenborg saying,

“I foresee 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, published in 1768).

So Mr. Swedenborg is associated with the Spirit of Truth, not because he is that Spirit, but because through him the Lord has revealed HIMSELF in ways that were not possible before and that have the power to HELP us believe in and understand His Word – which is why the Holy Spirit is called “the Helper,” “the Comforter,” or in the old translations, “the Paraclete,” a Greek word from a verb that means to beseech or exhort as well as to comfort. And do the new teachings not beseech or exhort us to believe? Do they not comfort us with new understanding? As Swedenborg wrote more than once about the deeper truths and holiness of Scripture,

“...In order to remove all doubt as to such being the character of the Word, the Lord has revealed to me the Word's internal sense. In its essence this sense is spiritual, and in relation to the external sense, which is natural, is as soul is to body. This sense is the spirit which gives life to the letter; it can therefore bear witness to the divinity and holiness of the Word, and convince even the natural man, if he is willing to be convinced” (SS #4, TCR #192).

That said, let's go back to the Gospel of John and review again the teachings about the Holy Spirit. This is from chapter 14, the whole context of which includes the Lord's clear declaration to Philip and the other disciples that “He who has seen Me has seen the Father,” thus that the heavenly Father is IN Him as the soul is in its own body. Now notice how the Father, Son and Holy Spirit are ALL one, all manifested in the wisdom of His Word. We read,

“If you love Me, keep My commandments. And I will pray the Father, and He will give you another Helper, that He may abide with you forever, even the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees Him nor knows Him; but you know Him, for He dwells with you and will be in you. I will not leave you orphans; I will come to you” (John 14:15-18; see also v. 26).

Think about this. Think carefully. “I will pray the Father, and He will give you another Helper, that **HE** may abide with you forever...” “He” is the Father, and the point is that “He” may abide with us forever. And how does He do that? – in the Spirit of His own truth “which the world cannot receive because it neither sees Him nor knows Him; but you know Him, for He dwells with you and will be in you.”

The point is that the Spirit of Truth is not a Person apart from Jesus any more than Jesus is a Person apart from the Father. The Father is IN Him and the Holy Spirit is Himself as He affects us with His love and power. In fact, as He plainly says concerning that Spirit – the Helper, the Comforter, – “**I** will not leave you orphans; **I** will come to you.” And HOW will He come to us? – by presenting the spiritual meaning of His own Word in a new body of doctrine that empowers us with wisdom and understanding to keep His commandments.

But the thing is, in order to preserve our freedom this new doctrine had to be presented by means of a man, a person of flesh and blood whose word could be accepted or not but who had the credentials of extraordinary intellect and experience so that he could counter the usual arguments against what he observed. For most of all, this was his special role – the role of an observer. After all, Swedenborg didn't invent any novel or extravagant doctrines, he simply saw what the Scriptures really mean and how the laws of spiritual life really work, and with his typical insightful discipline meticulously wrote all this information down so that we could see it, too, and understand it, and use it for good. In that sense he did nothing more than light a lamp and shine a light on the Word itself. But what a powerful and radiant light that is! And what a labor of love it was for him to write it all down – at least 12,000 pages in Latin, with a quill pen, TWICE (for he wrote two drafts of everything to make sure it was right), publishing every one of them with his own money, and most without even attaching his name to the works.

So, are we convinced? If we are it will not be just because of some eccentric 18th century Swedish polymath's claims, but rather because we see the truth – the Spirit of Truth – flowing out of the Word itself in what he wrote. For as he said, “The Second Coming of the Lord is not in person, but in the Word, which is from Him, and which is Himself” (TCR 776). This is the Helper, the Comforter, the Holy Spirit whom the heavenly Father sends in His name, which will teach us all things, and which will bring to our remembrance all things that HE has said to us (John 14:26).

Amen.

Lessons: Matthew 5:1-10
Children's talk: “They shall be comforted” – by the Truth

John 16:12-15 & 25-30
True Christian Religion #139:selections