

# TWO THEORIES OF TRUTH

---

Dan A. Synnestvedt<sup>\*</sup>

## INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this article is to contrast two theories of truth: the secular Postmodern theory and the Neo-Christian theory. This article constitutes a sketch of a very large topic. It has seven sections. The first two introduce the topic by stating what truth is, why the subject is important, and in what sense it is important. The third, fourth, and fifth sections proceed in a dialectical manner. The secular Postmodern assertion that there is no such thing as absolute truth is followed by the Neo-Christian assertion that there is: God is absolute truth. The objection that even if there is absolute truth, we cannot know it, is met in sections four and five. In these sections I not only show (from revelation) that we can know the truth, but also that we can have an awareness that what we know is the truth. The sixth section is designed to rebut the secular Postmodern assertion that we cannot love the truth for its own sake. The final section is entitled "A Cautionary Tale." It is a memorable relation that illustrates the fate of a secular Postmodernist in the life after death.

## I. WHAT IS TRUTH?

### A BRIEF ANSWER TO A LARGE QUESTION

The focus of this article is the Neo-Christian absolutist theory of truth in relation to the secular Postmodern relativist theory of truth. We will begin by laying the groundwork for the Neo-Christian theory.

According to the Heavenly Doctrine<sup>†</sup> of the New Church (the basis of the Neo-Christian theory), truth is a form of good (AC 4574) or, truth is the

---

<sup>\*</sup>Dr. Synnestvedt is Associate Professor of Philosophy at Bryn Athyn College of the New Church. His article on Kant and Swedenborg, "Emanuel, Immanuel: Magic, Miracles, and Morals in Enlightened Religion," appeared in the July–December 1998 issue of *The New Philosophy*, and he will have an article, "Swedenborg and the Ancient Greek Philosophers," in a book on Swedenborg and philosophy forthcoming from the Swedenborg Society. The author welcomes comments on this paper. They can be sent to Bryn Athyn College, P.O. Box 717, Bryn Athyn, PA, USA 19009, or to [dasynnes@newchurch.edu](mailto:dasynnes@newchurch.edu)

<sup>†</sup>The theological works of Swedenborg are referred to as "the Writings" or "the Heavenly Doctrine" in this article.

quality of good (AC 9154). When good is formed so that it may be intellectually perceived, then it is truth (AC 3049). Why don't more people know that truth is a form of good? Here is part of the answer:

Few at the present day know what truth is in its genuine essence; because it is so little known what good is, when yet all truth is from good, and all good is through truths, [*Arcana Coelestia* nos. 2507, 3603, 9186, 9995.] (*HD* 20)

So at the heart of our world's ignorance about truth is its ignorance of good. And since our world is also ignorant about good, so defining truth as a form of good is not very helpful. Consider this statement: "Everything that proceeds from love is called good, and everything that proceeds from wisdom is called truth" (*DLW* 31). This moves the problem up one level, but does not solve it because we are also ignorant about love and wisdom. Most people know that there is such a thing as love, but they don't know what it is (*DLW* 1). People, especially modern philosophers, don't realize that love and wisdom aren't airy-fairy things hovering in the atmosphere or vague words of approbation. Divine love and wisdom are substance and form itself—indeed, life itself—and we creatures are recipients of that love and wisdom (*DLW* 28, 40, 47). Love and wisdom constitute our very lives, and not just in general, but in the particulars of our minds and bodies. Thus good and truth are powerful Divine metaphysical forces operating in both a supernatural and natural way.

What is this powerful metaphysical force called love? It is the essence of love to be conjoined with others outside of the self, to share one's own gifts with others in a reciprocal manner, and to feel the joy of others as joy in one's self (*DLW* 47). Good and truth, love and wisdom, are expressions of Divine order (*HD* 17, *DLW* 37) and neither has reality without the other for they are essentially one (*DP* 11). Falsity and evil relate to things that are contrary to Divine order. Thus, evil and falsity are the opposites of good and truth, just as foolishness and hatred are the opposites of wisdom and love. In other words, love is orderly, satisfying, altruistic relationships. These statements may be taken as platitudes, but they are far from obvious to some people, and they are fighting words to the secular Postmodernist.

Since there is spiritual, moral, and natural good, and truth is a form of good, then there is spiritual, moral, and natural truth (*HD* 16). A passage in *Heaven and Hell* puts it this way:

The genuine rational consists of truths and not of falsities; whatever consists of falsities is not rational. There are three kinds of truths, civil, moral, and spiritual. Civil truths relate to matters of judgment and of government in kingdoms, and in general to what is just and equitable in them. Moral truths pertain to the matters of everyone's life which have regard to companionships and social relations, in general to what is honest and right, and in particular to virtues of every kind. But spiritual truths relate to matters of heaven and of the Church, and in general to the good of love and the truth of faith. (468)

From these passages we can see that there are three degrees of truth and that they are forms of good. In other words, good expresses itself on each level of life by means of truths.

Since good and truth relate to the Divine order, there are also three types of law: laws of spiritual, moral, and civil life (*HH* 531). This is because the Lord created the universe by means of the Divine truth and all the laws of order by which He preserves the universe are instances of truth (*TCR* 87:2). The law of God and God's truth are one and the same (*AC* 7463; 7381; 7206; *DP* 70). The term "law" in its widest sense signifies the whole Word (*AC* 6752; *Lord* 10; *TCR* 288). In a more specific sense, "law" refers to the Ten Commandments. These, too, are classified according to three degrees. The first three commandments (worship one God, do not swear, keep the Sabbath) are spiritual laws, the next four (honoring parents, prohibiting murder, adultery, and theft) are laws of civil life, and the last three (prohibiting false witness and covetousness) are laws of moral life (*HH* 531). The Ten Commandments are laws in that they are expressions of the Divine order and each is an instance of truth, that is, a manifestation of good.

To illustrate: it is true that a married man ought not to have sexual relations with another woman, and it is true that a married woman ought not to have sexual relations with another man. It is also true that a husband and wife ought to love one another and show this love by having

sexual relations only with each other. This is true because these statements, faithful behaviors, and attitudes are manifestations of good. These manifestations are good because they are wisely loving, that is, they promote selflessness, conjunction, reciprocation, and joy rather than selfishness, estrangement, greediness, and misery.

To summarize: good and truth proceed from love and wisdom on three levels of life and they can be written down as laws and stories that explain how to have orderly, successful, satisfying relationships with God and other people.

## II. WHY TRUTH IS IMPORTANT

If we want to know how to love other people wisely, then we need to know the truth—that is it in a nutshell. But more needs to be said.

First, considered *by itself*, truth is not as important as good. The reason I say this is that even though the ideal for all human beings is the conjunction and balance of genuine good with genuine truth, when there is an imbalance between the two, good loves trump true thoughts. Indeed, good loves even trump false thoughts (as long as they are the right kind of false thoughts; see *HD* 21 and *AC* 9259). Witness the variety of people who are in heaven—despite the fact that they do not believe 100% of the truth. The Lord is most merciful because He looks primarily upon our hearts, not our heads or hands.

Yet we have to be careful with this teaching because, if pushed too far, we might mistakenly conclude that it does not matter at all what a person thinks is true or what a person believes. This is not a correct conclusion, and the Word speaks volumes against it. Even though the Divine love wills to save all, it can save only by means of Divine wisdom and its laws. Divine love cannot transcend these laws because Divine love and Divine wisdom are one and act in unison (*DLW* 37). The subject of the first chapter in *The New Jerusalem and Its Heavenly Doctrine* is good and truth, and in passage twelve we find this bold declaration: “there is nothing more necessary for man, than to know what good and what truth are.” What we think is true *does* matter and, more importantly, what we believe *about* truth matters. The reason for making the statement that truth, when considered by itself, is not as important as good, is that I want the reader to

know that I am well aware that in the long run, what we think is true does not matter as much as having good motives. ["The Word teaches that the first and foremost matter of doctrine is love to the Lord and charity toward the neighbor" (AC 2588:2).]

The framework for what is written about truth is the circle of life. The circle of human life is to know, to understand, to will, and to do what is true and good (AE 242:4; AC 4247, 10,331; DLW 422). For good to be good and truth to be truth, they must be part of the circle of life. The circle of life involves taking what we read and hear into the memory (knowing it) and then into the thought (understanding it) and then willing and acting upon it—really living it (AC 4247:3, 4904, 5340, 5820, 8881). All these activities spring from the love at the center of the circle, for love is the life of a human being (DLW 1). Please put what is said about truth in the context of a full human life. I am *not* asserting that truth is all there is, that love or good deeds don't count—they all do.

Having made this general point about the importance of love and motivation in the circle of life, the next thing to know about truth is that it is important for us in many ways. *The New Jerusalem and Its Heavenly Doctrine* lists the uses of truth with references to passages in the *Arcana Coelestia*. Through truth there is faith, charity toward the neighbor, love to the Lord, conscience, innocence, purification from evils, regeneration, intelligence, wisdom, interior beauty, power against evils and falsities, order, heaven, and true humanity (HD 24). What a list! All of these arise through truths from good. "Besides, through truths man is led to good, and not without truths, [*Arcana Coelestia*] nos. 10,124, 10,367" (HD 23). Certainly truth plays no small part in the quest for spiritual fulfillment, the good life, and happiness. The person who believes that he or she can do spiritual good that is acceptable to the Lord without truths from the Word is "*much deceived.*" "Goods without truths are not goods, and truths without goods are not truths with man, although *in themselves they may be truths*; for good without truth is like the voluntary of man without the understanding, which voluntary is not human, but is like a beast's, or like that of a carved image which an artificer causes to operate" (AR 935, emphasis added. Notice the realist nature of the second emphasized phrase).

Our approach to the topic of truth, namely, what we think *about* truth, is significant. The reason is that it deals with a fundamental assumption

that we all make about the metaphysical and epistemological nature of truth. As the following quotation shows, what we assume, including what we assume about the nature of truth, is of paramount importance for our spiritual and natural lives, both as individuals and as a civilization:

Once any assumption is adopted, even if falsity itself, it can be confirmed in countless ways and so be presented to outward appearance *as though* it were the truth itself, as anyone may well know . . . But from a false assumption nothing other than falsities can flow; and even if truths are introduced among them, these nevertheless become falsified truths when that false assumption is confirmed by means of them, for they are polluted by the very nature of the falsity. It is altogether different if truth itself is the assumption that is taken, and this is confirmed; for example, that love to the Lord and charity towards the neighbor are that on which the whole law hangs and about which all the prophets speak . . . (AC 2385, emphasis added)

In other words, it is important to get one's assumptions right, for they are like the first few links in a chain, or the first cause in a whole series of causes and effects. The problem with making a false assumption and then confirming it, especially when it is made for the sake of justifying a particular evil, or selfishness in general, is that it takes away our freedom of thought. Not only that, it even prevents us from knowing that we are in bonds (AC 5096). In other words, we can make ourselves prisoners of our own thought. Yet we need not be: "If you abide in My word, you are My disciples indeed. And you shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free" (John 8:31–32).

In this article I am not concerned with whether people think this or that particular theology (for example, Catholic or New Church theology, Christianity or Islam) is true, that is, accurately describes God and reality. Instead, I am concerned about the level beyond this, the assumptions that people make regarding the existence of truth and our ability to know it. I will explain the difference between a Neo-Christian realist view of truth and the anti-realist view espoused by secular Postmodern philosophers such as Richard Rorty.

### III. THE SECULAR POSTMODERN THEORY

One popular and influential philosophy today is Postmodernism. Secular Postmodernists deny the existence of absolute truth, or to put it positively, they affirm the relativity of truth. According to secular Postmodern philosophers, such as Richard Rorty, truth is subjective, limited by time and space, irreducibly many, constructed, changing, and bound by language. What we take to be true today is not representative of some eternal reality. Postmodernists deny the existence of a metanarrative, that is, a standard of truth that is independent of oneself and one's society. They are anti-realists concerning truth: truth is not something real that exists over and apart from an individual's, or group's, perception of what is true. According to Rorty, "a liberal society is one which is content to call 'true' whatever the upshot of such encounters [between competing vocabularies and perspectives]."<sup>1</sup> Truth is not "out there." Instead, truth is invented by mortals and their languages. "To say that truth is not out there is simply to say that where there are no sentences there is no truth, that sentences are elements of human languages, and that human languages are human creations."<sup>2</sup> If truth were to exist outside of us, our minds are so conditioned or influenced by our heredity, society, era, and ethnicity that we can't know the truth. Hence, secular Postmodernism is a form of skepticism.

The Postmodern deconstruction of Jacques Derrida, a famous French philosopher, purposefully tries to *not* clarify the meaning and ethical value of texts. Instead, he celebrates difference (as opposed to identity), subjectivity (as opposed to objectivity), art (as opposed to science), and undecidability.<sup>3</sup> Allegedly in a bid for freedom, Derrida announces that "The hermeneutic project which postulates a true sense of the text is disqualified under this regime."<sup>4</sup> In other words, one is not free to say in

---

<sup>1</sup> Richard Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 52.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

<sup>3</sup> Vincent B. Leitch, *Postmodernism: Local Effects, Global Flows* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1996), 32.

<sup>4</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Spurs: Nietzsche's Styles*, trans. Barbara Harlow (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979), 107, quoted in Leitch, 34.

his presence, or in the Postmodern dominion, that one has correctly interpreted a text and discovered its truth. When Derrida said this back in the 1970s, he was referring to philosophy in general and phenomenology in particular. One can see how antagonistic this claim is to the New Church when applied to biblical hermeneutics, especially the assertion that someone has discovered, or has been allowed to see, the true internal meaning of Genesis, Exodus, and Revelation.

Postmodernists are relativists and anti-realists not only when it comes to truth, but, since truth is a form of good, they are also relativists and anti-realists concerning good. “There is nothing right or wrong, but thinking makes it so.” That is the motto of the Postmodern relativist. The primary reason why it is important to consider the secular Postmodernist view of truth and the Neo-Christian view of truth is that an attack upon the realist and absolutist nature of truth is also an attack upon the good. Furthermore, as we saw above, an attack upon truth is also an attack upon law and, ultimately, upon love. By attacking truth at a metaphysical and epistemological level, the secular Postmodernist is attempting to undermine the idea that there is a determinate love, good, or law, on any level of life. In other words, epistemological relativism concerning truth leads to moral relativism. Although moral relativism is certainly a big concern, it is not dealt with directly here. (Peter Kreeft’s *A Refutation of Moral Relativism* is recommended.)<sup>5</sup>

If the secular Postmodern theory of truth is wrong, why is it appealing? It is so for both intellectual and emotional reasons. Both kinds of reasons are outlined below.

The Postmodern theory of truth is intellectually appealing because it has latched on to appearances and confirmed them. The appearances are these: that humans are the source of what is true and good, that life is a complex of contingencies, that humans are not capable of loving anything but the power associated with self and the world, and that this defines the framework for our knowledge claims.

The first two appearances are ones that are necessary for our freedom. Yet the Word warns us repeatedly not to mistake those appearances for

---

<sup>5</sup> Peter Kreeft, *A Refutation of Moral Relativism: Interviews with an Absolutist* (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1999).

the reality. We are supposed to acknowledge with the lips and the heart that God is the source of good and truth and that life is not a series of contingencies, but is the result of human freedom and Divine providence.

The third appearance (about power) is one that, as Western culture suffers from the consequences of the death of the first Christian church, finds much evidence in its support. In contrast to this, the overarching message of the Word is that there is hope for humans on our planet. A new church and a new civilization are possible, and there is evidence to support this too. While it is in one sense true that, of ourselves, we humans are not capable of loving anything but self and the world, it is a cynical and despairing point of view to remain content with this. Postmodernism is a view that is so jaundiced toward ideals that the phrase "With God, all things are possible" means nothing or rather, it means that some televangelist wants to take your money and build a new mansion. Postmodernists are sick of ideals.

Historically speaking, philosophers have repeatedly looked to something as a source of truth. In Medieval philosophy many philosophers looked first to God, and then to human reason. As the first Christian church fell, philosophers increasingly looked toward human reason, originally as it was used in philosophy and then, in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, as it was used in science. Philosophers' infatuation with science undermined their faith in philosophical reason. However, philosophers' confidence in nature, scientifically understood, as a source for truth, has been steadily undermined in the last half of the twentieth century. Between the criticisms of Positivism and the scholarship published in the history and philosophy of science, many philosophers now view science as just another fallible human instrument and nature as a social construction. Confidence in the self, whether imagination or conscience, was undermined by Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud. Thus to the contemporary philosopher, we have run out of sources for truth: God, human reason (the self), and nature are no longer viable. Instead, we must give up the quest for truth. That was the problem all along!

Richard Rorty's chronology is a little different than mine and his solution to our human predicament is the polar opposite of mine, but our analysis of Western intellectual history is very similar. Here is how he tells the story:

[O]nce upon a time we felt a need to worship something which lay beyond the visible world. Beginning in the seventeenth century we tried to substitute a love of truth for a love of God, treating the world described by science as a quasi divinity. Beginning at the end of the eighteenth century we tried to substitute a love of ourselves for a love of scientific truth, a worship of our own deep spiritual or poetic nature, treated as one more quasi divinity.

The line common to Blumenberg, Nietzsche, Freud, and Davidson suggests that we try to get to the point where we no longer worship *anything*, where we treat *nothing* as a quasi divinity, where we treat *everything*—our language, our conscience, our community—as a product of time and chance.<sup>6</sup>

It is interesting that when students read this sort of statement by a Postmodernist, they often interpret it as a form of nihilism. This is not Rorty's intent. Instead, Rorty assumes a certain kind of naturalism and proceeds to apply it as consistently as possible across the fields of human experience. However, if one accepts the reality of our spiritual transcendental lives, it is easy to see how a consistent naturalism leads toward nihilism.

The secular Postmodern theory of truth is emotionally appealing because it is a philosophy of avoidance. It allows people to avoid changing the way they feel about themselves and their ideas. It allows people to avoid the embarrassment of submitting to God and obeying principles that are not of their own making. It allows people to avoid making judgments that apply to anyone other than oneself. "I won't judge (meaning, judge negatively) your difference, and you can't judge mine." This, in fact, seldom happens, but it is part of the theory that makes it attractive to extreme individualists. One reason why Westerners don't like a realist theory of good and truth is that when good and truth meet up with falsities from lusts, they give us pains in the head (AC 5563). Swedenborg himself experienced this intense pain during his regeneration.

Not all of the consequences of Postmodernism are bad for the growth of Neo-Christianity. For example, the humanization of, and skepticism

---

<sup>6</sup> Rorty, 22, emphasis in original.

toward, science and empiricism is helping dethrone Scientism and Positivism—two idols of the Modern era. Moreover, Postmodernism is encouraging the growing fascination with the “paranormal.” These trends can open up space for the consideration of the supernatural and the legitimation of the spiritual world and its influence. Indeed, some think that we are headed for a “mystical culture.” However, since good is the ground for the seeds of truth and truth qualifies the good we do, should Western culture lose a significant amount of moral and civil good and continue to be confused about moral truth, it will be unable to recognize the “paranormal,” or spiritual, truths of the Word.

#### IV. THE NEO-CHRISTIAN THEORY

According to the Heavenly Doctrine, the secular Postmodernist claims about truth are false—every single one of them. This doctrine asserts that absolute truth does exist; that truth exists independently of our perception of it; that it is discovered, not constructed; that it is eternal and universal, not limited by time and space; that it is ultimately one, not irreducibly many; and that in itself it is unchanging, although truths change with us. The main point is this: it is a realist theory of truth that is imbedded in the Word. The truth exists over and apart from an individual’s, or group’s, perception of what is true. Moreover, metanarratives (comprehensive stories, universal standards) are not only possible, but inevitable. Also, Neo-Christianity (the New Church) of all the world’s religions, provides the best, most true metanarrative for life because it enjoins love and charity beyond the others (*AC* 2596). (And this despite the frank admission in this same *Arcana* passage that there are few genuine Christians, that is, people who live the doctrines of love and charity.)

Let us explore the contrast between the Neo-Christian theory of truth and secular Postmodernism by beginning with God.

Postmodern philosophers, like Rorty, who deny the existence of absolute truth deny the existence of God as well. This is not surprising. Since the Lord is good itself and truth itself (*HD* 25), those who deny the existence of absolute truth are often atheists. As we saw just above, Rorty’s goal is to have us not worship *anything*, to treat everything as a product of time and chance. Rorty follows Nietzsche in proclaiming the human ideal

as the “self-creating animal.”<sup>7</sup> In his attempt to escape God, Rorty turns himself into an idol. “That which one loves above all things is his god” (AE 950:3). Ironically, Rorty forgets that he has already been created, that he cannot stop his love and so cannot stop worshipping something. Let us put this in the form of a *reductio ad absurdum*.

To prove that Rorty is wrong about the ability of a human being to not worship anything or have anything function as a god in one’s life, assume that he is right. Assume further that love is the life of a person and that which one loves above all things is one’s god. From these assumptions it follows that if Rorty is right, a person must stop loving. But if a person stops loving, a person ceases to be alive or to be a human being, and this is absurd.

I do not mean to imply that all atheists are Postmodernists. The Council for Democratic and Secular Humanism (CODESH), a strident anti-religion, “atheistic” group headquartered in Buffalo, New York, is opposed to Postmodernism because it undermines their god—Science. Postmodernism makes for culturally strange bedfellows: both the CODESH group and some Evangelicals are united in opposing it. Even political leftists cannot tolerate the way that Postmodernists have abused science.<sup>8</sup>

Now we need to show three things: that God as the Infinite Being is absolute truth; that it is “not just” God that is absolute truth, but that the Lord, Jesus Christ, is absolute truth also; and that the Word is absolute truth. Since these three things have the same essence, they must be shown semi-serially.

In *Arcana Coelestia* we read that “the Infinite Divine cannot be called anything else than Good and Truth themselves. Consequently the human mind is not at all mistaken when it thinks of the Lord as Good itself and Truth itself” (AC 2011). Another passage asserts that within “Jehovah or the Lord there is nothing but that which is infinite, and this being so, no other idea can be conceived of Him than that He is the Being and Manifestation of all good and truth, that is, He is Good itself and Truth itself” (AC 2803). In explanation of the words “And great in goodness and truth” from

---

<sup>7</sup> Ibid, 27, 20.

<sup>8</sup> Alan Sokal and Jean Bricmont, *Fashionable Nonsense: Postmodern Intellectual’s Abuse of Science* (New York: Picador, 1998).

Exodus 34:6, *Arcana Coelestia* 10,619 avows that “the Divine is infinite, and nothing other can be said of the Infinite than that He is the Absolute, or Being itself, and so is absolute Goodness; and being absolute Goodness He is also absolute Truth since all truth is the complement of good.” Another *Arcana* passage uses the *via negativa* to help us think about the Lord:

... if one holds in mind the idea that everything within the Lord is Divine and that the Divine transcends one’s entire thought, altogether transcending even what angels can comprehend; and if as a consequence one removes from one’s mind everything comprehensible, one is left with the idea of pure Being and the Manifestation of that Being. That is to say, one then has an idea of the Celestial itself and the Spiritual itself, which are Good itself and Truth itself. (AC 5110:2)

Based upon the foregoing passages, we may conclude that there is an absolute Good and absolute Truth, or alternatively, Good Itself and Truth Itself, and that these are identified with other absolutes of Being and Existence Itself: God. Based upon the foregoing passages, we can formulate this hypothetical: If a person believes in God, then that person should believe in an absolute Truth. Also, if a person believes in absolute Truth, then that person has at least a tacit belief in God. If one desires to be a celestial or spiritual person, then he should believe in and live the idea of absolute good and truth.

What proceeds from the Divine is truth, although in itself it is good. It is called truth because it appears as light in heaven (AC 7056). The light of heaven is the Divine truth itself (AC 5319). By light in the Word is signified the Lord Himself because He is Good itself and Truth itself (AC 3195). The Word also proceeds from the Lord. In fact, the Writings proclaim that the Lord *is* the Word, as well as light, doctrine itself, and the truth (AC 2516). The Lord alone, specifically the Divine truth, is holy. The Lord, Who is and Who was, is the Word, enlightenment, and Divine truth itself (AR 666, 686). “The Lord is truth itself” (John 14:6; Rev. 3 [:7,14]; TCR 323). “For the Lord is truth itself, and so equally is the Word” (ibid.).

These passages in *Apocalypse Revealed* (666) and in *True Christian Religion* (323) refer us to the Gospel of John: That the Lord is the Word may be seen in John 1:1,14; that He is the truth in John 14:6; and that He is the Light

and consequently enlightenment in John 12:34–36. The Lord even as to His Human became the Divine law and the truth itself of that Law (AC 6717:3). In other words, Christians should believe in absolute truth and that the Lord is that truth. Should sincere New Church people believe in absolute truth? Yes. It is an article of the faith of the new heaven and the New Church that “Jehovah God is Love itself and Wisdom itself, or Good itself and Truth itself” (TCR 3). The belief in an absolute transcendental source of goodness and truth is something Neo-Christians have in common with all sincere believers from the three monotheistic religions of the world (Judaism, Christianity, and Islam). As the above passages from the *Arcana* show, it is also something that they share with all sincere people from whatever religion on the planet who believe in an Infinite Divine, or Being of all beings, and who develop a conscience in obedience to that Divine Being. Of course it is one thing to share this common belief when it is based on a fact that has been memorized; it is another to share this common belief from personal experience (especially repentance).

Since God is the Creator, not a created being, it should follow that Good and Truth themselves are not created. Indeed, it does follow. In *True Christian Religion* we find that truth, like life, love, good, charity, faith, and wisdom, cannot be created (TCR 40). Truth is “uncreate.” Thus the Postmodern idea that truth is somehow invented or created by humans, instead of existing independently of us, is erroneous. As we will see later on, we all have our own approach to the truth, and no one has the absolute pure truth. However, this is not what the Postmodernists are asserting. Their assertions go far beyond this.

Sometimes Postmodernists say that truth is merely a function of the way we use words, that there is no metaphysical aspect to truth, merely a linguistic one. The Writings assert the opposite of this.

Hardly anyone at the present time knows that truths possess any power. People think that truth is merely something said by a person in a position of power . . . Yet in fact truth and good are the fundamental principles which underlie everything in both worlds, the spiritual and the natural. Hardly anyone knows that they are the means by which the universe was created and is now preserved, and the means by which man

was made, so these two are the all in all. It is openly stated in John that the universe was created by means of Divine truth:

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was God; everything that was made was made by means of it, and the world was made by means of it. John 1: 1,3,10.

Also in the Psalms of David:

By the word of Jehovah the heavens were made. Ps. 33:6.

In both passages the Word means Divine truth. (TCR 224, Chadwick trans.)

Notice that truth is not the words that people in a position of power use to persuade others to do something. Instead, truth and good are metaphysical living forces that have the power of the Lord's creation and preservation in them. It may be the case that in Western culture, or some other society, people are persuaded to do and believe things because of the words that powerful people speak or write, but the Writings assert that just because this is the case, does not mean it ought to be, nor does it alter the reality of Divine order.

In explanation of the phrase "And perverts the words of the righteous" from Exodus 23:8, *Arcana* 9267 states that "The reason why truths are meant by 'the words' is that in the original language 'a word' means that which is something and has real existence, and from this means also the truth; for everything that has being (esse), which gives it real existence, has connection with the truth." So truth is related to words and it does have a linguistic aspect. Philosophers are correct in paying some attention to truth, reality, existence, and language. However, what this passage shows is that contrary to the Postmodern separation of the linguistic aspect of truth from any metaphysical foundation, the fact is the two are inseparable. Even the word "word" has reference to truth, which in turn has reference to being, and ultimately, to the Divine Being. Truth is not just word-games or spin; truth is, and ought to be taken by us as, reality. Thus Christian philosophers, such as Douglas Groothuis,<sup>9</sup> are right to affirm the correctness of the correspondence theory of truth in philosophy.

---

<sup>9</sup> Douglas Groothuis, *Truth Decay* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2000).

If God is truth and God is one, then the truth must also be one. As *True Christian Religion* 379 proclaims, truth cannot be fragmented or carved up so that one part verges to the left, and one part to the right, and still remain truth. All the countless truths of faith make up, as it were, a single body (ibid.). Truth is not, as the Postmodernists would have it, nothing but a series of disconnected statements that are incapable of order. Truth is not shot through with contingency. Instead, truth is “all of a piece.” Ideally, truths cohere together just as the parts of the body work with one another to form a unity. However numerous the truths of faith are and however various they appear, they are made one by the Lord, Who is the Word, life, light itself, and truth (*TCR* 354). The numerous truths of faith are like branches from a single vine, for the Lord links together scattered and divided truths, so to speak, into a single form (ibid.) Thus there is absolute truth in the sense that there is one, complete, and perfectly coherent Truth Itself. This means that, again as Douglas Groothuis has written, the coherence theory of truth is also compatible with a Christian view of truth.

### **A. Absolute Truth as Eternal and Universal Truth**

What does Neo-Christianity have to say about the Postmodernist claims? Rev. John Elliot, the translator of the Swedenborg Society edition of *Arcana Coelestia*, sometimes translates “Ipsissimum Verum” (the truth itself) or “veritas aeterna” (eternal truth) as “absolute truth” (*AC* 6191, 6405, 8443). Now if by “absolute truth” one means truth in its infinite purity, completely perfect and unrestricted, then (as we will see), we cannot claim to know the absolute truth. However, if by “absolute truth” we mean the eternal and universal truths revealed to human beings, then we can claim to know absolute truth.

Truth is eternal and universal. If God is Divine truth and God is eternal and universal, then Truth must be eternal and universal. In other words, just as God is not bound by time and space, so the truth is not bound by them either. *Arcana Coelestia* asserts that whatever the Lord utters is eternal truth since it comes from the very Being itself of truth and it is “unchangeable” (2842). As the Lord said when He was in the world: “Heaven and earth will pass away, but My words will by no means pass away” (Matt. 24:35). Truth, like the Lord, is both transcendent and imma-

ment. Hence, the Writings directly contradict the Postmodern idea that the truth is merely a function of one's place and one's historical time. Truth Itself is not local. Truth can function in local spaces at particular times, but it does so from a transcendental origin. In order to illustrate the subject, let me list examples of eternal and universal truths from the Word. As you read these eternal and universal truths, picture a loving smile on the Lord's face and a warm light in His eyes as He reaches out to take you by the hand.

It is an eternal truth that:

- "the Lord governs the whole universe" (AC 597:3)
- "the Lord is the source of all good and truth and life" (ibid.)
- "man's proprium was nothing but evil and in itself something dead" (AC 597:3)
- "man [a human being] does not live from himself . . .; yet if he did not appear to do so he could not possibly live at all" (AC 1712:3)
- "the Lord rules over heaven and earth, also that no one apart from the Lord is self-existent, consequently that all life flows in—life filled with goodness flowing in from the Lord, life filled with evil flowing in from hell" (AC 6325)
- "there is to be no attachment to any sort of religion involving evil" (AC 10,639)
- "the Lord alone [not self] is to be worshipped in faith and love" (ibid.)
- "all the good of innocence, charity, and faith is to be ascribed to the Lord" (AC 10,654)
- "influx is spiritual, not physical" (AE 1215)
- "as the Divine from itself and through that which proceeds from itself created all things, so it sustains all things" (ibid.)
- "sustentation is perpetual creation" (ibid.)
- "those who worship Him will be saved" (PP 382; Ps. 132:11–12)

These are all eternal truths, which means that they are not only true now, but that they have always been true and that they always will be true. When is an eternal truth not true? Never.

Truth is also universal, which means that it is all-embracing, worldwide, and comprehensive. To illustrate the subject, let the following examples be studied.

First, it is “a most universal truth” that “the Lord is the Sun of heaven, and that from this Sun is all the light in the other life; and that to angels and spirits . . . nothing at all of the light of the world appears; and also that the light of the world, which is from its sun, is only thick darkness to angels . . . From this universal correspondence all other correspondences are derived; for all things both in general and in particular have relation to the good which is of love, and to the truth which is of intelligence” (AC 3636, Potts trans.).

Next, it is the “universal truth of all” that the “Lord united His Human to the Divine Itself, and that from this man [humankind] has peace and salvation. And it is also a universal truth that man must be conjoined with the Lord, in order that he may have peace and salvation, and this is effected by means of regeneration” (AC 10,730:3, Potts trans.). In this quotation the first universal truth concerns the Lord’s glorification, and the second tells us how our hope for peace and salvation is related to our regeneration and the Lord’s glorification.

Third, here are quotations from the work *Conjugal Love* that contain examples of universal truths:

Everything in the universe has some relation to good and truth, as every intelligent person recognizes because it is a universal truth. One cannot help but recognize also that in each and every thing in the universe, good is united with truth and truth with good, because this, too, is a universal truth, which goes along with the other. (CL 60, Rogers trans.)

This correspondence also follows from the origin of conjugal love from the marriage between good and truth, referred to under the preceding heading, because the church in a person is a marriage of good and truth. For a marriage of good and truth is the same thing as a marriage of charity and faith, since good is a matter of charity and truth is a matter of faith. One cannot help but recognize that this marriage forms the church, because it is a universal truth, and every universal truth is acknowledged as soon as it is heard, which occurs as a result of the Lord’s influx and, at the same time, the affirmation of heaven. (CL 62, Rogers trans.)

There are three universal truths in these quotations:

1. Everything in the universe has relation to good and truth.
2. Each thing in the universe has good united with truth and truth united with good in it.
3. The marriage of good and truth, or charity and faith, forms the church in a person.

The first universal truth is similar to the one found in *Arcana Coelestia* 3636 above. In the *Conjugal Love* quotations it is the nature of the relationship between good and truth—marriage—and how it relates to the church that is explicitly stated as a universal truth. (This universal truth has tremendous moral and political implications.)

Fourth, *The New Jerusalem and Its Heavenly Doctrine* (34) lists five “universals” which people must know if they are to have proper ideas of spiritual things:

1. Everything in the universe has relation to good and truth and their conjunction.
2. Humans have a will and understanding; the will receives good and the understanding receives truth.
3. Humans have an internal and an external; they are distinct yet they ought to make one.
4. The internal of a human being ought to be in the light of heaven, which is the very Divine truth, not just in the light of the world.
5. There is a correspondence between things in the internal and things in the external of a human being.

These, too, are examples of universal truth. In other words, these truths “hold,” or are applicable to, everything and every place in the natural universe and in the spiritual universe. Is there a location in space that a universal truth is not true? No. So far we have a dozen absolute truths. The realist view of the nature of truth is this: whether it be a moral truth concerning marriage or a truth of faith concerning the Lord, what is true is a form of good that is reality, and reality persists and endures despite people’s difficulty in accepting it. Social relationships affect how people

view truth, what questions they ask, what they take for granted and what ideas they are skeptical of, but the truth of the matter persists.<sup>10</sup>

I must confess that when I started my research, I began with the hypothesis that the Writings for the New Church supported some notion of absolute truth, but probably in a rather vague way that God is truth. I was surprised to find so many specific instances of absolute, that is, eternal and universal, truths.

Earlier it was pointed out that the Writings equate law with truth. If there are truths that are eternal and universal, then there must be laws like this too. Indeed, there are. Consider what is said in *True Christian Religion* 341: it is impossible for God to damn anyone who lives a good life and holds a proper belief, and the reverse is the case also. The reason is that the Lord's omnipotence proceeds by way of justice; "and the laws of justice are immutable truths. For the Lord says: 'It is easier for heaven and earth to pass away, than for one dot of the law to fall out. Luke 16:17.'"

The laws of the Divine providence are also said to be immutable, or unchangeable (*AE* 1172:2). This is because they are laws of the Divine wisdom and the Divine love. Thus the laws of justice and Divine providence can also rightly be added to the list of absolute truths. In other words, there are laws, or truths, that do not change with the times, with the location, or with culture. Put differently, there are laws and truths that are permanently stable and reliable, that can be counted on by all people everywhere because even though the laws work in space and time, they transcend spatial and temporal limitations.

By now I hope that the reader is convinced that the New Church position on truth is a realist one. This position is a traditional one in Western civilization (and probably others too) and it has had its proponents just as often as the anti-realists and relativists have attacked it. Postmodernism is actually just the most recent form of a very ancient position known as Sophism. The Sophist Protagoras (c.490–c.420 B.C.) said that "A human being is the measure of all things—of things that are, that they are, and of things that are not, that they are not." He expressed skepticism toward attaining knowledge of the gods, and he was practiced

---

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 101.

in the art of making the weaker argument into the stronger.<sup>11</sup> In Plato's dialog, *Republic*, the young Sophist Thrasymachus is a relativist concerning the good. He says that "justice is nothing other than the advantage of the stronger" (338c). He denies the idea of absolute justice and calls it naïve simplicity. Many of today's Postmodern philosophers do the same.

If the New Church existed in ancient Greece, it would have sided with Plato against the Sophists. If the New Church had existed in the Middle Ages, it would have sided with the Scholastic realists against the Nominalists, for the Nominalists held that universals (such as "good" and "truth") do not have a real substantial existence, independent of human thought. By contrast, the Writings state that Divine love and wisdom, and so good and truth, are substance and form, "are very *Esse* [Being] and *Existere* [Existence]," the "one and only absolute" (DLW 31, 40–46).

## B. Truth and the Individual Mind

Perhaps some doubts about the realist position still linger in the reader's mind. Someone may be thinking: "Sure, the Writings say that there is absolute truth and God is the absolute truth and so the truth exists outside of my mind, but what about when the truth comes into my mind? Maybe there is no difference then between what I think is true and the truth." Just in case this sort of doubt has arisen, I invite the reader to consider the following passages.

Attend to this one about a person who has his or her understanding enlightened because he or she believes that love to the Lord and charity toward the neighbor are the principles and essentials of the church:

For when enlightened, the understanding distinguishes apparent truths from real truths, and in particular falsities from truths, *though it does not form any judgements with respect to real truths in themselves.* (AC 7233:3, emphasis added)

Here is a person motivated by good intentions and beliefs whose understanding is enlightened by the Lord. This person distinguishes apparent

---

<sup>11</sup> Patricia Curd and Richard D. McKirahan, Jr. *A Presocratics Reader* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1995), 98.

truths from real truths, and falsities from truths, and yet this person does not form any judgments about real truths in themselves. In other words, we have the ability to make these distinctions and to accept or reject truth, but we do not have the ability to alter the truth as it is in itself. We *discover* the difference between truth and falsity, or between apparent and real truth, because real truth is a standard independent of a good person's perception.

Now let us take evil people as an example.

For everyone speaks in keeping with the impulses of his love; no one can speak contrary to them unless pretence, hypocrisy, fraudulence, or deceitfulness prompt him to do so, as is usually the case *with the evil when they speak truths*. But *these truths* which they speak are nevertheless falsities *with them*. On the other hand those who are guided by truth because they are motivated by good cannot do other than speak truths. (AC 7357, emphasis added)

Here we have evil people who have the ability to speak truths, but interestingly, even though the *content* of what they are saying is true, their evil motive turns that truth *with them* into falsity! What this shows is that the truth is a standard independent of their evils and their perception.

Some people are heard to say, when confronted by a moral law, "That may be true for you, but it's not true for me!" In the sense in which the speaker intends this statement, it is false. Truth is absolute, universal, eternal and therefore independent of us. If it is true for me that it is wrong to kill a person simply because of his or her skin color, then it is true for everyone else too. It is true universally and is not dependent upon the individual or a particular culture. The one sense in which this relativistic statement might be correct is the one given in the passage above, namely, that a true statement uttered by a person may in fact not be true for the hearer (or the speaker) because the hearer's (or speaker's) motive, interpretation, or application might falsify it for that person. This, shall we say, very *mild* form of relativism is not what the Postmodernists are pushing though.

Here is a passage that states the general principle in clear terms:

What is more, *truths which are in themselves truths* are more true with one person, less so with another; and with some they are not truths at all but indeed falsities. This becomes clear from almost all things *which in themselves are truths*. For truths *as they reside with the individual* vary according to his affections. For example, the doing of a good work or the good of charity *is in itself a truth* to be put into practice. With one person it is the good of charity because it flows from charity, with another a work of obedience because it flows from obedience, with others it is a merit-seeking because they wish by means of it to earn merit and salvation, but with certain people it is a hypocritical action which they do to be seen by others; and so on. (AC 2439:2, emphasis added)

This passage shows two things. First, that there is such a thing as absolute truth which is independent of our perception of it. Second, that the cause of the variation with truth as it resides with an individual is affection. It seems rather paradoxical (Postmodern even!) to say that truth is more true with one person, less true with another, and downright false with another! But the reason this makes sense is that there is absolute truth independent of an individual's reception of it, and even if a person takes the truth and turns it into its opposite—falsity—that still does not change the truth itself. The relativist who claims that “Nothing is true or false but thinking makes it so” is in error. An individual's thinking only affects the bit of truth with that individual, it does not change reality or the truth itself. A person who is in real faith says: “This is true, and therefore I believe it” (F 2). The person in real faith does *not* say: “I believe this, and therefore it must be true.” This is what the subjectivist or Postmodernist says.

## V. CAN WE KNOW THE TRUTH?

Now that it has been established that there is absolute (universal and eternal) truth, we turn our attention to the question of knowing it. Can we know the truth?

In 1763 Swedenborg wrote that it is commonly said that no one can comprehend spiritual, that is, theological matters because they are supernatural (*F* 3). This kind of skepticism still exists today, but in the last quarter of the twentieth century, it has broadened to include other matters too. In other words, we may say that today it is commonly said that no one can comprehend the truth because . . . (and there are various reasons given). In *Doctrine of Faith* 3 however, while aware of the skepticism, Swedenborg goes on to reject it. “Spiritual truths, however, are as capable of being comprehended as natural truths; and although the comprehension of them may not be clear, still when they are heard they fall so far within the perception of the hearer that he can discern whether they are truths or not; and this is especially the case with those who are affected by truths.” Even though he admits the lack of clarity which often attends our comprehension of truth, the main thrust of the passage is optimistic, encouraging, and affirmative: we *can* know truth, both natural and spiritual.

Consider this:

In short, it is anything but the mark of one who is wise, indeed anything but rationality, to be able to substantiate falsities; for it is the mark of a wise one, and it is rationality, when something is first seen to be the truth and is substantiated only after that. That is to say, seeing the truth implies seeing it by the light of heaven which comes from the Lord, but seeing falsity as truth implies seeing it by the inferior light which comes from hell. (*AC* 4741:3)

To be rational and wise is to see the truth and then to substantiate, or confirm it, not the other way around. This assumes that we have the ability to see the truth in the first place. This is openly taught: a “rational man [human] *can* see from so to speak a higher viewpoint whether it is truth that is being substantiated or whether it is falsity” (*AC* 4741:3, emphasis added). In the series on the conjunction of the will with the understanding in *Divine Love and Wisdom*, it is stated that “No man [human] of sound reason ever lacks perception of truth, so long as he has affection for understanding truth” (404). We have affections for knowing, understanding, and seeing truth (*ibid.*).

If a person has genuine charity and consequently feels an affection for truth, that person is not content with just believing in the tenets of the church in which that person was raised. Instead, that person wants to clarify from the Word “what the truth is and to see it before firmly assenting to it” (AC 5355:2). Again, this shows that people can in fact see what the truth is, especially when they are moved by good because “the discernment of truth originates in good, the Lord being within that good and imparting such discernment” (ibid.)

Indeed, people who read the Writings are consistently encouraged, even morally obliged, to see if the religion in which they were raised teaches the truth or not. The Heavenly Doctrine says that people usually don’t do this, but still they should! Here is the process that people should follow:

First of all one should get to know what the Church teaches; then one should discover from the Word whether such teaching is the truth. For things are true not because they are what leaders of the Church have so declared and their followers uphold. If that were so one would have to say that the teachings of any Church or religion were the truth simply because they are those of a person’s native soil and are those into which he was born. Thus not only the teachings of Papists or Quakers would be true but also those of Jews and of Mohammedans too since their Church leaders have so declared and their followers uphold it. From all this it is evident that one should search the Word and there see whether what the Church teaches is the truth. When an affection for truth motivates the search a person receives light from the Lord so that he may discern, though unaware of the source of his enlightenment, what the truth is . . . (AC 6047:2)

(There are other passages, such as AC 7055:2 and HD 21, that contain the same teaching as AC 6047:2.)

There are three important ideas contained in this passage. First, truth is not established by church leaders or by their followers. In other words, truth is not what the elite or the majority of a society think is true. If this were the case, that is, if truth were relative to people and their place of birth, then contradictory religions would all be true. This is logically

absurd. Again, we see the Writings promoting a realist or absolutist theory of truth rather than a Postmodern view.

Next, we are given a moral imperative (“one ought”) to search the Word to see if what the church teaches is true. The Word is to be our standard of verification.

Third, when our motivation is good, we can in fact discern what the truth is. “[T]hose who are enlightened see and perceive within themselves whether something is the truth or not . . .” (AC 9300:4). The reason is that good longs for truth and truth longs for good, each desires conjunction with the other. We are able to know the truth because the discernment of truth originates in good, and the Lord is within that good imparting such discernment (AC 5355). Similarly, charity contains within itself the willing of truth and the understanding of truth (AC 3877). We are able to know the truth because things that are essentially true have a hidden power within them to attract people’s minds (AC 5464).

There is a beautiful passage in *Arcana Coelestia* that wonderfully illustrates how it is that we are able to know what is true. Just as our physical sight develops and allows us to see ever more clearly and accurately, so our mental sight of truth should develop in a corresponding manner.

The natural level of a person’s mind sees things in the light of the world, the light that is called natural illumination. A person acquires this illumination through objects entering his awareness by means of sight and hearing, that is, by impressions of objects received from the world. Thus the person sees those objects with his mind’s eye almost exactly as his physical eye sees them. Initially the objects that he is made aware of through those senses are all a pleasure and delight to him. Later on, when still a young child, he makes distinctions among the objects that are a delight to him, and thereby learns to discriminate, gradually doing so more and more accurately. When the light from heaven flows into these things the person begins to see them spiritually, discriminating initially between the ones that are useful and those that are not useful. As a consequence he starts to see the truth clearly; for that which he sees to be useful he sees to be true, and that which he does not see to be useful he sees to be not true. This ability to see truth increases as the inflowing light from heaven grows brighter, until eventually he discriminates not only

between truths, but even between truths within these truths. And this he does ever more clearly, as the communication between the internal man and the external man is improved and opened up; for the light of heaven flows in from the Lord through the internal man into the external. (AC 9103:3)

Eventually, if we develop as intended, we not only have the ability to see truth as distinct from falsity and to see the difference between truths, but also the ability to discern more particular truths within general truths. Our mind's eye grows stronger as the internal and external parts of the self are harmonized and the light of heaven is able to flow into the mind's eye ever more brightly. What a hope-giving message!

Furthermore, "Everyone—no matter who, provided that he is not mentally deficient—is endowed with such an ability, that is to say, the ability to understand whether things are true. He has been endowed with it to enable him to be reformed and regenerated through the understanding part of his mind" (AC 5464). This is reiterated in the section on enlightenment in *Divine Providence*. "A rational man [human] by interior enlightenment from the Lord at once perceives, when he hears them, whether many things are true or not . . ." (168). Many examples are then listed. People have this perception because they have the faculty of rationality and when this is in the light of heaven, it enlightens. We are able to know the truth because what we see, we see in the light of heaven from the Lord, not from the inferior light of self or the world (AC 4741). This is how we are led and taught by the Lord.

Now follows an important passage on our ability to perceive what is true:

[2] Let a brief statement appear here about what perception, referred to so many times, is. Everyone possesses the ability to perceive whether something is true or not. The ability he has within himself, within his mind, to draw conclusions is what enables him to perceive it; yet this ability cannot possibly exist in him without influx from the spiritual world. It is a gift that one person possesses in greater measure than another. Those who possess it in smaller measure are people who draw few conclusions within themselves or their minds and so have little perception; and if they

say a thing is true they do so because others in whom they put their trust have said it is. Those however who possess the gift in greater measure are people who do not rely on others but see for themselves that it is true. But this kind of perception that everyone has involves worldly matters; nobody at the present day has any perception in spiritual ones. The reason for this is that what flows in from the spiritual source to produce that perception is blotted out and virtually annihilated by the delights of worldly and selfish love. As a consequence people have no interest in spiritual things except where duty or custom require it. Take away the fear that duty engenders, and the delight that custom affords, and people would scorn, turn away from, and indeed deny the existence of spiritual things. [3] To have perception in spiritual things a person must have an affection for truth stirred by good and must have an unceasing desire to know truths. This leads to an enlightenment of the understanding part of his mind; and once it has been enlightened *he is able within himself to see a thing with perception*. But if a person is not stirred by an affection for truth, then he knows what he knows to be true from the teaching of the Church on which he pins his faith, something he also knows because priest, presbyter, or monk has declared it to be. (AC 5937, emphasis added)

If we have an affection for truth stirred by good, we are desirous of, and are capable of knowing, what is true. We are capable of knowing what is true not just because we are persuaded by someone else, but because we can draw a conclusion for ourselves, assuming we have been given the gift of perception.

The same idea can be found in *Arcana* 5355: “But one with whom the good of genuine charity exists and who consequently feels an affection for truth is not content with [just confirming what his or her church teaches] but wishes to clarify from the Word what the truth is and to see it before firmly assenting to it. Also, it is good that enables him to see it, for the discernment of truth originates in good, the Lord being within that good and imparting such discernment.”

A similar passage occurs a little later on: “For the Lord does not openly teach anyone truths but leads him by means of good to think what the truth is, and also imparts to the person, though he is not aware of it, a

discernment and consequent adoption of a thing as being true because the Word declares it to be so, and because it squares with the Word" (5952). Again, we are able to know what is true because we compare what is said to us, or what we read, with the Word, and the Lord gives us discernment when we do so.

Next, reflect upon this passage:

Take people who think and teach in accordance with the teachings of their Church which they have corroborated for themselves, but who do not know whether they are true on any grounds other than the fact that they form part of what the Church teaches and that they have been propounded by learned and famous men. Truth that goes forth from the Divine in an indirect way may exist with those people, yet for all that, it is not joined to truth going forth directly from the Divine. For if it were so joined they would have an affection for knowing truth for its own sake and especially for the sake of the life they should lead. They would also as a consequence *be endowed with a perception* of whether matters taught by their Church were true *before* corroborating them for themselves, and would see whether the evidence corroborating each of those matters *agreed with the truth itself*. (AC 7055, emphasis added)

While this passage is speaking about people who have not acquired their own rational faith but have persisted in historical faith, the last sentence says that it is possible for people to have a perception about the truth of their church's teachings and that it is possible for them to see if these teachings agree with the truth itself.

Another passage states this directly:

All this shows the essential nature of the truth that is converted into good with very many members of the Church. None among them can see whether a teaching of their Church is true *except* those who have an affection for truth for the sake of useful services in life. Those who have this end in view are enlightened by the Lord constantly, not only while they live in the world but also afterwards. They alone are the ones who are able to receive truth, for the Lord leads them by means of good, and

through that good *He enables them to see truth and so believe it*. All this demonstrates the origin and nature of good as it exists with those belonging to the Lord's spiritual kingdom. (AC 8521, emphasis added)

In fact, it is part of the work of the Lord's Divine providence that He continually causes people to see truth and gives them affections for perceiving it and receiving it (DP 298:4).

### A. What Does it Mean to "Know" the Truth?

In this section I will show two things. First, the Writings teach that there is a rather superficial knowledge of truth and a much deeper knowledge of it. Second, that we do not know pure truth, but that the truths we have are purified and help purify us while our ability to discern the truth grows as we develop spiritually.

It is one thing to know the truth, another to acknowledge it, and still another to really believe it, or have faith in it (AC 896, 4151; HH 342). To know the truth, in a simple and superficial sense of "know," is to have truth in one's memory. To acknowledge truth is to take truth from the memory, reflect upon it from reason, and then give rational assent to it. Evil people, as well as good, can know and acknowledge the truth in certain states. To really believe in the truth, or have faith in it, is to will truth and live it. Only good people, people with a conscience, believe in, or have faith in, the truth. Actually, to really know and acknowledge truth (in the *deepest sense* of "know" and "acknowledge") one must live it (*Life* 76; *SS* 61:2; *AC* 9193:4). Consequently, it is only good people who really *know* and acknowledge the truth in the deepest sense of those words.

Moreover, good people have an epistemic advantage over evil people. People who are in confirmed evils cannot know what good and truth are, for they believe their own evil to be good and their falsity to be truth (*HD* 19). "But everyone who, by confirmation and life, is in good and the truth from it, can know what evil and falsity are" (*ibid.*). The good know what evil and falsity are, but the evil do not. Thus the good know more than the evil.

The Writings teach that no pure intellectual truth, which is Divine truth, resides with humans (*AC* 2053; 3993:8). Pure truth is never possible

with humans (AC 7902) and, even if we wanted it, we could not endure pure truth and pure good (AC 7854). Pure truth and pure good are the Lord's alone. Truth and good with humans are always tainted by something, whether it be fallacies of the senses or falsities. In fact, while there is a parallelism between God and humans so far as forms of good are concerned, there is no parallelism between God and humans regarding forms of truth (AC 3514).<sup>12</sup>

Again, we must be careful in our handling of this teaching. If taken to an extreme and not balanced with all of the foregoing passages that state that we can know the truth and have a perception of it, we could plunge ourselves into skepticism and apathy regarding truth. We could throw our hands up and say "Well, since we can't know pure truth, and it is not supremely important, what's the use in trying? We might as well give up and just be content with our current beliefs." This would miss the point of the teaching. The message from the Lord is that pure truth is Divine and we are not now Divine, nor will we ever be. God is the Infinite Creator and humans are the finite creatures. These teachings put us in our place, make us humble toward God, and remind us that truth exists not for its own sake, but for the sake of containing and expressing good.

There is hope for us lowly creatures. There are teachings that should encourage us to not remain complacent regarding the quality of the truth with us. For example,

The truths that constitute conscience vary, that is to say, they depend on the religion of the individual. These truths the Lord is unwilling to violate provided they are not contrary to the goods of faith, because the person has taken them to himself and considered them holy. The Lord breaks nobody, but bends him. This becomes clear from the consideration that every type of religious thought in the Church has followers who are being endowed with conscience. *The closer its truths get to the genuine truths of faith the better that conscience is.* (AC 2053:2, emphasis added)

---

<sup>12</sup> I thank Rev. Grant H. Odhner for drawing my attention to this and other related passages on this subject in an e-mail on August 8, 2001. He emphasizes that the closeness we have with God comes primarily by way of good, rather than truth.

Since we cannot have the kind of perception of truth that our celestial forebears had, we can at least make the conscience that we have as good as it possibly can be. How? By making sure that what we take to be the truth is as close to the genuine truths of faith as possible. To do this requires a standard outside of oneself. This agrees with the general teaching on the way that the quantity and quality of truth affects the nature of the good with us.

Therefore the more truth that is implanted, the more is the life of charity perfected. *Thus as is the nature [quality] and the amount [quantity] of truth present with man, so is the charity present with him.* (AC 2189:2, AE in original)

The *more genuine and pure truth is*, the *better is good* from the Lord able to be accommodated to it as the recipient vessel; but *the less genuine and pure truth is*, the *less is good* from the Lord able to be accommodated. For they must each answer to the other; and to the extent that they do, they are joined together. Goods cannot possibly be received into falsities, nor evils into truths as their recipient vessels, for they are by nature and disposition contrary. (AC 2269:3, emphasis added)

Hence, it is possible to strive for more genuine and pure truth and it is good to do so. The following passage explains how this happens:

But truth is said to be purified from falsity when the man is capable of being kept by the Lord in the good of innocence. Innocence consists in acknowledging that in oneself there is nothing but evil, and that all good is from the Lord; and also in believing that man does not know or perceive anything from himself, but from the Lord, thus also the truth which is of faith. When man is in this state, then falsity can be removed from him, and truth can be instilled by the Lord. This state is what is signified by the unleavened things, and also by the eating of the paschal lamb. (AC 7902)

Temptation and a change in the source of motivation play a part too:

To go further with what “made with yeast” and “not made with yeast” refer to, it should be recognized that the purification of truth from falsity cannot ever come about in a person without so-called fermentation, that

is, without the conflict of falsity with truth and of truth with falsity. But after the conflict has taken place and truth has triumphed, the falsity falls away like dregs and the truth emerges purified. It is like wine that becomes clear after fermentation as the dregs sink to the bottom. That fermentation or conflict takes place especially when a person's state undergoes a change, that is to say, when his actions begin to spring from the good of charity, and not as previously from the truth of faith. For a person's state is not yet made pure while his actions spring from the truth of faith, but they have been made pure when they spring from the good of charity, since they now spring from his will. Previously they sprang merely from his understanding. (*AC* 7906:2)

From the Lord's point of view and in reality, what we know and understand is like a drop in the ocean compared to what we do not know and understand (*TCR* 387). On the other hand, we can know what is essential to living a good life, and some people know more truths than others. We might rebel at this inequality and at the notion that older (more regenerate) people are wiser. We are encouraged to do this in Western culture. This skepticism and rebellion are part of our maturing process when we have to break away from the truth of doctrine as mere historical faith, or the faith of hearsay, to discover what is true for ourselves. But it is very harmful when we use a rebellious skepticism to confirm appearances of self-life, autonomy (in the sense that one is a law unto oneself), relativism, and when we don't grow beyond this stage of development.

Truth certainly does not come from, or originate in, the self. We must throw ourselves at the feet of the Lord and beg Him for light, and when we run out of reasons as to why something is true, we finally submit to the Lord and confess that something is true because the Lord (the Creator, the Infinite, Being Itself) has said so (*AC* 1911:6). The affirmative attitude is the thought that certain things are true because the Lord has spoken them (*AC* 2568:4; 2588:2). We recoil at this "authoritarian" statement, and yet it is reality; it is human experience. It is the natural unregenerate self that recoils at this; the spiritual self is thankful. The natural self does not like harsh "judgmental" truths. Yet the truths which proceed from the Lord do not damn anyone, "for all the truths which proceed from the Lord are from His Divine Good, and consequently are nothing but mercies; but men

[humans] expose themselves to damnation because they do not receive the Lord's mercy . . ." (AC 7206). We are not the authors of our own being. There is Another who has authored both ourselves and others. We must picture Jesus, the Gentle Shepherd, the Divine healer, the One who blessed little children, the One who wept over Jerusalem, as the One who has many important truths to share with us. Jesus: "Simon, I have something to say to you." Us: "Teacher, say it" (Luke 7:40).

As Christian philosopher Douglas Groothuis has remarked, the notion of absolute truth is misunderstood and rejected for bad reasons. Some people think that if you believe in absolute truth, then you have perfect knowledge of God, or that you are inerrant in your understanding of faith, or that you do not want to participate in reasoning or discussion.<sup>13</sup> Based upon the foregoing passages from the Word, we know that if we believe in absolute truth, we do not have perfect knowledge of God, we can make mistakes in our understanding of the truths of faith, and that we need help from other people to improve our understanding. The Postmodernist meanwhile assumes the position of a godlet, constructing reality and truth, and lazily dismissing any unpleasant challenges with the all-purpose cleaner: "Well, that may be true for you, but . . ." As Plato said over 2,500 years ago:

I do not insist that my argument is right in all other respects, but I would contend at all costs both in word and deed as far as I could, that we will be better men, braver and less idle, if we believe that one must search for the things one does not know, rather than if we believe that it is not possible to find out what we do not know and that we must not look for it. (*Meno* 86b)

## B. Knowing That We Know

Now that it has been established that there is absolute truth, that we can and ought to know it, and what is meant by "knowing" it, we come to the issue of knowing that we know the truth. In other words, how can we be sure that we know the truth?

---

<sup>13</sup> Groothuis, 70.

Knowing that we know is something that comes with spiritual growth. The more regenerate we are, the less we are troubled by doubts about truths, especially the basic ones about the Lord, the Word, and how to live a good life. As this next passage indicates, knowing the truth and knowing that you know is developmental.

[3] As to the specific matter dealt with here—that truth was to be introduced into Divine truth—the situation is that at first truth in the natural man was not Divine truth but truth that had the appearance of being Divine. For no truth in its earliest stages is the actual truth but an appearance of truth. In the course of time however it sheds the cloak of appearance and puts on the real essence of truth. To make this intelligible it can be illustrated by examples, for the moment by this alone: It is a Divine truth that the Lord is never angry, never punishes anyone, let alone does evil to anyone, and that from the Lord nothing but good ever comes. Nevertheless in its earliest stages this truth declares that the Lord is angry when someone sins, and that the Lord therefore punishes; indeed with some people it declares that evil comes from the Lord. But as a person progresses from early childhood, grows up, and matures in judgment he casts away that which from the appearance seemed to him to be the truth *and gradually takes up the truth itself*, which is that the Lord is never angry and does not punish, let alone perform evil. Accordingly it is by means of apparent truth that a person is introduced into actual truth; for it is a general concept that enters first, which in itself is obscure, containing scarcely anything that is to be seen until it has been enlightened by means of particular ideas, and these in turn by specific details. And once it has been enlightened interior things are discernible. In this way the delusions and appearances which are truths at the time of ignorance are dispersed and banished. (AC 3131, emphasis added)

One way of knowing that you know is by asking yourself this question: Did I follow the method that the Word recommends for finding the truth? Did I compare the teachings of my church, or other churches, with the Word? Did I approach the Word in the proper spirit?

Another way of knowing that you know is by checking to see if you have felt the Lord's presence when you have been searching for the truth

through study of the Word and reflection. When the truth that goes forth directly from the Divine via the will is joined with truth that comes via the understanding indirectly from the Divine “it seems as though the Lord is present; His presence is also felt” (AC 7056:3).

A third way of knowing that you know is explained in this passage from *Arcana Coelestia*:

[2] The term “revelation” is used to mean the light that comes when the Word is read, and perception then; for this is the way that people who are governed by good and desire truth are taught from the Word. But those who are not governed by good cannot be taught from the Word; they can only be made stronger in whatever they have learned since early childhood, whether that consists in truths or in falsities. The reason why revelation comes to those who are governed by good but not to those who are ruled by evil is that every single thing in the Word refers in the internal sense to the Lord and His kingdom, and the angels present with a person perceive this level of meaning in the Word. Their perception is communicated to the person governed by good who reads the Word and desires truth from an affection for it; through them comes the light he has and his perception. For with those governed by good and consequently by an affection for truth the understanding part of the mind has been opened into heaven, and their soul, that is, their internal man, is in fellowship with the angels. It is altogether different with those who are not governed by good and so do not desire truth out of an affection springing from that good. To these heaven is closed.

[3] But what that revelation is like which comes to those governed by good and consequently by an affection for truth is not easy to describe. It is not something overt, nor is it something altogether hidden; rather it is a kind of inclination, coming from within, to accept that a thing is true, or not to accept if it is not true. *When it is the inclination to accept, the mind is at rest and is tranquil; and in that state there exists the acknowledgement that goes with faith.* All this comes about as a result of the influx of heaven from the Lord. For from the Lord by way of heaven there comes the light which pours into the understanding, which is the eye of inward sight, and enlightens it. What are now made visible in that light are truths, for that

light actually is Divine Truth which emanates from the Lord; and this Truth is the light in heaven, as has been shown often. (AC 8694, emphasis added)

(An earlier translation reads: "It is not manifest, neither is it altogether hidden; but it is a certain consent and favouring from the interior that a thing is true, and a non-favouring if it is not true. When there is a favouring, the mind is at rest and is serene, and in this state there is the acknowledgement which is of faith." This Swedenborg Society translation was made by J.F. Potts and revised by W.H. Acton and J.F. Buss.)

This passage gives us an interesting explanation for knowing how we know. It clearly teaches that we can be given an inclination, or subtle favoring, by the Lord to accept something that is true and reject something that is not true. This occurs by means of a partially hidden light, which is Divine truth, pouring into the understanding which enables us to see truth. This happens when we read the Word from a desire to be affected by the truth. When we experience tranquility and a sense of rest after laboring to comprehend the truth, it is an indication (but not a guarantee) that we have acknowledged what is true.

Also, notice that we can know that we know by referring to both our intuition about what is true and the written Word. It is an activity that requires a balancing of these two avenues, the direct and the indirect, of truth. Relying on one's intuition too much is dangerous because our affection for the truth is not pure, and we get the best light when we have a pure affection for knowing the truth for its own sake and for the sake of living a good life. Our selfish and worldly affections block and obscure the light from heaven, thus corrupting our intuition. On the other hand, relying only on the literal sense of the Old and New Testaments is problematic as well because, at least without resorting to correspondences, the literal sense makes no sense at times and is contradictory. This is where the doctrine of genuine truth becomes important.

The Word is lucid and transparent with people who love Divine truth and apply it to life (SS 57). By means of the light from the internal senses, the Lord flows into the natural sense with humans. "Consequently, a man [a human] acknowledges the truth from an interior perception, and afterwards sees it in his own thought" (SS 58).

Some might object that according to the Writings we do not have perception. This is a half-truth. It is correct that when compared to the most ancients who were celestial, we do not have perception. (People of a spiritual nature are barely able to acknowledge any pure truth like the celestial people did [AC 2715:4] ) Instead, we have conscience. However, even our wise ancestors are said to not have perception compared to the angels in heaven. The fact is the Writings assert that we do have perception. There is the perception called common sense, which means that people without common sense are not perceptive. The Writings state that there is a universal influx from God into the souls of everyone that it is true that there is a God, and that He is one (TCR 8). People can perceive this through an internal “dictate” (AC 1308) as long as they are not under the control of hell or the pride of self-intelligence (HH 82) and they possess a religion and sound reason (TCR 9). People who are regenerate are perceptive compared to those who are not regenerate. The point is that the Writings talk about different degrees of perception and that the passages on the perception of the most ancients and our lack of it, must be taken together with the passages that say we do have perception.

While we are unaware of the light that flows in and enlightens, and we cannot perceive the influx, “nevertheless from various indications he [or she] may know that he has been enlightened” (AC 10,551). This passage goes on to explain that a person is engaging in self-deception if he or she thinks he or she has been enlightened and still does not love to know truth for the sake of truth, and for the sake of the good of life (ibid.). If a person has honor, reputation, and gain as an end in learning the truth, then a person is not enlightened. So if you love to know the truth for the sake of the truth and for the sake of living a good life, it is an indication that you have been enlightened regarding what is true.

This brings us to the (now novel) idea of loving the truth for its own sake.

## VI. CAN WE LOVE TRUTH FOR ITS OWN SAKE?

What if you were to have as a goal of your life that you will love the truth for its own sake, no matter where you find it and no matter what changes in your life it wrought? Truth would be an ideal to pursue, rather

like the ideals of Classical and medieval philosophy: the good, the true, and the beautiful. The Writings say that we ought to love truth. Moreover, we should love truth for its own sake. Indeed, the Writings urge us to go even farther: we should love truth for the sake of the good. My point is that loving the truth just because it is the truth, is not at all bad. It is not as ideal as loving the truth for the sake of the good, but still it is not bad. We have a continuum of degrees, a standard, from the Lord, by which to measure our motives and aspirations. Here is a scale:

The Best Motive and Highest Aspiration

- loving the truth for the sake of the good
- loving the truth for its own sake, simply because it is true
- loving the truth not for its own sake, but for the sake of self or the world
- loving falsity from a hatred toward the good and one's neighbor

The Worst Motive and Lowest Purpose (scale based partially on AC 10,683:2, 3 and AC 5804)

Interestingly, a person who does not love the truth for its own sake, but for the sake of self or the world, is really apathetic toward the truth. This kind of person actually does not care about what is true and does not care to find out if his or her beliefs are true (AC 8148:2). The reason is that he or she sees the truth, or whatever people take to be the truth, as a means to his or her own ends. Learning the truth for the sake of gain and reputation actually results in unbelief (AC 5433:2). When this happens, a person thinks that it is okay for other, simple-minded, people to believe in the truths of the church, but not for himself or herself. The secular Postmodernists, such as Michel Foucault, think that truth is merely a function of, or means to, power and that is all we are capable of. This is just fourth century B.C. Sophism dressed in Postmodern garb.

By contrast, people who are moved to learn the truth by an affection for the truth for its own sake, and go on to do the truth, have an affection for the Lord, for truth comes from the Lord (AC 5433:2; 9210:2). These people are among the angels (ibid.). They place reputation and gain in the lowest position and regard what is right and good as essential. They are willing to make sacrifices for the sake of what is good and true:

When the eyes of people such as these are fixed on what is right and good they are like soldiers fighting in battle for their country. During it they give no thought at all to their life, nor thus to their status or their assets in the world, which compared with what they are doing are of no importance to them. But those who rank self and the world at the top are the kind of people who do not even see what is right and good, because their eyes are fixed on themselves and on gain. (AC 9210:2)

What an inspiring message from the Lord! Many heroes (especially the Lord) and heroines come to mind which illustrate this encouraging message.

Often we love from mixed motives. Yet, loving the truth from mixed motives is better than not caring about the truth at all. The reason why loving the truth from mixed motives is better than not caring about truth at all is that at least there is some good affection for the Lord to work with, even though it is not pure. Take as an example two students. We are all students of the Teacher. One student does not care about the truth, has no interest in understanding truths or even in memorizing them for a test. Another student wants to do well on the test, wants a reputation as a scholarly student, wants to go to heaven, and likes to help others. So this student has an interest in memorizing truths and even an interest in understanding them. Now which student is more likely to know the truth, acknowledge it, then live it? It is the second student of course, the one who has some motivation to at least come into contact with the truth.

The point is this: while Modernism was motivated to find the truth for worldly purposes, at least it believed there was a truth to be found. The problem with Postmodernism is that it lacks even this basic belief. As Richard Rorty said in 1981,

Through the nineteenth century, men like Huxley and Clifford and Peirce still saw respect for scientific truth as the highest human virtue, the moral equivalent of the Christian's love and fear of God . . . But the nineteenth century also saw the rise of a new sort of secular intellectual, one who had lost faith in science with the same thoroughness as the Enlightenment had lost faith in God. Carlyle and Henry Adams are examples of this new kind of intellectual, the kind whose consciousness is

dominated by a sense of the contingency of history, the contingency of the vocabulary which he himself is using, the sense that nature and scientific truth are largely beside the point and that history is up for grabs. This sort of intellectual is secular with a vengeance, for he sees the religion “of science” or “of humanity” as just as self-deceptive as the old-time religion. His thought tends toward Nietzsche’s view of science as merely a prolongation of theology, of both as forms of “the longest lie.” The attitude of such intellectuals toward “scientific” or “linguistic” philosophy is summed up in Nietzsche’s wisecrack: “I fear that we shall be unable to get rid of God, since we still believe in grammar.” This split between two sorts of intellectual has become deeper in our own century.<sup>14</sup>

For Postmodernists, truth is not “out there” to be discovered. Instead, it is manufactured to suit the moment. This takes away our incentive to improve our beliefs. We no longer have a reason to care about what is true. As long as we feel comfortable, there is no motivation to seek the truth (it would be a vain effort anyway since there is no absolute truth). Postmodernism encourages apathy toward the truth.

The general point I want to make is that it is not bad to want to know the truth for its own sake, to want to know what is really true. It is good to want this and it is good to believe that there is truth out there to be found, that we can know it and love it for its own sake, eventually for the sake of the good, and that this will lead us to the Lord since all truth is the Lord’s (AC 1911:3). It seems like truth comes from us, but upon reflection, we should acknowledge that all truth is the Lord’s (AC 5664a:4). Since the Lord is truth itself, if one follows the path of truth, one will be led to the Lord. Starting on a spiritual journey from the quest for the truth is not a bad place to start and, if we make the right decisions, we will eventually get to the point where we start from good! Starting with an affection for truth seems cold, like we are chasing after an abstraction, but we will come to realize that the truth is the face of the One and Only Human.

Another reason why the idea of loving the truth for its own sake is emphasized is that this love takes the form of honesty. Rorty’s Postmodern

---

<sup>14</sup> Richard Rorty, “Philosophy in America Today” in *Consequences of Pragmatism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1982), 228–29.

idea that the truth is whatever his colleagues allow him to get away with is morally dangerous. As Douglas Groothuis has explained, Postmodernist perspectivism and constructivism negates the concept of lying.<sup>15</sup> The secular Postmodern view of truth blurs the line between truth and falsity in terms of telling the truth (being honest) and speaking falsely (lying). By “bearing false witness” in the natural sense is meant not only acting as a false witness, but also lying. In the spiritual sense this means persuading others that what is false is true, and that what is evil is good, and conversely (*Life* 87). How could this understanding of the eighth commandment make any sense according to a Postmodernist view of truth? It cannot. Assume for a moment that you convince a group of peers that you cannot help them with a project because you are too busy. You really aren’t too busy, you just don’t feel like helping them right now. Assume that they accept your statement and excuse you from helping them. According to Rorty’s view, it has just become true that you are too busy to help your acquaintances! Why? Because they let you get away with it. One lies when affirming the opposite of what one takes to be objectively true. However, if everything is a matter of interpretation, or redescription, or perspective all the way down, then there are no facts. One’s words create all the reality we know. The line between what is true and what is false, between reality and illusion, is erased.

This is dangerous because deceit is like a subtle poison that infects the interiors of the mind. It infects remains (affections for good and truth stored in the mind) and it not only closes up the path of communication between the rational plane of the mind and the sensuous, it also takes away the very capacity of ever becoming rational (*AC* 5128:5). People who make a habit of lying gradually deceive not only others, but also themselves. They become so tangled up in the threads of their fabrications, that they bind themselves to irrationality.

## VII. A “CAUTIONARY TALE”

What follows is a memorable relation from *Conjugial Love* 233. In this passage Swedenborg recounts his meeting with a secular Postmodernist.

---

<sup>15</sup> Groothuis, 108–109.

The Postmodernist is called a “confirmer” here, but as we will see the confirmer holds the same views regarding truth that the Postmodernist does. As you read the narrative account notice that the confirmer accepts the following propositions: humans invent the truth; there is no truth to be known in reality; two opposites can be true because humans create different perspectives on truth; our desires create what is true; and there is epistemic equality because no one has any truth due to each person being insane.

After this, one of the angels said, “Follow me to the place where they are crying out, ‘Oh, how wise!’” And he added, “You will see human monstrosities. The faces and bodies you see will be like those of a human being, and yet they are not human.”

So I said, “Are they animals, then?”

The angel replied, “No, they are not animals, but animal-like. For they are people who cannot see at all whether truth is true or not, and yet whatever they wish they can make to be true. Among us, people like that are called confirmers.”

We then followed the clamor and came to the place. And lo, we found a group of men surrounded by a crowd of people, and in the crowd some people of noble lineage. The men were confirming whatever the latter said and agreeing with them with such manifest accord that when they heard it, they turned to each other and said, “Oh, how wise!”

[2] However, the angel said to me, “Let us not go over to them but instead call one of them out of the group.”

So we called one of them to us, and going aside with him, we talked about various matters. And he confirmed each point so thoroughly that they all appeared entirely as true.

We then asked him whether he could also confirm the converse of these. He said that he could, just as well as he did the previous ones. At which point he said openly and from the heart, “What is truth? *Is there any truth in the nature of things other than what a person makes true? Say to me anything you please and I will make it to be true.*”

So I said, “Make this true, that faith is everything in the church.” And he did so, so cleverly and skillfully that some learned bystanders looked on in admiration and applauded. I asked him next to make it true that

charity is everything in the church, which he did, and afterwards that charity is nothing in the church. And he dressed up both propositions and arrayed them in such verisimilitudes that the bystanders looked at each other and said, "Isn't he wise!"

But I said, "Do you not know that to live rightly is charity, and to believe rightly is faith? If anyone lives rightly, does he not also believe rightly? Thus showing that faith is connected with charity, and charity with faith? Do you not see that this is true?"

He replied, "I will make it true and then I will see." And having done it he said, "Now I see." But shortly he made the converse of it to be true, and then he said, "I see as well that this is true."

We chuckled at this and said, "But are these not contradictory conclusions? How can you see two contrary conclusions as true?"

Nettled by our response, he replied, "You are wrong. *Both conclusions are true, since truth is only what a person makes true.*"

[3] Standing nearby was someone who in the world had been an ambassador of the highest rank. He marveled at this and said, "I recognize that something of this sort goes on in the world, but still you are insane. Make it to be true, if you can, that light is darkness, and darkness light."

To which he replied, "I will do it easily. What are light and darkness but conditions of the eye? Does light not turn to darkness when the eye comes in out of bright sunshine? Or when it gazes intently at the sun? Who does not know that the state of the eye then changes and that light consequently appears as darkness? And conversely, that when the condition of the eye recovers, the darkness appears as light?"

"Does an owl not see the darkness of night as the light of day, and the light of day as the darkness of night? Does it not see the sun itself as a dark and shadowy orb? If a person had eyes like an owl's, what would he call light and what would he call darkness?"

"What then is light but a condition of the eye? And if it is a condition of the eye, is not light darkness and darkness light? Consequently the one proposition is true and the other is true."

[4] After that the ambassador asked him to make it to be true that a raven is white and not black.

To which he replied, "I will do this easily, too. Take a needle or razor," he said, "and open up the feathers or quills of a raven. Are they not white inside? Then remove the feathers and quills and look at the raven's skin. Is it not white? What is the blackness surrounding it but an opaqueness to light, which is hardly a basis on which to judge the raven's color? If you do not know that blackness is only an absence of light, ask experts in the science of optics and they will tell you. Or grind a piece of black stone or black glass into a fine powder, and you will see that the powder is white."

"But," said the ambassador, "does a raven look black to the eye?"

"Perhaps," replied this confirmer of ours, "but as a human being, are you willing to base what you think on an appearance? You may indeed speak in accordance with the appearance and say that a raven is black, but you cannot think it. As for example, you may speak in accordance with the appearance and say that the sun rises, travels and sets, but as a human being you cannot think it, because the sun stands still and it is the earth that moves. It is the same with the raven. An appearance is only an appearance. Say what you will, a raven is totally and utterly white. It even turns white when it grows old, as I have observed."

[5] We then asked him to tell us honestly whether he was joking or whether he really believed that there is no truth but what a person makes true. And he answered, "I swear that I believe it."

After that the ambassador asked him whether he could make it true that he was insane. To which he said, "I could, but I do not want to. *Who is not insane?*"

This total confirmer was afterwards sent to some angels for them to examine and determine what sort of person he was. And having examined him, they said he possessed not even a grain of understanding, because everything that exists above the level of reason in him was closed up, and only that which is below the level of reason was open.

"Above the level of reason," they said, "is the light of heaven, and below the level of reason is the light of nature. And the light of nature is such that it can confirm whatever it pleases. However, if the light of heaven does not flow into the light of nature, a person does not see whether any truth is true, and so neither whether any falsity is false. An

ability to see both what is true and what is false results from the presence of light from heaven in the light of nature, and the light of heaven comes from the God of heaven, who is the Lord.

“This total confirmer is therefore neither human nor animal, but animal-like.”

[6] I asked the angel with me about the fate of people like that and whether it was possible for them to be among the living, since a person has life from the light of heaven, and from it comes his intellect. And the angel said that when people of this sort are by themselves, they are incapable of thought and so have nothing to say, but stand as mute as machines, as though in a deep sleep; but as soon as something catches their ears, they awaken. He added also that people become like that who are inmosty evil. “The light of heaven cannot flow into them from above,” he said, “but only some spiritual element through the world, from which they have an ability to confirm.”

[7] After he said this, I heard the voice of one of the angels who had examined the man, calling to me and saying, “From what you have heard draw an overall conclusion.”

So I drew the following conclusion: An ability to confirm whatever one pleases is not the mark of an intelligent person; rather, the mark of an intelligent person is to be able to see that truth is true and falsity false, and to confirm that.

I afterwards looked over at the gathering where the confirmers stood and where the crowd surrounding them was beginning to cry out, “Oh, how wise!” And suddenly a dusky cloud enveloped them, with screech owls and bats flitting about in the cloud.

It was then explained to me, “The owls and bats flitting about in the dusky cloud are correspondent forms and thus manifestations of their thoughts. For in this world, confirmations of falsities to the point that they appear as truths are represented under the forms of birds of the night, whose eyes are lit up with an illusory light from within by which they see objects in darkness as though in light. This is the kind of illusory spiritual light had by those who confirm falsities to the point that they appear as truths, and who afterwards say and believe they are truths. They all possess a kind of after-sight and not any prior sight.” (Emphasis added)

Interestingly, the Postmodernist (the confirmer) is found to not have one grain of understanding. The Postmodernist is described as a blind and mute machine, and also as being like an animal. What a strange hybrid, a monstrosity.

The main problem with the secular Postmodernist, and the moral of the story, is that if we do not believe in absolute truth, if we don't make truth a king over us on the way to the good (John 19:37–38; AR 20; AE 27:4), then there is nothing above the old self, and there is nothing that can tame our egoistic fantasies. The result is blindness, selfishness, misery, and the degradation of what should have been human.

### CONCLUSION

I hope that the reader is now convinced that the position of the Writings regarding truth is a realist one. Throughout the paper quotations from the Writings were used to help the reader see that New Church theology commits one to believing that there is absolute truth, that we can know it, that we can have some awareness that we know it, and that it is not bad to love the truth for its own sake. By seeing clearly what the Word teaches and how different its attitude toward truth is compared to secular Postmodernism, I hope the reader has enough knowledge to avoid Postmodernism's siren call.

Other aspects of the topic of truth are either not addressed, such as the accommodation of truth, appearances and appearances of truth, or just touched on, such as the different degrees and kinds of truth. Based on a little reading about accommodation, I think that while some of what is written here may be qualified, it will not be negated. For example, *Arcana Caelestia* 4772 discusses the way the Lord revealed truth to different churches that have existed on our planet. On the one hand, the Lord made numerous accommodations to the Most Ancient and Ancient churches and the Jewish church. Much has changed from one revelation to the next. Yet notice the continuity—how much has not changed. When the externals of the Ancient and the Jewish churches are unwrapped, the Christian church is disclosed. It was there all along!

As for the notion of appearances, or appearances, of truth, the Writings teach that truth divine proceeds from the Lord in six degrees. The first two

degrees are above angelic understanding. The angels can understand truth divine in the third and fourth degrees. We mortals can perceive truth in the sixth degree, and to a lesser extent, truth in the fifth degree (AC 8443). Again, we have to use this kind of passage in a balanced way. When we are feeling haughty, then we can use it to remind ourselves about how little truth we know and how little can be expressed in human language on the pages of a book. When we are feeling doubtful, skeptical, and insecure, we can use this passage to remind ourselves about the transcendental and angelic nature of the truth we know and how much truth can be expressed in language despite its limitations.

Yes, all the truths we have are appearances of truth. The absolutely pure truth is infinite and is the Lord's alone. He is the only one who knows the truth in the highest degree, indeed, in all degrees! Now some people may feel that the teachings on appearances of truth and degrees of truth justify either a mitigated skepticism or a Postmodern stance. The teachings do not justify either position. To see why, try this thought experiment. Let's say that instead of six degrees of truth, there are six times sixty, or 360 degrees of truth. Let us also say that we can know truth in the first two degrees, # 360 and # 359. Now, does this make the list of eternal and universal truths that we have been given in the Third Testament any less eternal, any less universal, any less divine? No. As *Arcana Caelestia* 8443 notes: "The appearing of the Lord is by means of Divine Truth, and also it is Divine Truth." Only if we think of these degrees spatially (vertically), or if we set the standard for truth too high for mortals, will we be dissatisfied with the degrees of truth that are open to us.

Notice the balance between what we can, and cannot know of the truth in this passage: The Lord is called the Word, for the Word is doctrine and the Lord is doctrine itself. But because everything in the Lord is Divine, and the Divine cannot be comprehended by any created being, matters of doctrine which come from the Lord, "are not therefore wholly Divine truths, but appearances of truth. *All the same, appearances do include Divine truths within them, and because they include them, appearances also are called truths*" (AC 3364:2, emphasis added). We must remember though that "truths exist to the end that good may flow in" (AC 3387) because, as regards life, "truth is charity itself" (AC 3157). □