

The Balance of Constancy and Change in the New Church

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The “Newness” of the New Church

Once, while Emanuel Swedenborg was in the spiritual world, he saw a magnificent temple. Inscribed above the entrance to that temple were the words *Nunc licet*, signifying that “Now it is permitted to enter with the understanding into the mysteries of faith.” Inside the temple Swedenborg saw the Word, “which lay open and was surrounded by a blaze of light” (*True Christian Religion* 508).

Nunc licet. Now it is permitted. It is significant that the first word of the inscription is “Now.” At this very moment we are permitted to enter with understanding into the mysteries of faith. In order to do so we must strive to think spiritually, beyond the bounds of time and space, peoples and places. “To think spiritually is to think of the things of the Lord’s kingdom” and not of names and nations and kings (see *Arcana Coelestia* 2015). As long as our thoughts are bound by time and space, “nothing can be understood about the Divine life, which is love and wisdom” (*Divine Love and Wisdom* 10). To understand spiritual subjects we must rise above notions of time and space, nation, and person, and strive to think spiritually. Hear the note of urgency in this passage: “Do not, I entreat you, confuse your ideas with time and with space, for so far as time and space enter into your ideas when you read what follows, you will not understand it, for the Divine is not in time and space” (*ibid.* 51). The Heavenly Doctrine of the New Church urges us to go beyond our habitual modes of thought. They beckon us to come up into the purer, holier realms of spirit and spiritual thought, to abstract our thinking from persons and focus on essential qualities, to rise above time and space and enter into the eternal now.

“Now” was the first word Swedenborg saw over the door of that temple in the spiritual world. It reminds me of the Lord’s perpetual presence: now, at this moment, inviting us to come to Him, to enter into that magnificent temple. Now is the moment; the Word is open to us, and we are permitted to enter with understanding into the mysteries of faith. The temple represents the New Church. To “enter in” is to enter into a new and deeper understanding of truth. This happens whenever the Word is read with a sense of its holiness and with the uses of life in mind. When does this happen? Now! The New Church is a very “now” church. “Whereas I was blind, *now* I see” (John 9:19).

Now and Then

It would be a mistake, however, to overemphasize “now” and disregard “then.” It is true, for example, that Swedenborg saw the words *Nunc licet* over two hundred years ago. In a certain sense we can say that the second coming happened “back then,” when the Lord caused the Heavenly Doctrine for the New Church to be written. We can also say that the second coming happens now, at this moment. We can see it as a spiritual experience that takes place within an individual whenever that person sees beneath the letter and glimpses the glory of the spiritual sense.

The Heavenly Doctrines are very matter-of-fact about the second coming of the Lord as something that took place at a certain point in historical time. Yet we also read that “the coming of the Lord is not according to the letter, [which states] that He is to appear again in the world; but it is His presence in everyone, and this exists *whenever the gospel is preached and what is holy is thought of* (*Arcana Coelestia* 300:9, emphasis mine).

Such viewpoints are not mutually exclusive. Things happen now, and then. Sometimes we find ourselves focusing on the importance of the past, speaking about what happened “back then.” Constancy and stability become important to us. We see our New Churchmanship as based on adherence to a set of firm beliefs. We find ourselves saying things like, “I have always believed.”

On the other hand, there are times when our focus is more on the present. While we acknowledge the past, we are not so much concerned with what we have always believed, but rather with how much more there is to know. In this state we delight in deepening our former understanding, and in being open to new ideas. Growth and change become important to us. We see our New Churchmanship as an attitude of openness to new ways of looking at things. We find ourselves saying, “I now see this in a new way.”

There are beautiful Scriptural passages to support either emphasis. When we find ourselves saying, “I have always believed,” we tend to be like the wise man “who built his house upon the rock” (Matthew 7:24). When we find ourselves saying “I now see this in a new way,” we are supported by passages such as, “Behold, I make all things new” (Revelation 21:5). Whichever way we feel ourselves leaning—then or now—it is vital to keep in mind that they are not mutually exclusive. I learned this back in 1965.

Something I Learned Back “Then” Is Still True “Now”

Back in the summer of 1965 I had just completed my junior year of college. I was working as a summer intern at the Connecticut General Life Insurance Company. The thought was that summer interns might decide to join the company after completing their senior year of college. I never did join the company, but I will always remember the words that Henry Dawes, the head of Personnel, spoke to me in our last interview. He said, “Believe strongly in what you believe. But subject your beliefs often to careful scrutiny, and be willing to alter them when better evidence is offered.” The first part of that statement I liken to “the rock”—“believe strongly in what you believe.” The second part calls to mind the Lord’s promise, “Behold, I make all things new”—“Subject those beliefs to careful scrutiny and be willing to alter them when better evidence is offered.”

What I learned back then I still try to apply to my life now. I do believe strongly in what I believe; at the same time I often subject these beliefs to careful scrutiny, and I try to alter them when better evidence is offered.

In many ways I consider myself to be a staunch New Churchman, rock solid about certain foundation beliefs: the oneness of God, the spiritual sense of the Word, the eternity of marriage, the life of charity. At the same time I remain open to seeing new truth flowing from the threefold Word. I realize that my initial understanding of truth must deepen with time, and that I must be willing to see things in new and deeper ways. In regard to the Divine truths of the Word, I liken this to the difference between John the Baptist (our first, most literal understanding of truth) and the coming of the Christ (our deeper, more spiritual understanding of the truth). In referring to the coming of the Christ, John the Baptist said, “He must increase, but I must decrease” (John 3:30). In commenting on this verse Bishop George de Charms said: “The letter [John the Baptist] speaks of earthly things, of people and places and historic events; but the Spirit [Jesus Christ] speaks of heavenly things, of faith and charity, of eternal truths...” (*Harmony of the Four Gospels*, p. 117).

Truth Solid as a Rock, Clear as a Stream

It was in March of 1978 that I first discovered the Heavenly Doctrine for the New Church. In some cases certain foundation beliefs have become even more rock solid, while other beliefs have undergone a great deal of alteration and re-vision.

My belief in the Lord and His loving presence seems now, more than ever, immovable, unshakable, rock solid. In regard to the Word, I have seen, again and again, confirmation of the truth that it contains an internal sense which at times shines forth in great glory. The blessings of conjugal or true marriage love become more real to me every day. I believe with all my heart that a life according to the commandments, with no thought of reward, is what heaven is all about. I am convinced that genuine truths from the sense of the letter of the Word shield me in times of temptation. These beliefs constitute the rock of my New Churchmanship—areas where I believe myself to be staunch and unshakable, “though the rain descends, the floods come, and the winds beat” upon my house. Though these beliefs have been subjected to careful scrutiny, they have not changed, only deepened.

There are other areas of my New Churchmanship, however, that have undergone careful scrutiny, and have been found to be in need of re-vision. At first, as might be expected, I did not see beyond the literal truth of the Heavenly Doctrine, in much the same way that I once did not see beyond the literal truth of the New Testament (*e.g.*, “Sell what you have and give to the poor” (Matthew 19:21)). I believed that the letter of the Heavenly Doctrine would be a permanent guide containing all the answers to my daily concerns. If I just studied them diligently enough, I would be able to find a plain and direct answer to every problem, from population control to proper diet. What I found was that heavenly secrets are truly secrets. The Lord allows us to enter in only to the degree that we are ready. When the Lord says, “Now it is permitted to enter with understanding into the mysteries of faith,” it isn’t like a reward for good performance; rather, it is an inevitable part of the charitable life. Use brings with it its own light (see *Arcana Coelestia* 8912, 9086). And along with that new light come new ways of seeing things, new perceptions of the good within the truth. The rock (what we have always believed) is struck, and it issues forth streams of living water, clear as crystal and translucent with sparkling light (new perceptions of truth).

“Then” and “Now”—Two Points of Doctrine

The Heavenly Doctrine assures us that as we strive to live according to the truths that we know, our understanding will deepen (see *Arcana Coelestia* 3982:2). I would like to offer examples of how my own understanding has grown in regard to two points of doctrine. It may help illustrate what I mean when I say an individual’s understanding of doctrine may “deepen” and “change” over the years. It is my own story of what I believed “then” and what I believe “now.”

1. “All evils are contagious” (*True Christian Religion* 120).

At first I took this quite literally and understood it to mean that I should be extremely wary of the people I associated with. The passage is quite strong, stating that “whoever associates with robbers or pirates at length becomes like them...for all evils are contagious and they might be compared to the plague, which is communicated merely by the breath of emanation from the infected.” To me this passage clearly said that I should avoid contact with evil people and all evil influences. I was careful not to expose myself or my family to anything indecent on TV, in the movies or even on billboards.

Gradually I came to see how very useful this teaching is, especially for young people and for all who are just beginning to develop in their spiritual lives. It is a fragile time, and a period of separation from the influences of the world is necessary. However, I also saw that these words had deeper and broader implications. This happened when I began to see them beyond the confines of physical time and space. I began to see them as words that did not so much dictate who my acquaintances in this world should be, but rather what thoughts I should entertain. These words began to speak to me not so much about my physical surroundings and associates, but about my spiritual environment—the thoughts and feelings I invited into my mind, associated with, and embraced. I began to understand at a new level. I began to see that I must not dwell on negative things, that I must not harbor evil grudges and resentments, that I must shun these tendencies in myself. If I didn't, they would just get worse and worse for me, and my evil tendencies would grow and spread like a contagious disease, making me more negative than ever. This was the “new light” in which I now saw those words, “All evils are contagious.”

I also realized, from other teachings of the Heavenly Doctrine, that it is indeed possible to associate with all kinds of people without danger of “spiritual contagion” as long as a person is in the Lord (see *Arcana Coelestia* 968, 2379, 6370, 8273, 9049:6). I take this to mean that I must be free of contempt, full of compassion, and firmly rooted in genuine truths from the letter of the Word. This is to be “in the Lord.” It provides a sort of protection which might be called “spiritual immunity.” It is noteworthy that this passage about “association with the evil” occurs in the chapter entitled “The Lord as Redeemer.” And the passage begins with the words, “Had it not been for the redemption effected by the Lord, iniquity and wickedness would now be widespread.” The passage ends with another mention of the Lord's redemption: “Hence, then, it may appear evident that without redemption by the Lord, no one could be saved...the only refuge from destruction for anyone is in the Lord, for He says: ‘Abide in Me and I in you...’ (John 15:4).” This calls to mind the words of David, “Because you have made the Lord your refuge, even the Most High your habitation, no evil shall befall you, nor shall any plague come near your dwelling. For He shall give His angels charge over you, to keep you in all your ways” (Psalm 91:9-11).

The warning that “all evils are contagious” is not to be taken lightly. If we choose to associate with natural robbers, thieves, and adulterers, we had better be sure that the Lord is with us, protecting us by means of truths from His Word. At another level this passage speaks powerfully about the dangers that lurk within us, the evil inclinations and impulses that flow in from the other world, even while we are in the midst of the most decent fellowship. These are especially the evil associations that we are to avoid like the plague!

2. “The faith of the New Church cannot by any means be together with the faith of the former church, and if they are together, such a collision and conflict will take place that everything of the church with a person will perish” (*Brief Exposition* 102).

At first I understood this to mean that I had better not read any theology or philosophy that was not strictly New Church. I was to become a complete and total New Churchman and not allow my mind to be cluttered with the confusion of any false ideas from the former churches. To me this passage meant that all my thinking should be based on the Heavenly Doctrine and the Heavenly Doctrine alone. Consequently, I steeped myself in an exclusive study of the Heavenly Doctrine, making room for collateral works by New Church greats such as Chauncey Giles, John Clowes, Samuel Noble, and William Bruce. I made sure that my mind was filled with New Church truths and New Church truths alone, and it was a truly beautiful experience. I found myself “thinking from the Heavenly Doctrine.”

Gradually I began to realize that the “New Church” and the “former church” referred to in this passage were not primarily speaking about theological camps in the world. Once again I came into a state where this passage seemed to transcend the world of time and space and speak directly to my soul. It said that I must be willing to put away preconceived notions (“the former church”) so that I could enter into a newer and deeper perception of Divine truth (“the New Church”). The process was simple. To the extent that I lived according to the truth that I believed, I found myself entering into the good of that truth. From “good” I was granted a deeper perception of the truth; I was able to see how shallow my “truth alone” understanding was, and was able to infill it with good.

An example might be helpful here. When I first began to study the Heavenly Doctrine, I was very impressed with the teachings about earth being a “place of preparation for heaven.” The focus on “the ruling love” being established here and then continuing to eternity seemed very powerful. It seemed as though my only reason for being on earth was to prepare for heaven. That was the faith of the “former church” in me. The “New Church” in me sees this apart from space and time; it sees the kingdom of heaven as available to us right now, in this very moment. “Now it is permitted to enter” that kingdom to the degree that we practice true Christian love. Helen Keller says it so beautifully, “The old thought tells us we are given earth to prepare for heaven; but there is a truth in the other way round. We are given a knowledge of heaven to fit us better for earth. The Vision of Beauty must come into the workshop of Nazareth” (*My Religion*. New York: Swedenborg Foundation, 1974, p. 85). And George Dole puts it like this, “Eternal life is not something we should be getting ready for, but something we are currently involved in” (“Just in Time: Linear Living in a Holographic Cosmos,” *Chrysalis*, Vol. II, issue 3, Autumn 1987, p. 297).

If we are spiritually developing, new feelings and new ideas are continually evolving out of former ones. It is a continual, deepening process, not a battle between the new faith and the former faith. Gradually we become kinder, more forgiving, less prone to anger and contempt. The New Church is growing in us. But there will be times when we are on the verge of reverting to earlier (i.e., less forgiving, less kind) ways of thinking, times when we are tempted to deny the new growth that has taken place within us. Then a battle might ensue that would leave us so confused and torn that we wouldn’t know what to believe—“everything of the church would perish.”

In this deeper, more spiritual understanding, my focus is more on the life of regeneration and less upon ecclesiastical organizations. The letter speaks of earthly things—people, places, organizations; the spirit speaks of heavenly things—charity, faith, the process of regeneration.

Now It Is Permitted to Enter. . .and the Door Is Perpetually Open

In this paper I have tried to illustrate how constancy and change are essential aspects of New Churchmanship. They are not mutually exclusive. It is our same Lord who not only tells us to build our house upon the rock, but also says, “Behold, I make all things new.” The spiritual sense of the Word depends upon and rests in the literal sense, just as the soul depends upon the body (see *Doctrine of the Sacred Scripture* 54). The truth we learn tomorrow is dependent on everything we have learned yesterday and today. The new understanding is built upon a rock-solid foundation as “The wise man built his house upon the Rock.”

Constancy and change: firm beliefs and openness to new ways of seeing things. Though apparently opposite, both perspectives are vital to our personal spiritual growth. The roots of the tree grow more deeply year by year. The tree grows stronger, more constant, secure, steadfast. And every year there

are new branches, new flowers, new fruit bearing seed. Why do the changeless truths of the New Church seem to keep on changing? The fact is that the truths themselves never change; rather, we change, seeing them more and more clearly, more and more deeply, and this to eternity. As human beings we are intended to grow, change, see things in new ways, and deepen our faith in God. The Word of God, like God Himself, does not change. The Word of God shall stand forever.

Hopefully we all incorporate something of constancy and something of change into our New Churchmanship. Along with maturity comes a deepening of faith as well as an acknowledgment that a current understanding of the Word will gradually give way to a still deeper perception of the Divine truth. It's important that we believe strongly in what we believe. It's also important that we take a new look at what we have always believed when better evidence is offered. There is nothing to lose and everything to gain. "The grass withers; the flower fades; but the Word of God stands forever" (Isaiah 40:8).

The Lord is continually inviting us to come into the heavenly kingdom, to experience deeper and richer perceptions of truth, finer and nobler affections of good. He is continually inviting us to reach beyond the literal truths, to rise above the world of time and space, to enjoy the purer, holier realms of spiritual thought and life. "The words that I speak to you are spirit and they are life," says the Lord (John 6:63). "I will not leave you comfortless; I will send you another Comforter...even the Spirit of truth" (John 14:16, 17).

He has come again. He has opened His arms to us through the opening of His Word. He invites us all to come to Him, to enter the temple. Now it is permitted to enter, again and again, more deeply, into the truths of the Word. We need not even knock, for the door is perpetually open: "Behold, I have set before you an open door, and no one can shut it" (Revelation 3:8).

Constancy and change; permanence and growth—these are essential aspects of life. They are not mutually exclusive. We need to believe firmly in what we believe; we need to be rock solid in our convictions. We need also to be open to seeing things in new ways, to continually look beneath the letter of our convictions into the spirit that gives them life. "Heaven and earth shall pass away, but My words will by no means pass away" (Matthew 24:35; Mark 13:31; Luke 21:33). The Word of God, constant in its essence, changing in our understanding of it, endures forever.