

## Collecting Vessels: New Church Education

by the Rev. Bradley D. Heinrichs

*“Go, borrow vessels from everywhere, from all your neighbors—  
empty vessels; do not gather just a few” (II Kings 4:3).*

Both our stories about Elisha and Elijah involve vessels and widows. Elisha commanded the widow of the prophet to borrow all the empty vessels she could from her neighbors. And Elijah commanded the widow of Zarephath to make him a cake first from her jar of oil and bin of flour, and then promised her that her vessels would never be empty.

Now, believe it or not, these two stories about vessels demonstrate very powerfully the importance of New Church education. And with the beginning of a new school year almost upon us, it is useful for us to reflect upon just why we put so much time and energy into New Church schools. They aren't money makers for the Church. Public school education is cheaper for the parents. So why do we bother?

Because of *vessels*! New Church education is all about providing appropriate vessels for our children. Vessels of all shapes, sizes, and materials. So with that in mind, let's look at Elisha's story of the widow and the vessels first.

The widow in this story was the wife of one of the good prophets in Israel. He had died and left her and her two sons behind. She cried out to Elisha for help because the creditor was coming to take her two sons as slaves since she could not repay the debt she owed.

To fully appreciate her desperate plight, you have to realize that by the laws of the land the creditor was fully within his rights to take her sons, and that as a woman in that time period, she had almost no rights and very few means of supporting herself or earning any money.

A widow, we are told, symbolizes those people who have some basic goodness, but have an affection and a longing for the truth which they lack (see *Arcana Coelestia* 9198). In her case this point is emphasized because she had been the wife of a prophet, whose job it was to teach the truth (see *Arcana Coelestia* 2534). Her sons, now orphaned by the death of their father, represent the similar desire to be conjoined with the truth that was now absent.

This was the state of intense longing for the truth that the widow and her two sons were experiencing. And who better to turn to than Elisha, the great prophet of the Lord? Elisha, in fact, represents the Word of the Lord and in particular the truth of His Word (see *Arcana Coelestia* 8408:5, 10105:3).

Now in making the connection between this story and New Church education, it is important to think of our children as being in a similar state to that of the orphans or the widow. They have been brought up with some basic principles of right and wrong and possess some degree of natural, basic goodness.

But nevertheless, they are at an age where their minds thirst for truth. There is so much that they don't know about this world, about heaven, hell, and the world of spirits. How do you multiply

numbers? Why is the sky blue? How do you write “cat”? Are there angels with us? Why do bad things happen to good people? How big is God?

Their minds are like dry sponges, waiting to soak up anything that they hear. And that is why New Church education becomes so vitally important. Children are ready to soak up anything that they hear—truth, falsity, appearances of truth, and fallacies of the senses. To children, most things that are presented to them by an adult or an authority are received and accepted as truth. In New Church schools there is a concerted effort to make sure that all the knowledge they soak up is truth on one level or another. Truths about the importance of prayer, the Divinity of the Lord Jesus Christ, and about developing good moral character: being honest, acting with integrity, and knowing the difference between right and wrong.

In addition to these things, they are also taught the basic natural truths as they would be in other schools—truths about math, geography, art, music, history, language, and science. But there is this difference—all these things are taught in the light of the Word, with an emphasis on how they relate to the bigger picture of spiritual realities.

These truths are the vessels that New Church education tries to equip children’s young minds with. Now, as we see in our story, there are two things required for the collecting of vessels or truth. The first is the affection or desire for it, and the second is action. The widow and her two sons obviously had the desire for the truth, but Elisha told them to go out and collect the vessels. He didn’t just hand them a huge sack of vessels. It required initiative on their part.

This illustrates very important techniques in teaching. All children, as said earlier, have some natural desire or curiosity about learning the truth. This affection or love is the small jar of oil that the widow started out with. With some, the affection is a bit greater, but with others it is very little indeed. So one of the first things we need to do as adult teachers is inspire a greater love of learning. This involves appealing to affections, even very external and sensual ones such as taste, touch, smell, sight, and hearing (see *Arcana Coelestia* 1900:2). Hands-on projects, cooking, music, art, and games—use whatever hook you can to catch their interest. For affection is what makes truth stick in their minds (cf. *Arcana Coelestia* 3068).

Once children have the desire to seek further for the truth of a matter, then you must encourage them to take initiative and look further on their own. You don’t just spoon-feed them and give them the vessels; you require them to go out and seek for the vessels themselves. Through their positive action, they take a certain sense of ownership and make the truth their own.

Particularly noteworthy, is that Elisha told the widow to gather many vessels, not just a few. Now at first glance, this may seem just common sense—if you are going to gather vessels anyway, you might as well gather a lot. But the importance of this is underscored by a teaching in the Heavenly Doctrine which says, “All truths are recipient vessels. And as truths are the vessels into which good flows, truths set the limit to the inflow of good” (*Arcana Coelestia* 4205:1).

Think about that for a moment. Truths are the vessels into which the goodness and love of the Lord flows. And as a vessel, truth sets the limit on the amount of good that can flow in from the

Lord. Just as a glass or a bucket holds a fixed amount of liquid, so a truth has a fixed amount of good that it can contain. This is the reason why the oil from the small jar ceased flowing once all the collected vessels had been filled.

So if a child only gathers a few truths as vessels, the goodness of the Lord that can flow in is limited to that amount. This is why New Church education places such great emphasis on collecting as many truths as possible, for the goal is that the children have limitless vessels within them to contain as much of the Lord's inflowing goodness, love, and mercy as they can possibly hold.

The vital importance of New Church education is magnified even more, when you consider this teaching from our third lesson: "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" (*Arcana Coelestia* 2269:3).

By teaching children the truths of the Word, we are giving them the most genuine and pure vessels there are. And these are able to contain more of the Lord's goodness than any other vessels. We are giving them buckets instead of thimbles. And by teaching natural and worldly truths in the *light* of the Word, we are expanding the size of those vessels, too, so that they are better accommodated to receive the Lord's love.

In contrast, our third lesson points out the damage that can be done if falsities are collected as vessels instead of truth. If children are taught from authorities that God is a harsh vindictive judge, or the opposite, that all truth is relative and therefore anything goes, then these falsities can only be receptive of evil and therefore repellant of good. As our lesson put it, vomiting would be induced and the one would throw up the other (see *Arcana Coelestia* 2269:3). Again, this places a real emphasis on the vessels we allow our children to collect, because influx is according to the receiving vessel—if the vessel is truth, then good inflows, but if the vessel is false, evil inflows (see *Conjugal Love* 86; *Spiritual Experiences* 3635; *Arcana Coelestia* 3387:1).

Now let's quickly turn our attention to the story of Elijah and the widow. Due to King Ahab's incredible wickedness, the land was suffering from three years of severe drought without any rain. Elijah met a widow as she was out gathering sticks so she could build a fire in order to bake a cake out of her last bit of oil and flour, so that she and her son could have a last meal before they died.

This widow was in a tragic circumstance to be sure, and what did Elijah do? He asked her to use her last bit of oil and flour to make a cake for him first, and then he promised her that her jar of oil and bin of flour would not be used up until the Lord again sent rain upon the earth. Imagine how those words must have sounded to the widow. Here she and her son were, about to die from starvation, and a prophet of God tells her to feed him first! What incredible faith she must have had to even contemplate the idea.

There is a powerful lesson about vessels here for us. The Heavenly Doctrine states that "it is a universal law that influx adjusts itself according to efflux, and if efflux is blocked influx is

blocked” (*Arcana Coelestia* 5828:3; cf. *True Christian Religion* 814). This is perfectly illustrated by the widow’s jar of oil and bin of flour. As long as there was efflux or flowing out from her vessels, there would be a corresponding influx or flowing in to match it.

Her outflow of charity toward Elijah, placing his needs above those of herself and her son, created the necessary room in the vessels of her mind and heart for the Lord’s love to flow in and sustain her in her time of need (see *Arcana Coelestia* 9198:7). The Lord did not command Elijah to ask to be fed first out of heartlessness, but because He knew that in a state of self-pity, the solution was for her to look outside herself and seek to help another.

This lesson about the efflux and influx into vessels is also valuable in the context of New Church education. Once we have helped students to collect all the vessels of truth they can, then we need to teach them that there must be an outflow of good deeds and charitable acts. For this will provide for a limitless inflowing of the Lord’s goodness into those same vessels.

All the truth that students obtain as vessels for goodness is useless, unless that goodness is directed toward others. The oil of the Lord’s love would indeed flow into their vessels of truth, but if it just sat there for a long period of time, it would eventually become rancid and stagnant and turn to evil because it sought only to serve self. However, if it is used to bestow the Lord’s love upon other people, then the oil keeps flowing and is continually renewed. Consequently, the drought ends and the gentle rain of new truths from heaven comes down and refreshes the mind (see *Arcana Coelestia* 10570:5).

So, as we contemplate the beginning of a new school year, we should reflect on these powerful lessons from the Lord’s Word, and re-dedicate ourselves to supporting the vital use of New Church education. It really is all about helping the children obtain the best and the biggest vessels of truth, so that they can receive the greatest amount of the Lord’s love that they can and then go out into the world and share the joys of His wondrous love with others.

The education of children to become useful members of the Lord’s kingdom is our privilege and responsibility. Let us heed the words of the Lord:

*“Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one! You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your might. And these words which I command you today shall be in your heart; you shall teach them diligently to your children, and shall talk of them when you sit in your house, when you walk by the way, when you lie down, and when you rise up.”*

(Deuteronomy 6:4-7)

Amen.

Lessons: II Kings 4:1-7; I Kings 17:1,8-16; *Arcana Coelestia* 2269:3