

The Acts, the Epistles and the Word Itself

A sermon by Rev. Michael Gladish
Mitchellville, MD, January 24th, 2016

“Most assuredly,” Jesus said, “he who believes in Me, the works that I do he will do also; and greater works than these he will do, because I go to My Father. And whatever you ask in My name, that I will do, that the Father may be glorified in the Son. If you ask anything in My name, I will do it” (John 14:12-14).

In Matthew, chapter 10 and, coincidentally also in Luke, chapter 10, when the Lord sent His disciples out to preach the Gospel He gave them dramatic powers to heal the sick, raise the dead and cast out demons. At the end of the Gospel of Mark He added that they would speak with new tongues, and not be hurt if they took up serpents or drank anything deadly.

These powers were all confirmed in the early days of the Christian Church as the apostles like Peter, John, Stephen, Paul, Silas and others travelled throughout central Europe and Asia Minor doing exactly what the Lord had said. So the promises were literally fulfilled, and the Writings for the New Church confirm that it was so.

It is also worth noting that the Lord had warned the disciples repeatedly that when they went out to preach this new Gospel they would be persecuted and even condemned by many for it – even as He Himself had been persecuted and condemned (Matt. 10:16-39).

With this in mind it can be a moving experience to read the history of this early period in the church, and see not only the things that were done but the unflinching *courage* these men had in presenting the great truths the Lord had revealed to them – even in the face of incredible suffering. It was in large measure because of this resolute conviction that the church in those years grew incredibly fast – sometimes by several thousand in a day (see Acts 2:41 and 4:4).

Now, of course, apart from certain rather suspicious, even theatrical demonstrations in certain churches, we don't see much evidence of these miraculous powers. And again, the Writings for the New Church explain why this is so: it's about free will, that is, the deep, internal freedom to decide for one's self whether something is true or false, good or evil. The problem is that demonstrations of miraculous power tend to compel belief – or at least outward co-operation – so that a person feels overwhelmed, unable to resist the claims that are made at the time. But since this is only an external experience, it may not really affect the will, and so as soon as it passes and the person has a chance to reflect on it, he may reject it all as a trick or a coincidence, or find some other explanation. We see this time after time in the Old Testament, when astounding miracles were done for the Children of Israel, but within days, sometimes even hours, they fell right back into their old ways.

So why were miracles allowed, *even promoted* by the Lord among the disciples of the early church? Well, the answer is simple. It seems the Lord knew very well that neither the disciples nor any of the early Christians would be able to understand the more interior implications of His teachings; they just didn't have the cultural or educational basis to understand or to reflect very deeply on their thoughts and affections. But they knew a good thing when they saw it, and the Lord's power to heal their diseases and save them from many other evils really met their needs.

So, accommodating as He always does, the Lord provided these miracles to ensure that a very simple faith in Him could be established and spread throughout the world, thereby laying the groundwork for His Second Coming, when, again as promised, He would reveal deeper truths to meet the needs of a more enlightened age. Remember, He said, “I still have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now. However when ... the Spirit of truth has come, it will guide you into all truth” (John 16:12-13). We’ll come back to this thought in a few minutes.

Today, however, the miracles are not needed (except perhaps for the very simple who are still not capable of deeper reflection), in fact they can really interfere with a person’s deeper thought and in a way shut it down (Inv. 46). So instead of such things the Lord has now revealed the spiritual sense of His Word and the whole quality of our life in the spiritual world so that we can *think and understand*, and cultivate an *inner life* that really prepares us for heaven.

But naturally this raises the question, how can we know that this new revelation really is from the Lord, and *what exactly IS His Word, anyway?* Is it a collection of wise sayings? Is it the history of the Jews or the early Christian Church? Or is it, rather, the story of the Lord’s own life, told in symbolic detail in the lessons and parables of the books of Moses, the Law, the Prophets, and the Gospels? What then about Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Ruth and other historical accounts like the Chronicles? What about the Epistles and the book of Revelation?

One way we can tell the difference – that is to say, which books are Divinely inspired and which ones are more like sermons or commentaries – is to see who is the center of attention in the stories. Is it the Lord, His teaching, His zeal, His mercy, His work, or is it someone else? In most Bibles today you can get a clue by looking for the red print, which represents the Lord Himself speaking, especially in the New Testament. And in the Old Testament you can get a sense of it by noting which stories feature the Lord’s work or His commandments among the people, and which focus more on human wisdom or interactions flowing *from* that work. There are, for example, some very beautiful, practical *and clever* sayings in the book of Proverbs, but for the most part they don’t reflect the Lord’s direct teaching. And some of the books, like Ruth, don’t even *mention* God. The book of Revelation, however, is ALL about the Lord and His prophecies about the future of the church.

The book of “the Acts of the Apostles” contains wonderful stories about how those men used the Lord’s authority and power to do amazing things, but it is not really about the Lord. And the Epistles are more like sermons or commentaries than direct teachings about the Lord. In fact they were all written as letters of instruction and encouragement to the members of the early church, warning them about various abuses and giving advice on practical matters. And in some cases, as in 1st Corinthians 7, Paul plainly says that his advice is his own and *not* from the Lord.

Still, these books have tremendous value for anyone seeking to understand the implications of the Lord’s Word, or to be inspired by the experiences of those who bravely shared those teachings in the face of life-threatening opposition. So, when asked once in a letter from a scholarly friend why he had not referred to these books as God’s Word, Swedenborg replied,

“In respect to the writings of the apostles and Paul, I have not quoted them in the *Arcana Caelestia*, because they are doctrinal writings, and consequently are not written in the style of the Word, like those of the prophets, of David, of the Evangelists, and the Book of Revelation. The style of the Word consists altogether of

correspondences, wherefore it is effective of immediate communication with heaven; but in doctrinal writings there is a different style, which has indeed communication with heaven, but mediately.

“They were written thus by the apostles, that the new Christian Church might be commenced through them; wherefore matters of doctrine could not be written in the style of the Word, but they had to be expressed in such a manner, as to be understood more clearly and intimately. The writings of the apostles are, nevertheless, good books of the church, insisting upon the doctrine of charity and its faith as strongly as the Lord Himself has done in the Gospels and the Book of Revelation; as may be seen and found evident by everyone who in reading them directs his attention to these points.” (*Documents Concerning Swedenborg*, page 242)

Now it's worth noting that some four years after this letter was written, in *The True Christian Religion*, subtitled *The Universal Theology of the New Church*, Swedenborg *did* quote extensively from the Acts and the Epistles, and even lumped them together with other references which he cited as “the Word.” This has led some to suppose that they are indeed part of the Word after all, but this needs to be seen in context, since terms in the Writings can have variations of meaning depending on their context, and it must also be seen in the light of other passages that clearly and specifically identify the books of the Word (AC 10325 and NJHD 266).

In context, *The True Christian Religion*, more than any other book of the Writings, essentially is a long argument or “apology” (in the scholarly sense), answering objections and confirming the doctrines of the New Church *for the Christian academic world*. It surely is no coincidence that this book was written during the time of the so-called Gothenburg trial, when the doctrines of the New Church were bitterly attacked as heretical and contrary to Scripture (a charge that was eventually dropped as being completely without merit). Anyway, it should come as no surprise that this defense appeals to all the books that the Swedish state church had accepted as the Word, holding nothing back in confirmation of the truth.

Swedenborg could do this because, as he said, there was nothing inconsistent with the truth in those books; they were simply not written with the same Divine authority.

But now, what about the Heavenly Doctrines? In one sense, being “doctrinal writings” they are not part of the Word as defined in Swedenborg's letter. But in another sense they are, since everything that is directly from the Lord is His Word. In any case, the Writings are ALL about the Lord, and Swedenborg testifies numerous times that he could not have known anything of what he wrote except from the Lord.

But this is a big subject. Today we are focused especially on the Acts and the Epistles, and the question is, why *wouldn't* we read and even study these wonderful books? For one thing, like Swedenborg himself in TCR, if we want to communicate with other Christians, and especially if we want to make a case for the heavenly doctrines with other Christians, we need to know what's in the Acts and the Epistles. For example, there's a famous passage in Romans (3:28) that says, “Therefore we conclude that a man is justified by faith apart from the deeds of the law.” But we need to ask, who's “we”? And what does Paul mean by “the deeds of the law”? Many Christians think it means the whole law, including the Ten Commandments. But in context it is clear that it means the laws of circumcision, diet, external cleanliness and so on. He goes on just two

verses later and says, “Do we then make void the law through faith? Certainly not! On the contrary, we establish the law,” which clearly refers to the core commandments.

Again, look at 1st Corinthians 12 or 13. Or 14. Here we find beautiful teachings about the unity and diversity of the human form of the church (not unlike what we know of the human form of heaven), the priority of love over faith, and a striking treatment of “the gift of tongues” in which Paul strongly affirms that it is better to speak with understanding! Or go to Timothy and read about some excellent rules of social conduct. True, Paul’s teachings about the roles of men and women are a little off, but remember, he was a Pharisee and was thinking from the literal sense of the Old Testament. When we know the spiritual sense it changes everything.

The Epistles are full of stuff like this, and it really is wonderful. To cite just one other example, Paul in Romans 4 says that Abraham was justified by faith *and not by works* in that he *believed* God concerning the temptation to sacrifice his son, Isaac. But James in his Epistle, chapter 2 cites the same story and says that it proves Abraham *was justified by works and not by faith*, since he was willing to *do* what God commanded him in that temptation. Who’s right? Well, we say they’re both right, since one can’t really exist without the other! They go together like planning and doing; it’s only a matter of which comes first, and on *that* subject the Heavenly Doctrines have a great deal to say – explaining everything on the deeper level of the mind or spirit.

And so we come back to the point made earlier that the Holy Spirit, “the Spirit of truth that leads to all truth” is and must be revealed by the Lord Himself. And in that revelation, thanks to many factors in His Providence that prepared the human race to receive it, He cuts through the appearances of the natural senses, including the reasoning of some who play on people’s fears and physical needs to promote a faith that binds the conscience (and usually involves some sort of financial obligation).

Please don’t misunderstand. There is something quite beautiful about a simple faith in the Lord’s power to heal, and even science has shown that such faith promotes healing. The problem is that unless we can *understand* the great truths of religion and see how they apply to our spiritual states of thought and affection we are missing the point and very likely to be distracted from the self-examination that leads to real spiritual health and well-being. Yes, we might experience a miracle of healing or some other natural blessing. But that alone will not make us better spiritually any more than illness or suffering in themselves make us any *worse* spiritually.

But by revealing the spiritual sense of the Word, and shedding light on the whole quality and character of spiritual life, the Lord provides in a special way for our true freedom in preparing for heaven (or, if we insist, hell). And so these gifts are *better* than any miracle affecting our natural lives. In fact, the only real mystery about these teachings is why we who know about them are not *at least* as zealous, committed and courageous as the first apostles were about sharing them with other people. Perhaps if we spent more time in the Acts and the Epistles we would be more inspired and encouraged to do so.

Amen.

Lessons: *John* 14:1-14
 Arcana Caelestia 7290 – see next page
 (1st *Corinthians* 15:35-54 – but not for reading in the service)

“With regard to the wonders and signs described in what follows from here onwards, it should be realized that they were performed among the kind of people whose worship was external and who had no wish to know about internal worship. For those whose worship was like that had to be coerced by means of external things. This explains why miracles were performed among the Israelite and Jewish people, for their worship was entirely external and not at all internal. What is more, since they had no liking for internal worship, external worship was the kind they were required to engage in, to the end that they might represent things of a holy nature within their external observances. This would establish a channel of communication with heaven as if through something of a Church. For correspondences, representatives, and meaningful signs link the natural world to the spiritual world. This then was why so many miracles were performed among that nation.

[2] “But no miracles are performed among those whose worship is internal, that is, who have charity and faith residing with them, since miracles are harmful to them; for miracles compel one to believe, and what one is compelled to believe does not remain but is thrown to the winds. The internal constituents of their worship, which are faith and charity, must be implanted in freedom; for then they make them their own and what they make their own in this way remains, whereas what is implanted under compulsion remains outside the internal man, in the external man. This is because nothing passes into the internal man except by way of ideas seen in the understanding, that is, seen rationally, since the soil which receives what is implanted in the internal man is enlightened reason. This is why no miracles are performed at the present day. One may also conclude from this that they are harmful, for they compel a person to believe something and give the external man fixed ideas about the truth of it. If after that the internal man refuses to believe what the miracles have proved, the internal man and the external become opposed to and clash with each other, and when at length the ideas implanted under the influence of miracles are driven to the winds, falsity becomes joined to truth, that is, profanation occurs. This shows how harmful miracles are at the present day in a Church in which the internal qualities constituting worship have been made known. This is also what is meant by the Lord's words to Thomas,

Because you have seen Me, Thomas, you have believed; blessed are those who do not see yet believe. John 20:29.

“This shows too that they are 'blessed', those whose belief is not induced by miracles.

[3] “...The fact that miracles do not make any contribution towards faith becomes quite clear from the miracles performed among the Israelite people in Egypt and in the wilderness; those miracles had no effect whatever on them....

[4] “They would have even less effect at the present day when nobody acknowledges that there is anything which has its origin in the spiritual world, and when anything miraculous that occurs and is not attributed to natural causes is refused recognition.... If at the present day therefore one who belongs to the Church were to witness utterly Divine miracles, he would first deduce that they had a natural origin and sully them with this, then dismiss them as fantasies, and finally mock whoever attributed them to the Divine and not to natural causes. The fact that miracles have no effect at all is also clear from the Lord's words in Luke,

If they do not hear Moses and the Prophets, neither will they be persuaded if someone rises from the dead. Luke 16:31.” (AC 7290, abridged)