

In this special edition of Voice, we present Beryl's article which was originally written for the Caritas book, "Healing Words: A Theology of Wholeness".

Twelve Gates of the New Jerusalem: A Plea for a Wider View

by Beryl Simonetti

How have Swedenborg's theological works been received since their publication?

The theological works of Emanuel Swedenborg have been read and valued by many men and women for more than 250 years. Can it be surprising that these readers have varying points of view and varying levels of commitment concerning these works? As a believer that what is given in them came from God, I can only wish for increasing influence of the concepts and visions that they present to us.

Not everyone who reads Swedenborg shares these desires, but those who read with an open mind are likely to find things which will influence their lives and inspire them to reach for a richer spiritual life than they had before. Some may simply find a philosophy which they resonate with, and incorporate that philosophy into their own personal view of the world. Some may find fascination with the world beyond our natural life, and regard Swedenborg as someone who went to another level of existence and came back to tell about it. Some may believe that the Writings of Swedenborg are a valid revelation from God, but only one of many revelations that have appeared in the world, such as the *Koran*, the *Bhagavad Gita*, the *I Ching*, or the *Book of Mormon*.

Others regard the Writings of Swedenborg as a unique revelation from God. Even those with this specific belief look at what Swedenborg wrote in many different ways. Some have argued that Swedenborg did not intend to have churches founded around belief in his message, but that he saw his work as something that would permeate existing church organizations. Others have formed church

organizations using the Writings as a primary source of belief.

Some consider themselves "Swedenborgians" and value many of Swedenborg's concepts and ideas, but do not feel they must accept all of them without question. They do not exclude other spiritual writings and ideas. I believe the Swedenborgian Church (formerly the General Convention)

falls into this category, but even within that organization the degree of commitment varies widely.

The General Church of the New Jerusalem accepts the Writings of Swedenborg in a more specific manner. "The Old Testament, the New Testament, and the Writings together are the supreme authority in matters of faith..." (from *A Statement of the Order and Organization of the General Church of the New Jerusalem* p.3) Other spiritual writings and ideas are not included, but may be used if they confirm what Swedenborg's Writings teach.

Members of a third organization, The Lord's New Church which is the Nova Hierosolyma, believe that this revelation has its own internal meaning, which can be discovered by individual enlightened persons.

These are not the only organizations based on a belief that the theological works of Emanuel Swedenborg are a revelation from God, but they show some of the typical differences that have arisen. Differences of opinion are found within each of these organizations as well. How can we acknowledge all these differences and appreciate the broad spectrum of what has been given to us through Swedenborg?

My personal response: where do I stand?

Of these different ways of receiving the Writings of Swedenborg, I feel the most affinity with the position of General Church. I believe that the Writings of Swedenborg are a revelation from God. The characteristic of the General Church I

appreciate the most is the *respect* which the organization accords the Writings, as they are, as we find them. I have difficulty accepting some of the details in the Writings, but I prefer to say "I don't understand this yet" rather than "This is false."

To me, believing that the Writings are a revelation from God is not inconsistent with observing the cultural and scientific context in which Swedenborg wrote, admitting that his science has flaws (as ours does) and that his culture is not universal (as ours is not) and taking this into consideration when I apply what I find to my life. I don't want to have to believe in another level of internal meaning to get around the problems. (Not that I think an internal meaning to the Writings is necessarily a bad idea.) I prefer to set aside certain questions (for example, about men on the moon or customs of concubinage) for later contemplation rather than avoiding them entirely or trying to explain them away.

And I don't want to be asked to trust anyone else's "enlightenment" over my own. I want to be responsible for my own path and my own beliefs and any non-traditional points of view I may have. I think the General Church used to be more accepting of this sort of thinking than it is now. Now, when people express views that are not the accepted ones, there is an effort by some in the clergy to make sure that traditional believers are not led astray by any "innovations." To me, what is taught in the Writings is not as clear as some of the clergy would like us to believe. We are asked, in AC 6222, to "assiduously take one statement together with another, and by doing so see what [we] ought to believe and what [we] ought to do." I see this as an individual task. When a group of clergymen takes it upon themselves to tell us what the

Writings really mean, we have lost the spirit of inquiry which the Church depends on. We are all responsible for finding truth in the Old Testament, the New Testament, and the Writings and applying it in our own individual lives. Priests are to lead us in this search, but it is not their role to tell us what we should believe and do.

I believe that Convention, the General Church and the Lord's New Church are three responses to the ambiguities, paradoxes and limitations inherent in the literal meaning of the Writings. Of those three, I think the General Church has the narrowest view, but I believe, and pray, that its respect for the Writings can be compatible with a wider view.

The rest of this study will deal with my own personal thoughts and wishes about the organization of the General Church. It is my hope that the specific ideas presented about these matters will have a more general application to the problems that arise when decisions are made about how to interpret texts. How literally shall they be considered? What is the value of limiting our view to a narrow perspective? What is the value of broadening that perspective? Does a wider view necessarily remove the focus that is needed if we are to adhere to certain principles and ways of living in accordance with our beliefs?

What is Essential for a New Church Organization?

If we believe that the Old Testament, the New Testament and the Writings are our authority, we need to search in them for statements which tell us about the essentials of a church. We find these, as well as many similar declarations:

"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." Deut. 6:4,5.

"For where two or three are gathered together in My name, I am there in the midst of them." Matt. 18:20

"...Love to the Lord and charity towards the neighbor are the chief and essential qualities of the Church." AC 7233.3

"...These two, the acknowledgment of the Lord, and a life according to the Decalogue... are the two essentials of the new church..." AR 491 (see also AR 876)

"There are three essentials of the church, an acknowledgment of the Divine of the Lord, an acknowledgment of the holiness of the Word, and the life that is called charity... If the church had held these three as essentials it would not have been divided, but only varied, by intellectual dissensions, as light varies the color in beautiful objects..." DP 259.3

Are these essentials all accepted by the General Convention, the General Church, and the Lord's New Church? Are they sufficient for agreement on what is most vital to these organizations? How important are the distinctions that were made in the past when schisms occurred? Perhaps there were precipitating causes at those times, but is continued division inevitable?

The Writings give us information about the essentials of a church, but they also describe areas where agreement is not essential. Statements which tell us about

differences we can expect within a church, without causing harm, include the following:

"Among [the peoples of the Ancient Church] doctrinal teachings and religious practices differed from one to the next, but there was nevertheless one Church because with them charity was the essential thing... [If this were the case now,] everyone would then say of another, No matter what form his or her doctrine and external worship take, this is my sister or brother; I observe that he or she worships the Lord and is a good person." AC 2385.5

"If all... are governed by charity or mutual love, they have but one end in view, namely the common good, the Lord's kingdom, and the Lord Himself. Variations in matters of doctrine and in forms of worship are like the variations that exist with the physical senses and with the inner parts of people's bodies which... all contribute to the perfection of the whole." AC 1285.3

"There are two things which join members of the Church together — life and doctrine. When life joins them together doctrine does not separate them, but if doctrine alone joins them together, as happens within the Church at the present day, they separate themselves from one another and form as many Churches as there are varieties of doctrine, even though doctrine exists for the sake of life, and life ensues from doctrine. AC 4468

"Although there are so many variations and differences in matters of doctrine... nevertheless they all

form one Church when everyone acknowledges charity to be the essential thing of the Church, or what amounts to the same, when everyone regards life to be the end in view of doctrine — that is, when everyone asks, How does a member of the Church live? rather than, What does he think?" AC 3241.3

Some recurring phrases in these selections are "matters of doctrine," "doctrinal teaching," "forms of worship," and "religious practices." These are the aspects of a church which may distinguish groups or individuals within a larger organization. Can we have complete respect for what the Writings say without requiring the same interpretations, derivations and outward forms to be valid for all? Can belief in the essentials provide a common bond among those who may differ in the details of their belief and practices?

Can we have respect not only for the right to differ, but also for the differing ideas themselves? What does it mean to be tolerant of differences of opinion? Is "tolerance" just a word for putting up with something that is basically unacceptable and that cannot withstand critical analysis? Or is it possible that there is more than one interpretation that is acceptable in the eyes of the Lord, and that people with different views are equally searching for the Lord's leading in their lives?

In Revelation, we read about twelve gates to the city of the New Jerusalem. (Rev. 21:12) "Gates signify knowledges of truth and good from the Word, because a person is introduced by them into the Church." (AR 899). And twelve signifies all — all the different ways of being introduced into the Church.

Can we survive together, in charity, without complete acceptance of one another's views? Or is it necessary, as some believe, to correct the "drift" to progressive, innovative, wide-ranging ways of thinking, and return to the fundamentals of our General Church heritage?

There are people who desire to follow a narrow way of literal interpretation and who prefer to think that this is the only valid way. Perhaps it is the only way for them. Perhaps the General Church way is the narrow way, and others who wish for a broader outlook should leave and find (or, if necessary, found) yet another organization. Does every gate to the New Jerusalem require its own separate organization? Before we come to this conclusion, let us examine some of the ways of approaching the new church which is signified by "the great city, the holy Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God."

First we will examine the narrow way.

The Narrow Road

Those who travel on the narrow road have a "holy fear" of doing harm to anything that is the Lord's. Their respect for the Writings brings with it a fear of violating or contaminating them. They seek for a way to be sure of keeping them safe and uncorrupted.

If there are doubts and disagreements about what is meant by certain parts of the Writings, priests are to study the issues and tell us their conclusions. This is the accepted way to guarantee that there will be "purity of doctrine" in the church. (see TCR 245)

Some members of the clergy fear to think or do anything wrong in connection

with the doctrines. It seems as if, for them, making mistakes is almost a form of profanation. The thought seems to be "We have been entrusted with these beautiful truths so we are obligated to use them correctly. If we fail it would be better if we had never had them." The responsibility must be overwhelming.

I believe the reason for this fearful and mistrustful attitude is found in the following teaching, which is found in many variations throughout the Writings: "Seen in our own right, or in terms of what is actually ours, we are nothing but evil." HH 484e

This teaching has been chosen for particular emphasis in the General Church, rather than the teachings that stress that the Lord is always flowing into us, if we are open to receive: "It is well known that there is nothing good nor anything true except that from the Lord; also that what is good and true is flowing in constantly from the Lord into humans, but it is received in varying ways..." AC 2284.2

As a result of the emphasis on the first of these teachings, there is reluctance to trust any human being, even a priest, to interpret ideas from the Writings, from fear that their meaning will be twisted to suit selfish desires.

One way of addressing this problem is to choose to believe that the Writings are literally true without exception. Many people feel safe and protected when they follow this traditional view.

For some people, reliance on the Writings requires assurance that there is one point of view which will be correct and applicable for all people in all times. Any doubt, any inclusion of other points of view,

is unacceptable for those who see the Writings this way.

This view leads to certain difficulties. In the effort to be sure of what we are doing, we may be giving up many reasonable, valid possibilities and options. Unless we can welcome uncertainty, accept that some things in the Writings are ambiguous, and leave some questions unanswered, we will not even be able to look at the whole picture, let alone comprehend it.

We see passages that imply one thing, and passages that imply the opposite. Some members of the clergy seem to find it their duty to come down on one side or the other of every debatable question, and to tell us what is the sound and pure doctrine. Not being able or willing to encompass paradox leads to narrowness. We may not even accept that there *is* a paradox, and so see and believe only one side of it. If we do this, we are closing ourselves off from a part of the Lord's revelation.

What other way is open to us?

The Wide Road

Those who follow the narrow road, as we have seen, do so based on fear of doing harm to the Heavenly Doctrines, and they take utmost care to preserve them in their integrity, and to foster agreement among their followers. Those who wish to follow a wider road, on the other hand, are willing to attempt to deal with paradoxes and puzzling concepts in ways that differ from previous interpretations. They are willing to experiment with new ideas, and they do not shrink from disagreeing with others in their organization.

This approach carries risk with it — there may be a tendency to fly off in directions that are not grounded in what the Writings teach, and those who want a wider view may become too fond of their own ideas. But if they keep their need to follow the Lord's will before them, and if they continue to have respect for His revelation, they need not be fearful. The wide road is based on trust, and leads to expansion and development of more and more variety in the Church. This prepares the way for more and more of the world's people to find and benefit from the revelation given through Swedenborg.

The wide road was the route that Swedenborg himself followed. He took full advantage of the science and philosophy of his day, and he contributed to it as well. He prepared himself by studying all that was known in the world around him. He used every available resource to help him express the ideas he received from the Lord. Should we not follow his example and use the science, philosophy and psychology of our day to prepare ourselves to understand the revelation he has written down for us?

"In order to be intelligent and wise, it is fitting that we learn a great deal not only about heavenly matters but also about earthly ones. We learn about heavenly matters from the Word and the church and about earthly ones from the arts and sciences. To the extent that we learn and apply our learning to our lives, we become intelligent and wise..." HH 351.3

Finding truth and living by it is an iterative and interactive process. First we learn true things, and then try to incorporate them into our way of living. Living them gives us better insight into what we need to learn about next, and after that

we go on to further changes in our behavior. This interaction of knowledge and action leads to a closer and closer approximation of a good life. When we live in harmony with what we know to be true, we are prepared to understand that truth more deeply. If we are trying to learn enough truth to avoid mistakes altogether before we start to live by it, we will fail, and the process will be cut off at the beginning. We can't expect to succeed with the first attempt. We will need to have the help of our priests, who are ordained to teach and lead to the good of life. I would hope that priests could show us the way, and point us in good directions, but they cannot take the journey for us. They cannot lead us to the good of life by putting blinders on us and tethering us to a leash to prevent our "going astray." What is needed from the clergy is help for people to find the truth that speaks to them individually, so that they can apply it to their own lives.

Each one of us needs to turn the light of the Lord's revelation onto the concepts we have been taught and have accepted thus far. We need to discover old false assumptions, to be willing to change our point of view and give up ideas that we grew up with. It is possible that we may have misunderstood the intentions of our teachers! We need to allow a new enlightenment to take place within us as we read the Word and discover truth in it that is new to us. If we do this, our thought will evolve. We will develop principles and guidelines for our lives that we had no way of comprehending in our younger years. We will hear people saying "I used to think — but now I see it differently."

Sometimes old ideas don't become invalid, they just become outgrown. Newton discovered laws that we still use as a good approximation of what happens in our

familiar physical world. Einstein saw the world more deeply. His ideas grew beyond Newton's but included them. There may be something analogous in our comprehension of what Swedenborg has revealed to us. We can learn about lasers, holograms, genetics, new theories of cosmology, psychological concepts such as projection and narcissism (another word for self-love) and other new concepts. This knowledge can connect us to spiritual realities in ways that were not available when the Writings were written.

A new interpretation or derivation or application of the Writings does not necessarily invalidate the old ones. We do not have to say, "I think you are wrong, and I am right." Instead we observe, "We see these things differently — your way may serve you well, but at this time it does not serve me." We may believe in the new revelation; we may believe in the authority of the Writings; but we may not see eye to eye with all others who believe in these things.

Still, as the Writings themselves proclaim, differences do not need to divide. It doesn't really matter which of the many affirmative approaches to the Writings we take. The important thing is to take an *affirmative* approach. Are we truly searching for truth we can put to use in our lives? Are we putting our trust in the Lord to lead us in the way we should go, and not trusting ourselves or looking for confirmations of preconceived ideas? There is no doubt that risks are involved if we travel on the wide road. The chief risk of a wider view is the probability that human egos will be active when we decide which path we will follow. It is natural for us to want things *our way*. We may get ideas that confirm our evil tendencies and we may become satisfied that there's nothing wrong with ideas we have "hatched."

In searching for truth to lead our lives by, we may see new ideas in the Writings that have not yet been used by people in the church. We ask ourselves, "Did this come from the Lord or is it from my own desires? What are my motives?" Careful examination is necessary before we incorporate them into our lives.

At this point I will pause to consider some of the specific issues that might come up as we travel on the wide road.

Traveling the Wide Road

Many questions about the content of the Writings do not have simple answers. The General Church emphasis on the rational quality of the Writings has led to an assumption that the answers to all the questions we might ask are contained in them if we search in the proper way. Is this a reasonable expectation? Perhaps we need to make room in the church organization for uncertainty, for not knowing exactly what is meant by each statement in the Writings. Uncertainty may be uncomfortable but not, as far as I can see, theologically *wrong*.

The repeated insistence that the Writings are clear, they mean what they say, and that they must be taken at face value, will not satisfy people who are struggling with ideas which they find hard to understand and which are not clear to them. A priestly edict cannot *make* them clear.

Since the Writings themselves claim that there may be differences in doctrinal teachings and religious practices within the church, then how are we to proceed?

Picking and Choosing

One thing we can do is examine the idea of "Picking and Choosing" that has been much discussed in the organization in a negative way.

Those who accept the beliefs of the General Church regard the Writings as a revelation from God that (together with the Old Testament and the New Testament) form the basis and authority for the organization. This means that we cannot disregard or dismiss anything that is written there. We have been rightly cautioned against the kind of "picking and choosing" that would let us ignore teachings that we find distasteful or not to our liking. We cannot absolve ourselves of the responsibility to examine and abide by such teachings. Some call them the "hard sayings" of the church.

Still, there are some things in the Writings we may approach with difficulty. There are paradoxes. There are natural errors of science. And apart from these obvious difficulties, there are many parts of the Writings some people find they must put aside and say "I don't understand this yet."

Some General Church members believe that certain teachings have been overemphasized and others have been paid less attention than they deserve. This could be regarded as a form of "picking and choosing" within the church organization. However, *everyone*, when faced with 30 volumes of theological information, has to "pick and choose" what they find to be most important to them. We are incapable of *not* picking and choosing. There is no way to absorb the entire 30 volumes and believe that every statement in them shares equal

importance for us with every other statement.

Distinctions can and should be made between harmful picking and choosing and valuable picking and choosing. While we are cautioned strongly not to eliminate specific teachings, we may emphasize the teachings that have special meaning for us, the ones that appeal to our individual loves.

"Truths... which have been stored away in the natural man's memory form... a field there for the contemplation of the internal man into whom light from heaven flows. From this field the internal man chooses such things as are in agreement with the good in him..." AC 9035e

This healthy kind of "picking and choosing" is what we are here on earth to do. Life is about developing ourselves as distinct individuals, about manifesting the loves which have been given to us for our potential contribution to the Grand Human and which are different from anyone else's. Our heredity and our experience will be factors which will influence us as we find the particular truth that speaks to us to live our lives by.

Not all of the Writings will be clear to us and we don't have to reject the parts we don't understand. Other people in other places and times will perhaps understand them better.

Understanding Spiritual Concepts

Exploring and accepting individual differences becomes easier when we acknowledge the difficulty of comprehending spiritual concepts.

The Writings tell us that heavenly ideas cannot be adequately expressed in earthly language. They show us the truth about spiritual matters in many different ways. Several approaches may be necessary before a whole picture emerges. We have to consider all sides of difficult questions and not avoid the paradoxes that inevitably surface in the natural world.

The wide road makes room for ambiguity and uncertainty. When we enter the spiritual world and are able to gain a spiritual perspective, some of our limitations will disappear and we will have the opportunity to resolve some of the paradoxes that troubled us in the natural world. Until then, if we can't accept our limitations, we will struggle unsuccessfully in the attempt to find a correct answer to all questions.

I am not as interested in exploring the content of the ambiguities and paradoxes as I am in exploring the processes we use to deal with them, and the attitudes that shape our experience of them. Are we looking for right/wrong, either/or, for/against decisions? Or are we looking for ways to find and acknowledge the fullness, wholeness, and integrity of the concepts which seem to be beyond our present comprehension? Can we safely leave some of our dilemmas unresolved? Perhaps the answer to some of our questions could be, "I don't know yet, but I see several possible ways of looking at this." Can we be content with this uncertainty? There may be some questions for which answers are not required to live a life of charity.

Specific Questions and Issues

Some of the questions and issues which might benefit from a wider view are:
— Are the Writings the Word?

- Is God male?
- Does Swedenborg's cultural and historical context affect his presentation of revelation?
- Does doctrine for the church differ from doctrine for the individual?
- Governance of the church organization
- Appropriate forms of ritual
- Women in the priesthood

I will explore a few of these topics, not to give my personal interpretation, but to show how ambiguities and paradoxes are present.

Are the Writings the Word?

The idea that the Writings are indeed the Word has become more and more accepted and insisted upon in the General Church in recent years.

There is no doubt that Swedenborg refers to "the Word" differently in different contexts. He does not appear to use the term "the Word" in a self-referential way, however.

"...I have not received anything that pertains to the doctrines of the New Church from any angel, but from the Lord alone, while I read the Word."
(TCR 779)

Here, by "the Word" he seems to be referring to the Old Testament and the New Testament.

In *The White Horse* #16 we read, "The books of the Word are all those which have the internal sense; but those which have not the internal sense are not the Word." Following this, the books of the Old Testament and the New Testament are listed. In this reference, the books of the

Word do not seem to include the books of the Writings.

On the other hand, in the opening section of TCR, on "The Faith of the New Heaven and the New Church," we read, "...Without the advent of the Lord into the world, no one could have been saved. It is similar in this day: wherefore unless the Lord came again into the world in Divine truth which is the Word, not any one can be saved." (TCR 3) In this context the Word can be regarded as including the Writings. The Lord has come again into the world in the form of truth revealed through Emanuel Swedenborg.

Some numbers which have possibly ambiguous meanings are these:

HH 1 (NCE) *"The Word is in fact written in pure correspondences so that there may be deeper meaning in the details."*

SS 8 *"As... the Word interiorly is spiritual and celestial, it is written exclusively by correspondences. And what is thus written is in its ultimate sense written in a style such as is that of the Prophets and the Evangelists, which, although it may appear common, yet conceals within it Divine and all angelic wisdom."*

SS 9 *"The spiritual sense is in all things of the Word, and in every single particular of it."*

When he wrote the three passages quoted above, was Swedenborg including or referring to his own works? His works appear to be *about* the Word of the Old and New Testaments, rather than being included as part of the Word itself. If we wish to regard the Writings as part of the Word, these passages seem to imply that the

Writings themselves have a spiritual sense "in every single particular." Should we actively pursue this meaning?

Another consideration is this: if we believe that what Swedenborg wrote is from the Lord, as he claims it is, should we perhaps pay closer attention to the works he actually published, as opposed to the works he left in manuscript form, unpublished?

It seems to me we have several possibilities here.

Is it possible to give the Writings the respect they deserve as a revelation from God without having a definitive answer to the question: "Are the Writings the Word?" I think we can. Must we have "The Writings are the Word" included as a basic, unquestioned tenet of faith in the *Order and Organization of the General Church of the New Jerusalem*? In view of the previous discussion, this would seem to be a derived doctrine. Other interpretations would seem to be reasonable, and I would hope that those in the General Church could leave this question open to discussion.

Is God Male?

Another question we sometimes hear is, "Is God male?"

There can be no doubt, from the stories in the New Testament, that the Lord was born on earth as a male, but this is not the only manifestation of God that we can know about. In *Genesis 1:27* we read, "So God created man in His own image; in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them." In *Divine Love and Wisdom* we read about the Grand Human: "Since God is human, therefore the whole angelic heaven in its entirety resembles a single

person. It is moreover divided into regions and provinces corresponding to the members, viscera and organs of the human anatomy.... The whole of heaven is in this image because God is human. God, moreover, is heaven, because the angels who constitute heaven are recipients of love and wisdom from the Lord, and recipients are images." (DLW 288). And lest we ignore the female part of this Grand Human, we read: "There are heavenly and celestial communities to which the organs and parts dedicated to generation correspond — every single one in both sexes." (AC 5053).

So, the question remains: Is God male? Is it necessary to answer this question Yes or No, or can we live with a certain ambiguity and be satisfied with Yes AND No?

Does Swedenborg's cultural and historical context affect his presentation of revelation?

Can we entertain the thought that Swedenborg was a man of a privileged, educated class in 18th century Europe, and that possibly his rational presentation of the revelation he received from the Lord reflects that fact? Or does his historical and cultural (and even scientific) context become universal as he reveals spiritual truth that many regard as the very Word of God?

There is fear among some believers in the Writings that if it is all right to think that Swedenborg's culture affected the way he wrote the Writings we are "sliding down a slippery slope" and abandoning our willingness to be led by the Lord and our belief in the authority of the Writings.

But some General Church teachings — especially those derived from the work *Conjugal Love* — have proved difficult to

maintain. If we are to apply some of the teachings literally, we need a privileged class 18th century culture to live in. Perhaps we could be consistent in our applications if we could create for ourselves a society congruent with the culture of Swedenborg's time.

In *Conjugal Love #86*, a statement is prefaced by the words "Even a simple peasant can see..." Is not this a remark made by a person belonging to the upper class intelligentsia? And in #91, "With respect to the employment of the female, it can be seen that it has to do with things that are works of the hands and are called sewing, needlework, and other names, which serve for decoration, for her personal adornment, and for enhancing her beauty." This also is a remark of a person belonging to a privileged class. Can you imagine a woman who is a "simple peasant" (referred to in #86), who is probably doing hard physical labor for her family's survival, spending time on her personal adornment? Why is it not permissible to consider these examples in their cultural context? Sometimes the Writings may give us narrow examples of truth in which broader concepts are contained. Swedenborg's examples inevitably come from his culture and experience. Is it necessary (or at least permissible) to consider the context of his life when we apply the teachings of the Writings to other cultures and other times?

Refusing to expand our view might make it easier for us to be content to follow in a literal way what the Writings teach, but we would be trying to stay in Swedenborg's time and culture. This could be one solution to the problem, but perhaps it is more important for us to discover the universal concepts in the Writings and to apply them to our culture, to see from them how our culture needs to be changed.

Women in the Priesthood

A burning question for some at this particular time in the Church is this: Could women be ordained into the priesthood? What would happen if both men and women make further study of the Writings, and have open dialogue about this issue, and the answer is, "We don't know." If this should happen, could we leave the question unanswered to the point of allowing women to minister to those who want to be ministered to by women, but not to those whose particular doctrine and faith do not allow such forms of ritual?

Could those who oppose women in the clergy say to themselves, "No matter what form her doctrine and external worship take, this is my sister; I observe that she worships the Lord and is a good person." (AC 2385.5) Could they then be willing to have women ministering to those in the Church who desire the form of external worship that includes officiating women?

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We can see from just these few examples of possible differences of interpretation that traveling the wide road will not be easy. Many disagreements will be encountered. Can we trust that people who disagree with us are on paths that suit their highest loves and that the Lord is leading them? Perhaps this would require a kind of charity and trust we are not accustomed to extending to others.

A Plea for a Wider View

The General Church seems to be at a crossroads. The challenges to the organization are increasing and the reactions from the leaders of the Church to

those challenges are becoming more uncompromising.

Some are in favor of traveling the narrow road of tradition, of fearing to harm the Writings that the Lord has entrusted us with. This fear is to be respected, and the narrow road may appear to be safe and certain. But if we travel this road we may find ourselves avoiding risks, letting others decide what is best for us, and abdicating our responsibility to make our own spiritual choices.

Others are questioning the traditions and assumptions of the present organization, and are anxious to travel the wide road of searching for the potentials in this new revelation. The expansiveness and new possibilities of the wide road may appeal to us, but if we are not careful we can be carried away with ideas that come from our own desires and are not in the best interests of our spiritual lives.

How can we deal with the confusing and conflicting teachings that are present in the Writings? Here we have one of the major paradoxes of the church.

Some claim that conflicts don't exist, that the Writings are clear and all we need to do is follow what they say. These people remind us that the desire to probe into mysteries of faith by means of sensory evidence and factual knowledge has been the cause of the fall of every church (see AC 127) and they think that this is what we are doing if we interpret for ourselves what the Writings mean.

On the other hand, we are *required* to decide what the Writings really mean in our own lives. Who else can decide this for us? It is the essence of what we must do — to read prayerfully and affirmatively, and to

decide *for ourselves* what the Lord is saying to us. Anything else is to let another person, whether priest or lay, man or woman, decide *for us*. This is what we are warned against, time and again, in the Writings.

"A blind faith is not faith, but only a persuasion; and as such a persuasion is from another, either from some master or preacher, or from the Word not understood, it is a historical faith, which is natural and not spiritual." (AE 759.4)

"Historical faith... is believing a thing to be true, not because one sees it in himself or herself, but because another in whom he or she has confidence has said it." (AE 401.35)

How can we know if we are dealing with this paradox in a good way or from ego and desire for control?

"It is allowable, by means of every perception obtained from the Lord, for anyone to discover what truth and good are, but it is not allowable to do so from self and the world, that is, to probe into mysteries of faith by means of sensory evidence and factual knowledge." (AC 126)

We can't know what our motives are. We can only pray for the ability to distinguish and follow the good — to follow the Lord. We can't be sure of being safe, avoiding risk. And we can't give this responsibility to *anyone else* — any human authority, any organization, any priest, any mentor. We are responsible for our choices. We are here on earth to make choices for ourselves.

If I exercise my spiritual freedom on my own, will I inevitably get into trouble and be "led astray?" Or, on the other hand, if I

follow the leaders of the church, and believe what they tell me is true, will I inevitably be kept safe from harm and heresy? The answer to both questions is *no*. We can't be sure.

How can we know we're on a good path? We can't. We have to trust that the Lord is taking care of us. What we need from our church organization is an environment in which choices are not made for us, but we are prepared and supported in making our own individual life choices — toward a life of integrity and kindness — in other words, a life of faith and charity.

Some who are worried about the present climate of challenging old interpretations have made the following observation: "In all scholarship, the question must be, 'Am I understanding the intent of what I am reading, or am I reading into it what I wish to see in it?'"

I would request that all of us ask ourselves this question. The person who asked it seemed to be implying that those who put forth new interpretations are guilty of finding only what they want to find. I wonder if those who defend traditional views are not doing the same thing. I would ask these people to look carefully at their long-held opinions and interpretations, and ask, "Am I understanding the intent of what I am reading, or am I reading into it what I wish to see in it?"

I am afraid that the General Church, in its effort to be correct in all its positions, will become increasingly narrow and constricted, serving fewer and fewer people, and eventually become a dead end in the history of the evolution of the Lord's

New Church on earth. Perhaps, in the Divine Providence, this may happen, and the organization will die.

If it is to live, it must be able to change. We need people who are willing to go *beyond* what has been known and accomplished by the General Church in the past -- to go where ideas are not comfortable, not traditional, but real and growing. We need to expand, not to contract. We need to include, not to exclude. We will make many mistakes, but we will be able to correct them with the Lord's help if we, as individuals and as an organization, practice sincere self-examination as we go along,

The message of revelation — "Behold I make all things new" — is a challenge to each new generation to find out how the Writings speak to them, rather than to continue in their historical faith and their accepted culture. We run the risk of looking for confirmations of our own points of view, but this is a risk that must be taken.

The General Church is unique in its respect for the Writings as they are. This is the common bond which holds the organization together. I believe this respect can continue through many disagreements and variations of interpretation. As we have seen, the Writings themselves tell us to expect differences in matters of doctrine and in forms of worship.

We have inherited a strong foundation of respect for the Writings. Now it is time to build on that foundation, and to discover for ourselves how the new revelation can inspire our present generation.

...the more external a person's thinking is, the less distance it spreads, the more internal it is, the greater the distance it spreads.
AC 6612

African Spirituality

by Helen Kennedy

In reading a book that included African religions, I was struck by a new concept on approach to spirituality — that of invocation, or a thing called *nommo*, the magic of the word. Janheinz Jahn wrote in *Neo-African Literature*, "Thinking forces are the most powerful by virtue of their control over it [nommo]". The thinking forces "include living people, dead people, deified people, the ghosts and the gods. In the hierarchy of thinking forces, living people are on the lowest rung, yet the whole universe of forces depends on them." And, "only through living people can gods produce changes. Therefore it is the human responsibility, through word magic, to invoke the gods into his life. The *nommo* indicates the activity proper to invoking them. The human takes this into himself by realizing their [the gods] latent capacities in himself." Through the sympathetic magic, a human "invokes their activity, as handed down in myths, depicted in legends or demonstrated by historical actions." The human "brings the gods into his living presence, indicating to him the present concrete task." As a result the African's religious practice is not contemplative as in Christianity, but evocative. In African religion, as in the religion of the [Negro] Spiritual, faith is expressed through the invocation of God, in the Christian religion through the adoration of God."

Janheinz Jahn goes on to say that this "has led to different forms of expression." For the Christian, who stresses God's omnipotence, the believer adopts a passive attitude as he waits for God's grace, or for God to call him. The mystical act of faith is "a complete union with the Divine". During this, its highest linguistic expression is silent utterance.

"In African religion, on the other hand...man has an active attitude towards the gods. Through the sympathetic magic of invocation", the divine power unites with him in ecstasy. If the union does not take place, "this is not the god's fault but means the magic is too weak or inadequate." This gives a little insight into what is meant by magic, as far as is understood by Africans, and why to white people, the African concept of magic has been incomprehensible. Images of big wooden masks and voodoo dolls come to mind, but mostly, people of European descent have been afraid of the

use of this word in relation to anything other than sleight of hand tricks. Yet one of the things the Writings say magic is that it is an abuse of correspondences, and AC 4964:2 says, "The Egyptian magic itself originated from this; for they knew the correspondences of the natural world with the Spiritual one, which, after the Church had ceased with them, they abused to things magical." Abuse of correspondences is actually what caused the fall of the Ancient Church. But can there be something good about it?

In his book about African literature, Jahn next relates the power of invocation used in African religion to the Negro Spirituals. He writes that the Spirituals grew out of a culture of poetry that invokes God, or is, simply put, "word magic". When the slaves in the South were Christianized and developed revivalist church services, mainly Baptist and Methodist, they found a new opportunity "to invoke a god in the new language by calling the name "Lord! Lord! Jesus! Jesus!". They got to know Bible

One Mind

In light of what can be learned from Africa, Andrew Harvey, in *The Essential Mystics*, had a perception that all religions are aspects of one human mind. He made the following chart. This, of course, concurs with the similar teaching by Swedenborg in the Writings about all religions representing one mind.

<i>Hinduism</i>	The Way of Presence
<i>Taoism</i>	The Way of the Tao
<i>Bhuddism</i>	The Way of Clarity
<i>Judaism</i>	The Way of Holiness
<i>Ancient Greece</i>	The Way of Beauty
<i>Islam</i>	The Way of Passion
<i>Christianity</i>	The Way of Love In Action

To this we can add:

<i>Africa</i>	The Way of Invocation
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I have been shown that when thoughts accompanied by affections distribute themselves, they circulate in a pattern very much like that assumed by the enfoldings of the grey matter in the human brain. For a long time I watched the ways in which they were flowing round. They were winding round, bending, weaving in, and coming out, as the grey matter...does. But the patterns produced by heaven are even more wonderful, transcending the grasp even of the angels
AC 6607

Loving Arms Mission

*Excerpts from Loving Arms News
Fall 2002*

We have achieved the goals we set for ourselves thus far, thanks to the touching and generous response from New Church people all over the world. We feel that God is calling us to do more, and we have faith that he will lead us as we plan our next steps. Major difficulties are now behind us, and we believe that expansion will be much easier than the initiation of our project in Nepal. Therefore, we have set out the following goals for the future.

1. Help Nepali women who have been enslaved in the brothels of India. Some of these women were

kidnapped, tricked or sold from Nepalese villages when they were as young as twelve. Most of them are sick with AIDS when they return, and almost all are rejected by their parents and relatives for bringing shame on the family. We will provide a place to live for ten of these women and hire one female staff member to provide assistance to them, maintain order, and oversee the shelter. Once a month these women will go on trips to villages and tell their stories to educate young women and parents about how to avoid being tricked into sexual slavery. We will teach the women to make bamboo rakes and raise chickens. This kind of cottage industry will raise enough or almost enough revenue to cover the cost of living for these women aside from rent.

Many factors may cause hesitation about this project. The women may have special medical needs; they may have habits and hurts that are difficult to deal with because their lives have been so full of pain. Yet the Lord loves all of His children and weeps with these women as they weep, and he calls us to help them. It is both good and right to offer love, comfort and dignity to these women who have suffered a fate more terrible than most of us can imagine.

2. We also wish to provide loving homes for more children as money becomes available. There are an estimated 50,000 homeless children in Nepal. Why should even one child go unfed and unloved when we are in a position to help? Furthermore, by helping children and training them in morality, leadership, and the love of God, we can help to improve Nepali society. In expanding to help more children, we would stay with our current model of

ten kids and three staff living together. We would hire husband and wife teams to be "Dads" and "Moms". Our current staff would supervise each home to ensure the children are getting quality care until we were fully confident in our new staff members. The children from each home would come together for worship and singing.

To contact Loving Arms Mission, write to P.O. Box 213, Bryn Athyn, PA 19009; email alrogers@newchurch.edu; phone (215-659-3344 and ask for Mandy.

CC

The man who removes a mountain starts by carrying away one stone.

Journal For Grief and Healing

by Donnette Alfelt

This is a guided journal. Donnette begins with a page about loss and healing: *When someone close to you dies, the impact is life-changing... In the midst of grief, it's often hard to know what you need. One thing that can help is to realize that your spirit has suffered a very serious wound...*

Donnette then briefly introduces the journal pages: *A journal is a place where your heart can speak in privacy and freedom. It is a place where it is safe to be completely honest about what you are thinking and how you are feeling. It can uncover thoughts and emotions you may be scarcely aware of.*

Pages 10 through 93 provide space for journaling. At the upper left and lower right of

each page spread are thoughts and quotations on grief, healing, and afterlife. Some quotes are from the Bible and Swedenborg., and some are from a wide variety of others, such as John Adams, Shakespeare, Emerson, Helen Keller and Charles Lindbergh. After the journaling pages, Donnette concludes with some text about afterlife, and then provides a list of *Recommended Reading* books about grief recovery and about afterlife, both from Swedenborgian and non-Swedenborgian sources. This is a book that can be used to reach out to someone who is bereaved, whether they are members of the organized New Church or not.

Hardcover, \$12.00. Available at the General Church Book Center or from Fountain Publishing FtnPublish@aol.com, 877-736-8598.

With so much of our spiritual life depending upon the free flow of ideas, this newsletter is intended to be a forum for people to explore their affections and thoughts. Disagree with anything? Write a letter or an article.

Subscriptions and Contributions

The estimated cost of the Voice is \$3.00 per issue. To get the next issue, please contact Peggy Mergen or send a check to Lynne Smith. A year's subscription costs \$6.00. When sending us money, please indicate the amount you intend for subscription, and the amount (if any) towards a contribution.

We are grateful for the support we have received in the form of articles, feedback and contributions. If you are interested in supporting this effort, we would appreciate contributions of any amount. We welcome all comments and suggestions.

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*Men will wrangle for religion, write for it, fight for it, die for it
anything but live for it. Charles Caleb Cotton*

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TO:

*Modern technology
owes ecology
an apology*

Alan M. Eddison (1969)

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