

## THE IMPORTANCE OF THE PRE-THEOLOGICAL WORKS

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Today we celebrate the birthday of Emanuel Swedenborg, the Lord's servant, who in the humility of his later life was able happily to acknowledge his own nothingness as he undertook his Divine mission to reveal the Divine Human; so making God forever visible to man. As Swedenborg said: "These works are by the Lord who used me as the means (*a Domino per me*)."

He was but an instrument in the hands of our Creator, who used the vessels of his mind to reveal Divine truth much as mortal men might use a pen to express their knowledges. This analogy of the pen can be taken a step further to illustrate something more of the nature of Divine revelation.

In ancient times, when men wrote on clay, a pen was a very impractical instrument. A pen will flow freely across a piece of paper, but on clay we need something that will make a sharp, clear imprint. For clay, a stylus is a far more practical writing implement. The implement is also a factor in determining the mode of expression. In writing in clay, our flowing form of script is impractical. Our whole alphabet is designed to be written on paper with a flowing pen. On clay, using a wedge-shaped stylus, an entirely different alphabet is necessary. The cuneiform alphabet of the ancient Mesopotamians was far more practical for their writing materials. Only with the development of paper was it possible for men to develop our present alphabet and writing tools. So we see that, with the development of man's scientific knowledge, the modes whereby he expressed his new knowledge changed.

The case is somewhat similar with the expression of the Divine Human to man. The Lord, of course, does not change, for God is unchanging; yet man's ability to see the Divine did change. Coinciding with man's developing ability to see the Divine, there was a development in the expression of the Divine to man. In ancient times, man saw the Lord in a Word, a representative image of the Divine. Moses and the prophets were instruments in the

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hands of the Lord. They were used to express truth to the people of their day. Yet, because their ability to see the Lord was greatly limited, the language which the Divine, of necessity, had to use to express truth was suited to this limited knowledge. It was representative of rational truth, rather than rational truth itself. Today we, as it were, have to translate this representative language of the Old Testament in order to understand it.

Just as the clay tablet of old demanded both a different alphabet and a different instrument, so man's ability to see the Divine, limited as a result of his desire for evil, demanded different instruments and a different mode of expressing truth.

The stylus was an inflexible instrument. It stamped out shapes according to the impress of the writer. The instruments which the Divine used at that time were similarly inflexible. Moses and the prophets did not understand the spiritual meaning of the representatives which they used, but they could only, as it were, impress those representatives into the print of Divine organization. They did have an understanding of what they wrote, but their understanding was limited to the *representatives* of what they wrote. They did not comprehend the spiritual sense. Like the stylus, they were inflexible or obedient scribes.

Now, of course, Swedenborg in this analogy answers to the pen. When, by the leading of Divine providence, men were prepared to accept a rational revelation of the Divine Human—that is, when men were prepared to see God—the Lord was able to use a new type of implement with which to express Himself. Also, He was able to use a new form of language. In the Writings, we see Divine truth directly accommodated to rational understanding. The need for representative expression of truth no longer exists. Indeed, all former revelations of truth are now also raised by the Writings to their own level, for we now learn from the Writings of the spiritual sense. We no longer need this former expression of representative truth, except for purposes of introduction to and confirmation of the now open truth of the New Word. As we read in *Arcana Coelestia*: “The historical parts [of the Word which are representative] have been given in order that infants and children may thereby be initiated into the reading of the Word; for the historical parts are delightful, and rest in their minds, whereby communication is given them with the heavens;” (6333:4 cf. 3690:2).

So we see that Swedenborg served the Lord in a unique manner. The New Word, which was given through him, was as it were written with a new implement in a new language. As the Lord said: "Behold, I make all things new." (Rev. 21:5)

There is one further idea that we can draw from our analogy of the pen. In writing, we are limited to the abilities of the instrument we are using. In addition to this, there are often imperfections in our instruments. How often have we picked up a pen and found it to write dark and then light? As long as we could read what we had written, the imperfections of the pen did not really hamper our expression of knowledge but we were somewhat limited by it. The Lord also is limited in accommodating His Divine truth to men, and this in accordance with the instrument He uses. Even when He took on the Human by assuming a body in this world, the expression of His Divine nature was limited by the instrument used. Indeed, the destruction of the former Christian church can be traced directly to a false concept of this instrument—the body of our Lord on earth. Their idea of a tri-personal god was a result of concentrating on the person of the Lord and failing to see the Divine essence in it.

Swedenborg, then, when considered as an instrument in the Divine hands, must also have been subject to certain imperfections or misunderstanding. The New Word given to mankind by means of him is truth accommodated. It had to be confined to the limits of the instrument used—the mind and body of Swedenborg. We of the church must ever be aware of this simple fact, for if we are not, we will fall prey to the same destructive elements that led the former Christian church to commit suicide. We must be willing to acknowledge the imperfections of the New Word, which in general can be characterized as certain scientific errors and certain slips of the pen (such as the somewhat famous passage which states that ivory comes from camels or the one in *Divine Providence* concerning progeny of mixed racial marriages). Yet we must be ready to acknowledge these imperfections as something apart from, but necessary to, the Divine revelation now with us. Just as the body which the Lord took on from Mary was apart from the Divine Human, but necessary to the glorification of that Human, so the accommodation of truth through Swedenborg is both apart from and necessary to the open sight of the Lord now given to the New Church. We can say that scientific errors exist in

the New Word, but we must clearly recognize that these come from Swedenborg, the instrument, and are not Divine. Just as the pen will write both dark and light without destroying the ideas we are trying to convey, so too have the instruments of Divine revelation affected the accommodation of Divine truth without destroying that truth.

Yet, with this acknowledgment, we must be ever on guard lest we fall prey to the more insidious heresy of separation of the Divine. The present heresy of the trinity in Christendom was permitted lest men deny the Divinity of Jesus Christ. We, too, could come to deny the Divinity of the New Word if we tried to separate its parts saying, "This is of Swedenborg, while this is not." All Divine accommodation of truth is Divine on its own level. It may be veiled, but these very veils do express the Divine. There may be illustrations of spiritual truth more in accord with scientific facts, which with enlightenment we may come to see, but we can rest assured that those illustrations given in the Writings do indeed illustrate the spiritual truth therein. We cannot pick and choose from the Word.

In all forms of Divine revelation there is accommodation of truth in accordance with the nature of the vessel used. But also there is, in greater or less proportion, clear teaching of genuine truth: open truth which men cannot misunderstand unless they really try. The Ten Commandments in the Old Testament offer one example of such genuine truth. Here truth lies as it were unveiled. Yet even such open teachings as these are accommodated truth. They have been written in natural words which are subject to the definitions which men interpret. For example, the commandment "Thou shalt not kill" in the Hebrew means, to the best of our knowledge, thou shalt not commit murder—yet some men have decided this Commandment should apply even to accidental killing.

The Writings, of course, contain more open truth than any previous revelation. In their pages we can plainly see the Lord. We can approach His very essence—His Divine love—as we enter into its earthly form of Divine wisdom. Yet even the Writings are an accommodation of truth. The Writings are written in natural language, and the words used in the Writings are subject to men's interpretation.

Now, of course, in all Divine revelation the Lord has guarded against mankind's perversions. Each successive revelation has

been written in a language which can be called dead; a language which is no longer changing as to its definitions of words; a language past its zenith; a language which had a period of flower when its words were carefully defined and carefully noted so that anyone using this language would normally use the definitions prescribed during this former period. Hence, all Divine revelation has been written in languages which are least subject to change—languages which are no longer in popular use where the influence of slang and changing connotations may alter definitions.

In passing, however, we should note that these so-called dead languages do change. Scholars investigating different aspects of languages have found that some of the meanings we have applied to certain words in these languages are incorrect. For example, no one today can honestly say that the coat of many colors which Jacob gave Joseph was really a many-colored coat. The ancient meaning of the word is now lost. There are also other changes in these dead languages of revelation which we do not have time to note. Yet, of particular importance to the New Church man, are the changes which the Latin language—the language of the Writings—has undergone. The Latin of Swedenborg is not the Latin of Cicero. He used constructions foreign to the classical period. Also, because Swedish was his native tongue, his Latin was influenced by that language. There are Swedish constructions and even Swedish idioms in the Latin which Swedenborg used. It almost goes without saying that the New Church scholar who would understand the Writings must be familiar with such influences. But where do we learn of these things? Obviously, our only source is the works of Swedenborg—the Writings themselves—and, in addition, the pre-theological works—the works written by Swedenborg prior to his call. It would seem that, for the study of Swedenborg's Latin, the pre-theological works would be the more important—for it was while writing these earlier works that Swedenborg, under the leading of providence, developed his Latin prose style. The changes in this style which may be found in the Writings would be expected to be minor as opposed to those of the pre-theological works. Yet, of course, such changes would be very important, for they would have been made under the direct guidance of the Lord. And so, if we could understand why such changes were made, we could far better see the truth that necessitated such a change. As far as I know, no study of such change in Swedenborg's Latin con-

structions from his earlier works to the Writings has been made, and I myself have no illustrations of such changes. Yet it is to be expected that future generations of New Church scholars may well gain deeper insight into the truths of the New Word through such studies. Here, then, lies an as yet untouched use of Swedenborg's pre-theological works—a use that may in future reap great rewards.

There is another aspect to this question of the language of the Writings. Swedenborg was a scholar. He thought deeply and often found no words in the Latin language that properly defined his thoughts. For this reason, he often found it necessary to define the terms which he used. Such definitions of terms can be found throughout the pre-theological works. Now, as is the case with any deep thinker, such terms were not defined once and then consistently used in the same way in later works. As ideas changed, the necessity of changing definitions arose. Usually, however, these ideas were not discarded—deeper thought on a subject deepened the definitions. The terms, as it were, grew to maturity. In the case of Swedenborg, this gradual maturity of ideas was under the special leading of providence—for the Lord was to use these ideas to convey His own infinite truth. Now, as any student knows, it is much easier to learn by first learning something in a simplified form and then adding to it deeper and deeper layers of meaning. In the study of mathematics, for example, we do not begin with the differential equations of calculus, but rather learn first the very simple equation two plus two equals four. From this beginning we can progress to the more sophisticated equations of advanced mathematics.

In the Writings, many of the terms used had already reached the sophisticated level. Swedenborg had already defined these terms in his earlier works. Hence, if we would really understand such terms with all their connotations, we must trace their development in the pre-theological works. Without this tracing, our knowledge of the Writings will be impaired. It seems to me that this is a most important reason why the pre-theological works of Swedenborg have in providence been preserved for the New Church. For through such studies of the terms of the Writings, as seen developing in the pre-theological works, future generations of New Church men will be able to enter ever more fully into the Holy City New Jerusalem—the doctrine for the New Church.

With enough desire, we can begin with a sophisticated term of the Writings and by a careful comparison of all its usages in the Writings arrive at a clear understanding of its meaning. And whether we study the pre-theological works or not, such a careful comparison must be made. Yet in such a study we might begin with a definition learned from a dictionary and then change it to fit the usage of the Writings. There is in this method the danger of allowing something which does not belong to the term to cling to it, however careful our study might be. It would seem to be a far better method to begin with Swedenborg, taking the word as he learned it, and then tracing all the growing aspects of that term even to its first usage in the Writings. In this way we could follow in the pattern of providence which led to the incorporation of that term in Divine revelation.

Studies along these lines have been undertaken by several New Church scholars and have produced lasting benefits. For example, the term "degree" has been carefully analyzed in its development through the pre-theological works, and by means of such study many insights into the Writings' use of that term have been attained. However, we should recognize that only the surface of this source of insight has been tapped. The future offers much promise for increased enlightenment, seeing that almost all the terms of the Writings can be found in the pre-theological works.

Here is one illustration of what can be seen by this method. In the *Word Explained*—a work written by Swedenborg after the Lord had appeared to him but before he began the *Arcana Coelestia*—we read concerning the terms "representative" and "significative":

The question arises as to whether the whole of the old church was a representative church; for to represent the true worship of God Messiah, and to signify it, are two distinct things. In what way representing differs from signifying can be evident from the fact that the external man represents while the internal man signifies; the external man being here taken for the natural man, whatsoever his quality. Consequently, the latter is said to represent, in that he places the worship of God Messiah in externals, but he who places it in internals is said to signify . . . (WE 5572).

Now from this distinction between representatives and significatives consider the following often repeated statement of the Writings: "All things [in the Old Testament] are representative, and the words are significative." (AC 2075, cf. AC 1401, 1407, 1408,

1783, 2143, 2607, 2953, 9481:2, etc.) When we realize that a word is an abstraction from a thing, and is therefore internal to that thing, we can gain from the passage in the *Word Explained* a real insight into this simple statement of the Writings. In future generations such examples will be increased many times over and, by this means, much more of the infinite truth of the New Word will become clear.

We have now discussed two very important uses of the pre-theological works to the Church. First, they will aid in our understanding of the Latin which Swedenborg knew and which the Lord, therefore, used in giving His new revelation of truth. Second, these works will aid us in comprehending the terms which the Lord in His providence led Swedenborg to develop as proper containants of this truth.

There is still a third most important use of these works—for in these works Swedenborg not only developed a style of writing and definitions of certain terms, but he also recorded the knowledge which the Lord had led him to acquire. In other words, in the pre-theological works we find a record of the vessels which the Lord used in accommodating His truth to men. For example, in these works we learn the science Swedenborg had at his command; hence, we learn what tools the Lord would be able to use in the Writings. Knowledge of these tools will help us to understand why certain scientific errors appear in the Writings, for the purpose of Divine revelation is not to give man scientific data. Man can learn this for himself. The purpose of revelation is rather to give man knowledge of truth on degrees beyond his ken, degrees of spiritual truth which can never be discovered by science. Divine revelation, then, will use accepted scientific facts.

Many examples of this principle can be found in all forms of revelation, but one will illustrate it. In the *Apocalypse*, we read of a star falling to earth, an occurrence which now seems scientifically impossible, but which, at the time of the writing of this book, was an accepted possibility. Because of this general principle, we can explain why scientific errors might occur in revelation without injuring our devotion to the spiritual truth such illustrations convey. In the Writings, then, should we find some scientific error, we would be able from our study of the pre-theological works to demonstrate that this error was accepted scientific fact in Swedenborg's mind, and so would have to be used in the accommo-

dation of truth, for the nature of the Writings is such that Swedenborg could not write of something he could not understand. Because the Writings are infinite truth, we, and future generations of New Church men, will be able to understand far more in the Writings than did Swedenborg. His understanding will appear most elementary in later generations.

There is another aspect to these general concepts which we have yet to consider. In the Writings, when compared to the pre-theological works, there are certain changes in scientific data. Such changes are most important, for they show things which Swedenborg learned from the spiritual world—things which he had to learn for the sake of the Writings, but which he could learn only from heaven. The need for such instruction, prior to the Writings, is amply illustrated by the fact that Swedenborg spent at least two years in communication with spirits prior to beginning the *Arcana Coelestia*. From our studies of the pre-theological works, we can get a clearer understanding of what these things were and then can, perhaps, better understand why they had to be learned.

Let us consider one illustration of these changes. In the *Hieroglyphic Key*—a work written by Swedenborg in 1744, which was during the period of his calling by the Lord—we read: “The human race will constantly endure, nor will the world ever perish, so long as God, by means of His spirit and the angels, is able to enlighten human societies with intelligence and the rays of wisdom.” (Psych. Trans. 169) Now compare this statement with one found in *The Last Judgment*: “But although the human race, by separation from the Divine, might perish on one earth, which, however, is provided against by the Lord, yet still they would continue on other earths; for that there are earths in the universe to some hundreds of thousands, may be seen in the little work, the Earths in our Solar System called Planets, and the Earths in the Starry Heaven.” Notice that Swedenborg had now learned about life on other planets—something which he could only truly understand from seeing spirits of these planets. Knowledge of life on other planets was essential to the revelation of the Lord’s omnipotence and infinity, yet we might also note that the total number of planets given by Swedenborg does not seem to be so important to this concept; for contrary to the hundreds of thousands given by him in the passage, scientists now estimate the

number of stars to be in excess of 50 billion billions, which would probably place the number of planets at at least 300 billion billions, on the basis of six planets to each sun.

So we can see that it was necessary for Swedenborg to learn of life on other planets, but that the reason he learned of this was not to deliver scientific data to men on earth—for he apparently did not learn of the specific number of planets. Because of this, we should not be too hasty in trying to claim scientific knowledge from the Writings, but should use them as our Lord intended, so that we might see Him and thereby fulfill His purpose in our creation.

To sum up, there are three important uses in our study of the pre-theological works: to learn of Swedenborg's Latin style, to learn of the definitions of terms used by Swedenborg, and to learn of the natural facts which Swedenborg accepted as truths.

Let me return to the analogy of the pen and the alphabet for one final consideration. It is not essential in our knowledge of a written passage to know exactly what instrument was used, or even the alphabet used. Knowledge of the instrument may explain certain problems we have in making out certain letters, but even if we do skip a letter or two we will probably understand what has been written. Also, if we cannot read the alphabet in which the writing occurs, we may well be able to get someone to read it to us. What is important is that some among us have a knowledge of both of these things and that we can trust them to explain faithfully to us what they know.

The study of the pre-theological works and their relationship to the Writings requires special skills and a special devotion. It is a study for the few, but we who do not undertake this study should be most appreciative of the work others do on our behalf. We should respect their particular devotion and encourage them in their studies.

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## A VISIT TO EUROPE

During a visit to Europe in the summer of 1964, I was able to visit with people who are interested in the same sort of things as are the members of the Swedenborg Scientific Association, namely the study and application of the Writings and philosophical works of Emanuel Swedenborg.