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Spiritual Leader's Address General Conference AGM 2022 *By Revd Jack Dunion*

Introduction:

Back in 2007 I gave a talk here at the Hayes, during which I spoke on how the world was on a certain trajectory which would eventually and inevitably bring it to the very brink of disaster. There would then need to be a point where the world would utter the words "What have we done?". My talk was partly influenced by a series of lectures given at the Royal Society in London that year, by the leading economist Geoffrey Sachs. In the first in a series of 5 lectures, titled "Bursting at the seams", Sachs outlined the future challenges facing mankind, and argued that we must adapt to the new age. My aim was to highlight how the world would one day come to regret having created a future without the guiding light of the Lord's Word through his church, and how we should prepare for a day when the world would come to realise what the Lord Himself told us in John 15:5 "*I am the vine, you are the branches.....apart from me you can do nothing*".

At the time of giving the talk I was young and a bit “wet behind the ears”, so I don’t expect people would have taken my words very seriously. After my talk was finished, I was approached by the Revd Leslie Chambers who, in his usual supportive and wise way, firstly, congratulated me on a great talk, before going on to encourage me by saying that I had an ability, and if I was to make the most of that ability, I should put aside my notes, hold my head up and speak straight from the heart! It has taken me all of 15 years to find the confidence to do just that, and, thanks to Leslie’s helpful feedback all those years ago, that is exactly what I intend to do here today.

I will break up this talk into 3 parts, allowing for questions between each part. I will talk on:

- A potted history of what Swedenborg refers to as the 4 churches (or ages) on earth.
- The future direction for our church
- A possible vision and roadmap for moving into the future

Potted History

The first church on earth

I want to begin by explaining what Swedenborg meant by the word Church. According to many ancient texts, there have been 4 ages on this earth. Swedenborg refers to these ages as churches. So, it’s not meaning churches in the sense of a building or any organisation, but more an age involving a shift in human consciousness and the way in which the human race relates to God our creator. Each of these 4 ages, Swedenborg says, is founded by God the creator, who is pure love and wisdom. It therefore has his love and wisdom at its centre. From that standpoint people are able to understand the purpose of creation, because at such a time the Lord’s love is in what they will, and therefore it produces wisdom, or truth, in their understanding. This is because it is our own will which influences how we understand things. For example, if I desired or wished to move to a new location, I would form a way to do that in my understanding. My will to relocate and my understanding of how to do it would work together in achieving what my will wants. So, we can see from this principle how a good understanding is dependent on a good will. During the first age on earth, men and women had a will which was aligned perfectly with God the creator’s will. which is love itself, and so they also had a true understanding of the world and the purpose of creation.

A shift in the human will

The reason the first age or church declined, giving way to a second age, was because the people began to will or desire to do things from themselves, instead of directly from the love of God our creator. Once the desire to live from self entered the will, this also changed the way in which people understood life in terms of how they relate to God the creator. In other words, falsity entered their understanding from their corrupted will.

Gradually, over time, their will grew to have less and less of God's love in it, and so their understanding had less and less truth in it about God's true purpose. This is how each of the 4 churches or ages were born from love and then began to decline due to lack of love, eventually coming to an end. Once an age comes to an end, having nothing of God's love left in it, then God raises a New Church, or new age, which is once again founded on His love.

These 4 churches all died out, due to this lacking in God's love. The Christian church was the last of these 4 Churches, out of which a new 5th age was to arise, one which is spiritual and which therefore will never again need to come to an end. This is what Swedenborg means by a "New Church" on earth. Swedenborg tells us that this New Church is what is meant in the book of Revelation 21:2 by the Holy City New Jerusalem coming down out of heaven from God. Not from the physical sky, as some have thought, but descending within the human spirit into the conscious human mind.

The end of the Christian church was what was meant by Jesus when He said to His disciples in Matthew 24:14 *"This gospel of the kingdom will be preached in the whole world as a testimony to all nations, and then the end will come."* That is, the end of the Christian Church. Today the Gospels are indeed known in all the world. It's incredible to note that Jesus said these words before the Gospels were even written down, and yet they are clearly being fulfilled in our world at this time. This means that a New Church, or a 5th age, is even now descending into human consciousness.

Ref: True Christian Religion 786 *"From the beginning there have been, generally speaking, four churches on this earth; one before the flood, one after the flood, a third the Israelite, and the fourth that named Christian. Since all churches depend upon the knowledge and acknowledgment of one God, with whom a member of the church can be linked, and since all four churches lacked that truth, it follows that a church will take the place of those four, which will know and acknowledge one God."*

Apocalypse Revealed 52 *"The end of the age is the final period of the church."*

AR 24: *"Behold He comes with the clouds of heaven, signifies that the Lord will reveal Himself in the literal sense of the Word, and will open its spiritual sense in the end of the church."*

Why are we experiencing so much trouble in the world today?

Swedenborg makes it clear that the New Church descending will happen only to the extent that the new heaven, established when the Lord founded the Christian church, continues to expand due to people passing from this world and entering it. However, he also tells us that this descending will only take place to the extent that the falsities of the former church are removed. The question may be asked then, in which way will these be removed, and what will be the effects of such removal? Our answer comes from what Swedenborg says regarding the way in which evils are removed. In order for evils to be removed they must appear or manifest, where they can be seen and rejected. The obvious

conclusion here is that as the new heaven expands, the New Church descends, and the evils, once concealed, will begin to manifest in the world. This is bound to make it look as if the world is getting more and more evil and also less rational, but, in reality, it is the evils which were previously kept hidden within human hearts, manifesting in the world where they can be seen and acknowledged. To illustrate: whenever abuses, which may have been happening in secret for many years, are exposed and people see them for what they are, our instinct then is to focus on how terrible the situation is. However, in reality, the situation 'has been terrible' but will now no longer be terrible because it will no longer be allowed to continue.

Ref: TCR 784 "Just so far as this new heaven, which constitutes the internal of the church with man, increases, does the New Jerusalem, that is, the New Church, descend from it.... but it takes place to the extent that the falsities of the former church are set aside".

The future direction

Change is coming

As the evils of the old church (age) manifest and the human race begins to desire to have these removed, the church on earth can play a vital role, if, that is, it is prepared ahead of time to provide what the world will need and what it will then seek. The writings for a New Church are already with us. As the evils of the old church emerge, it is becoming increasingly obvious that those who are currently running the affairs of the world are unable to find solutions to the problems the world faces today. Many people today are already beginning to recognise that the current trajectory the world is on needs to change if the human race is to survive at all. However, despite knowing this, the world is proving powerless when it comes to making the necessary changes. No one knows how far and to what extent the old evils will need to manifest before the world builds a sufficient desire to begin seeking change. I believe that we, that is, those who have the Word and the Writings for a New Church, can play a vital role when the world finally does seek that fundamental change to human behaviours that it will need to survive.

Emerging technologies

One of the many moral dilemmas facing our world today is, how will we regulate and keep tabs on Artificial Intelligence (AI) as it becomes more and more sophisticated and "self-learning". Most people think of AI as something coming in the future, perhaps robots in the human form. However, AI is already here and heavily influencing our day to day lives already. Take social media, for example. Basically, three different interoperable strands of AI are used in the development of social media platforms. These 3, which are called algorithms, interact with one another to form a "self-learning" mechanism used for meeting the objectives of the programmer, which objective is, of course, to make money. These interoperable algorithms function as follows. They:

- a) gather and store information about individual users;
- b) use such information to hold the person on a screen (e.g. phone or tablet etc.)
- c) present advertising products according to the individual user's preferences.

All the data collected about each person is collated and processed via AI (computer algorithms) to maximise profits. As the algorithms are designed to "self-learn", they become increasingly more efficient in meeting the intended aims and objectives. One example of the problems this new technology presents is that the algorithms have learned that false information (e.g. conspiracy theories) get shared online six times faster than true factual information. The algorithm, for the sake of keeping the person on the screen, then shows each individual information, true or false, that will retain their interest, hence persuading them to spend more time on the screen and potentially buy more selectively advertised products. In short, our time on screen has become what the various social media platforms compete for with no regard to the person themselves.

What has this all got to do with the future of the church?

On the face of it, we could say that the world is becoming more and more selfish and greedy. On the other hand, we could say that this situation is simply manifesting or highlighting problems which have already existed within the collective human will. That is, we humans have essentially become self-centred and therefore our understanding is not capable of seeing what is true. One thing that all those who know and see the destructive potential of AI can agreed on, is that it would take a 'collective will' to put a stop to this kind of activity. Unfortunately, none of them express any confidence that such a collective will currently exists. So, rather alarmingly, despite knowing the dangers, no-one can see a way in which these future problems could be stopped from developing. Therefore, it is the Lord alone who can stop this! Or what is the same, the world doing the Lord's will instead of our own.

In the garden of Gethsemane, the Lord Jesus is recorded as facing the most agonising dilemma, one which, for you or I, would be simply unimaginable. The Lord had to choose whether to go on living in this world by doing His own will, or do the will of the Father instead, which meant going through the pain and torture of crucifixion. He went through with this even while fighting off the combined and sustained assault from the hells, which were attacking Him from within, while facing the same from all those around Him. Having a full awareness of what was at stake, namely, the future of the entire human race, the Lord submitted His will to the Father, or the Divine love within Him. He knew that if He didn't go through with this battle, humankind would never have access to, nor therefore be able to obtain, a will strong enough to resist the hells. And, they would therefore otherwise perish! Faced with this unthinkable dilemma, the Lord then prayed to the Father: *"Father, if you are willing, take this cup from me; yet, not my will, but yours be done."* (Luke 22:42). The Lord alone has a will of pure love which He can use to fight for us, right down to our level. Because, by means of the human He took on in this world, He is now in last things as well as first things.

What can we do as a church?

Anyone who truly believes that a New Church is to emerge on this earth must also face the inevitability of what needs to come first. A New Church descending and all the old evils and falsities having to come to light and be cast out, surely signals some difficult times ahead. If, for example, the new heaven was to expand through a sudden and significant influx of people into the next life, then it could perhaps, at that same time, herald a paradigm shift in human consciousness and increased spiritual awareness. The church's role in all this is surely to be watchful and to be ready, willing and able, to present an alternative to the path the world is currently on. If and when the world finally reaches a point where the desire for change overtakes the need for the things of self and the world, then we must be ready to offer that alternative. Where else could it come from? Where else, but from those in possession of the new revelation for a New Church on earth? And, instead of programming the algorithms to do the will of the world, such could then be programmed to do the will of the Lord. We might think of these words from Luke's gospel 16:8 *"He commended the unjust steward, because he had done wisely: for the children of this world are in their generation wiser than the children of light."* The world, through the pursuit of material gain, has taken us to extraordinary technological discoveries. The church can surely make use of these too. The Writings tell us that the end of creation is that *"a heaven of angels be formed from the human race"*. Having already told us so, the Lord will now need to allow the world to reach a point of knowing and acknowledging that without Him, we can do nothing! Our role, when that day arrives, will surely be to offer the structured alternative, one which the Lord has already revealed through the opening of the internal sense of His Word. To achieve such a goal, it will, I believe, require a global effort and a coming together of the whole international Swedenborgian community. However, in order to help bring this about, we, as a church, need first to overcome and put aside our own will and rise above our own differences and disagreements. At the same time, we must strive to continue to both do and help bring to this earth, the will of Him who sent us.

Preparing our own church for this future

The proposal I wish to make may involve some difficult adjustments. But I do think such changes are vital if we are to be able to do our bit in facilitating the development of the Lord's New Church in a world that so badly needs us to do so. Therefore, before putting forward this proposal, I wish here to briefly say why I think these changes are necessary. Swedenborg tells us that a New Church is founded with the Lord's love at its centre. In other words, the people of the church start out by doing the Lord's will and thereby see everything in the light of His truth. Such a church, though, soon falls into decline, until, at last, it has nothing of the Lord's love in it and it therefore sees only in the dim light of this world. The obvious conclusion here is that the Christian church, now at its end, and being void of the Lord's love, largely sees falsity as truth and vice versa. As we, as New Church members in the UK, have affiliated ourselves with the old Christian church, and also adopted many of its traditions, we inevitably fell into the same decline as the old

church. One of the old church traditions we adopted, was one which clearly contradicts the heavenly doctrines of our church. It is a doctrine of conformity. We, like the old Christian church, have insisted that people embrace our own prescribed interpretation of the Writings seen largely in the same light as the old church. We have insisted, as they do, that if people wish to become part of our church community, they must think and believe as we do. This, I believe, has promoted sameness and stifled diversity within our organisation and within the church as a whole. Yet, in the Writings of our church, in Heaven & Hell 56 we read: *“Every unity has its existence from diversity, for a unity that is not the result of diversity is not anything; it has no form and therefore no quality.”* We can take our example from the very form of heaven. All in heaven have their own particular use, where all societies are as varied as the parts of the body. Despite their differences and various uses, they nevertheless work together in perfect harmony in doing the Lord’s will, instead of their own. It is, therefore, I think, a mistake to expect everyone to conform to the same ways of thinking when we are all created to be different.

A possible vision and roadmap

Practical ways forward

All of the above having been said, wouldn’t people work better together if each individual within the church was able to act from their own conscience? At least when it comes to the different views on how we should each “do church”. As we are all different, and therefore see things in different ways, it is inevitable that we won’t ever be able to agree on everything. For me, the trouble only begins whenever one person begins to insist that another does things the same way they do. Surely, it is everyone’s right to act according to their conscience? After all, we all think that what we think is right, and we can’t all be right! Unless, that is, we can see it as right for us without necessarily needing it to be right for everyone else. As long as we are all acting from love and charity we can have different ways of seeing how things should be done. This too is consistent with the doctrines of our church. As we read in Arcana Caelestia (see par. 1285) *“Doctrine is one when all possess mutual love, or charity. Mutual love or charity causes things, though varied, to be one, for it makes one out of varied things.”* I have previously asked the question: “If we are all to conform to the same way of thinking, whose form of thinking are we to conform to?” The answer came back “Emanuel Swedenborg’s”. The trouble is that we are all so different that everyone has a different way of interpreting even the Writings. The reason, I think, is that we can’t ever all agree, because we are not supposed to! As we read in Heaven & Hell 56: *“Heaven is where the Lord is acknowledged, believed in and loved. Variety in worship of the Lord resulting from the variety of good in one society and another is not harmful but beneficial, for the perfection of heaven is therefrom”.*

Facilitated roadmap

As the numbers have declined within the church and various societies have had to close, we find ourselves with no real vision for the future. During this decline and the gradual transition away from the society model, we have, perhaps understandably, been so

preoccupied in the struggle to hang on to what the church has been in the past, that we have not given sufficient time and thought to planning what it could become in the future. No one sets a ship on a course without first deciding on a destination, plotting a course, forming a crew and placing someone at the helm. Now, I believe, is the time for a new vision. Time for our church to plot a course for our journey into the future. Thanks to our forefathers and predecessors, we already have the solid basis and foundations to build on. Any future planning should include consultations with all groups and stakeholders within the church. To this end, I propose that a facilitation day be arranged, attended by representatives of all the various groups within the church, to help create a roadmap and form a vision for the future. A vision with stated aims and objectives, including how we will reach our destination through a series of determined milestones. The representatives should then meet regularly (say, every 6 months) to check that we have met the stated aims and objectives for that particular leg of the journey. New objectives should then be set, including who will do what, and within what time frame. Our ultimate aim will of course be one which aligns with the Lord's very purpose of creation, which is that *"a heaven of angels be formed from the human race"*.

Global co-operation

If and when, we in the UK can demonstrate a working model for the future, which will enable us to demonstrate a significant contribution towards the establishment of the Lord's New Church here on this earth, then we may be able to begin taking that model out in forming a global alliance or a "Global Council of Swedenborgians" consisting of representatives from around the world, in preparation for what is to come; being watchful and ready, as and when required, to provide the world with the basis for a New Church. A model that both makes sense and provides a relevance, a meaning and a purpose to all of our lives.

As Swedenborg writes in Doctrine of Life 1: *"All religion has relation to life, and the life of religion is to do good"*. We all know, or at least sense, that the world is on a course which is simply unsustainable. The governments of the world continue to try and do what they can, on their own. But, without the Lord's help, the situation will only keep getting worse, until, at last, the time will come, when the world will finally need to accept the Lord's words from John's gospel: *"I am the vine; you are the branches. If you remain in me and I in you, you will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing"*. Let us begin now to prepare for that day. Let those of us who long for the Lord's day rise above the mundane and seek, with all our hearts, that the Lord's Kingdom will come; as in heaven, so upon the earth.

Respectfully submitted,

Revd Jack Dunion