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A New Heaven and a New Earth

Revd Brian Talbot writes:

“A New Heaven and a New Earth”
(Sermon given at the Zoom Service)
(Sunday 11th February 2024)

Readings: Isaiah 65:17-25; Revelation 21:1-7

Isaiah 65 and Revelation 21 are about us and what the LORD is doing to re-create us. Our new heaven is the angelic, higher and deeper part of us, which shines the LORD's light into our lower part, the earth, and out to people, or “the angelic heavens” and “the church”,

(*Arcana Caelestia* or *Secrets of Heaven* (AC) 4535:2e; 9408:4, 5) or “a new church, internal and external”. (*Apocalypse Explained* (AE) 294:14; 304:54; AC 4535:2; 9408:5) To “create in the Word means to reform and regenerate “ (*Apocalypse Revealed* (AR) 254:2)

There are quite a few times in my life when I have turned away from my conservative New-Church background, and developed my own New-Church faith. Looking back over my life, I believe I have improved my New-Church faith in the areas of dreams and visions, spiritual healing, ecstatic experiences such as happen in Charismatic or Pentecostal churches, homosexuality and now Spiritualism. Swedenborg warns us that our inherited faith or “historical faith, which in itself is tradition received from others, or from indulging the imagination.” (*Five Memorable Relations* (FM) 8) You will have to decide if I am “indulging” my imagination! Part of growing older is to think for ourselves and to examining what our “teachers and parents” have taught us. We are to chew over what we have learned and believed before, and then each of us “either endorses it, has doubts about it, or refuses to accept it.” (AC 5135:2) The danger is that our beliefs are “an alien faith” or “only the faith of another in” ourselves, and not our own. (AE 242:5; 232:1 [Tansley]) So not all teachings we have received from ministers, parents, Sunday School teachers and so on, have to be rejected, they have to be weighed by us.

How do we start the process of changing our attitudes and behaviour. In one passage in *Apocalypse Explained*, Swedenborg explains that the LORD teaches truths by means of the Word, preaching, reading, conversation and self-reflection about these. (AE 1136:9 [Tansley]; 1173:9) The process of change could begin with a word or a phrase, from a hymn, or from the Bible. I spend a lot of time reading and studying the Revelation given through Swedenborg. This may not be for you, and that’s OK.

So I am undergoing a bit of a change inside. You could call it spiritual growth or regeneration. I have been researching Spiritualism in the Writings and I find that I cannot go along with my conservative New-Church upbringing. I am not going to become a Spiritualist. I am far too happy with the New Jerusalem Church and its teachings. You could call me a Spiritualist-sympathiser.

I was brought up to be anti-spiritualist. I probably didn’t know what a spiritualist was!

“Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away”. (*Revelation 21:1*)

Swedenborg tells us that heaven is our inner self, while the earth is our outer self. (AE 294:14; 304:54) The new heaven is how I think and feel about something, whether inspired by God or not. The earth is what I say or do. I was brought up to think that contacting spirits was dangerous, when the Writings actually teach “dangerous unless” we’re in true faith, or we’re led by the LORD. (*Heaven and Hell* (HH) 249 note; *Earths in the Universe* (EU) 1:2 note; AC 5863; *Spiritual Experiences* or *Spiritual Diary* (SE) 1622) I was brought up to believe that if people contacted spirits, we would only contact evil spirits, and yet we have at least two

good spirits, even an angel, and at least two bad spirits, possibly a demon. (AC 50:1; 697; 904:4; 968; 986) Again I was brought up to believe that any spirit who contacted a spiritualist medium lied or impersonated people. Soundbites such as the following would be used:

“Spirits tell very tall tales, and they lie”. (SE 1622)

“Little should be believed of what spirits speak”. (SE 1902)

“Evil spirits know neither what is true, nor what is evil”. (SE 3756)

But what about?

“Evil spirits cannot be with those who believe in the Lord” (SE 1966)

“Even the evil and unbelievers, when in company with good spirits, speak truths, and even believe them” (SE 1255)

“And because he was in the company of good spirits and angels, his thoughts were guided in such a way that he would think nothing evil at all that might give evil spirits cause to attack him. This continued for a long time.” (SE 2034 [Odhner])

I can find other passages which say that the presence of good spirits and angels can neutralise their influence! (SE 3048 (= AC 318); 4399; AC 7805 = EU 73:2) We will look a bit silly if we tell spiritualists that it will be always dangerous, and that they will only contact lying impersonators. Swedenborg pessimistically discourages contacting spirits, and yet if we are on our own and hear a non-physical voice, we’re not in danger. (HH 249) There are two passages in *Other Planets or Worlds in Space* or *Earths in the Universe*, which talk about learning from and being instructed by good spirits. (EU 1:2; 123:2-3 (= AC 9348:2)) Here’s me a faithful New-Church Minister realising that his upbringing is not as doctrinal as it could be. I’ll say again, I’m not going out to find the nearest séance! I am however going to be far more angelic towards Spiritualism and Spiritualists! I’m not going to be as dismissive and pessimistic as I was brought up to be.

“Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away”. (Revelation 21:1)

I have a cousin called Nic, who is a spiritualist. We met up at a family funeral, which I conducted in December. Nic is a trance medium, which would have filled me with absolute fear and dread, had I not found passages in the Writings in which Swedenborg, like the prophets of the Old Testament, were possessed, with or without some consciousness of it, but didn’t suffer any ill effects. (AC 6212:4-5; SE 2277; 2279) Anyway cousin Nic, as a child, vividly remembered a discussion between his father, a keen Spiritualist, and a New-Church minister who was very dismissive of Spiritualism. I was brought up to dismiss Spiritualism. I’m ashamed of that now. I’m embarrassed. I repent with my whole being! In our church’s teachings that the LORD and his angels – or the LORD in us and the angel in us – don’t dismiss. They are gentle and don’t break people’s beliefs, they bend them. (AC 25; 1255; 1992:5; 2053:2; 2180:5; 9039:1e; SE 2011-2012; 2194; 2393; 2994) The LORD even bends my stubbornness to be a good New-Churchman! (SE 2994) Have I been brought up to break or bend?

“The angels are forbidden to act in any violent manner and thereby crush a person's evil desires and false assumptions; they must act gently.” (AC 5992 [Elliott])

“But an influx coming through angels adjusts itself to the person's affections, which they guide gently, turning those affections towards what is good without breaking them. The actual influx of them is silent, barely perceptible, for it is an influx into the person's interiors, always operating through his freedom.” (AC 6205 [Elliott])

“Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away”. (Revelation 21:1)

My cousin Nic is very generous. He has given me 7 spiritualist books about mediums and communicators or guides. I am far more knowledgeable about Spiritualism, because I've examined in depth what the Writings tell us, but also what Spiritualists say about themselves. I have started walking a mile in their moccasins – well, a lot of communicators are Native American! Red Cloud, Grey Eagle, Silver Birch and so on. Again I'm not becoming a Spiritualist, I'm becoming a more angelic Swedenborgian!

Nic and other Spiritualists are very keen on a guide called Silver Birch. Having read some of his teachings, I don't believe that he is as advanced and evolved as he makes out, or Spiritualists believe him to be. I wonder whether Silver Birch is a European spiritualist! The more I read of him that more I have the following passages shouting in my head.

“For this reason none but enthusiastic spirits speak with enthusiasts; none but Quaker spirits act upon Quakers, or Moravian spirits upon Moravians.

[5] The case would be similar with Arians, Socinians, and with other heretics (heraeticis). All spirits that speak with man were once men in the world, and were then of the same character. It has been granted me to know by repeated experience that this is the case.” (AE 1182:4e-5)

“Since a person is in the company of spirits who share his religion, the spirits who speak with him confirm all the religious principles he has adopted.” (*De Verbo* or *The Word* (SS(P)) 13:2 [Chadwick])

I find Silver Birch very sectarian. I would have thought he could become more universalist as an angel. I expected he would be more appreciative of the good in other spiritual approaches and not to criticise and dismiss Christians in such black-and-white ways. Why can't he find more shades of grey? Hold on a minute, he's sounding like 'old' Brian!

The LORD “leads men gently, bending and not breaking them, thus withdrawing them from evils, and leading them to good; therefore neither does He chastise and punish”. (AE 409:2) Have I been other than gentle?

“Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away”. (Revelation 21:1)

We share a belief in survival with Spiritualists. We both believe that a person is resurrected immediately after death and loses nothing of his or her personality. They are as critical of people who believe that we sleep until the Last Judgment. (Maybe I'm going to have to re-

visit my reaction to that doctrine as well!) We both don't believe in death-bed repentance. There's more. (I've actually made a list!)

So sectarian Brian, who was dismissive of Spiritualism, is wiser, more knowledgeable and more angelic. He offers a far more nuanced doctrinal view of Spiritualism.

Can we go further and deeper? We have a lot of unconscious bias against Spiritualists, probably because some Swedenborgians defected – is that too emotive a word? – to the likes of Thomas Lake Harris or Andrew Jackson Davis. We are hurt. We feel they have been deceived. We have Swedenborgians who have gone off the rails and started preaching the celestial sense of the Word, such as James Johnson in Salford in the 1800s, when yet Swedenborg occasionally mentions the celestial sense of the Word. There is great pain over the Swedish Theosophical Society, who started off Swedenborgian and became Spiritualist. There is a load of pain to disentangle.

With being such a small denomination, we can become passive-aggressive towards others, or after what we perceive as threats or attacks. The *Psychology Today* website teaches us:

“Passive aggression stems from deep anger, hostility, and frustration that a person, for whatever reason, is not comfortable expressing directly. When dealing with passive-aggressive behaviour, it's important to understand that beneath all of those snide remarks lies a deep unhappiness and sadness.” ([Passive-Aggression | Psychology Today](#)) (accessed 22/01/2024)

I wonder whether we have “deep unhappiness and sadness” inside us, because of defections to spiritualism, or because many of our churches have closed? To what extent have we lost our sense of identity? To what extent do we have a sense of purpose and direction? To what extent are we taking our frustrations out on other people, such as Spiritualists?

We can regard ourselves as spiritually superior. We have a revelation from the LORD himself in the Writings of Swedenborg. Why don't more people gain the benefits we have from them?

I find that some early New-Church writers defined Swedenborgianism as being anti-Spiritualism. I wonder whether this is actually healthy? To define ourselves by saying what we're not, seems pessimistic and very limiting.

“Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away” . (Revelation 21:1)

The first heaven and the first earth symbolise our old self. The first heaven is what used to believe and the first earth is what we used to say. How we reacted with fear dread, suspicion and panic. How we were triggered by the mere mention of Spiritualism or whatever. The new heaven and the new heaven symbolises our new, more nuanced, wiser and more loving view of Spiritualism or whatever. Since we are re-created we think more constructive

thoughts, we feel more empathy and compassion, and our mouth doesn't make the same mistakes that we have been brought up making.

[“Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more.” \(Revelation 21:1\)](#)

AMEN

Some of the passages I quoted from the Writings during the service are:

“The Lord's coming does not consist, as the letter has it, in His appearing once again in the world, but in His presence within everyone. He is present there as often as the gospel is preached and that which is holy is contemplated.” (AC 3900:9e)

“Divine Truth is the Word, and those who are of that church are enlightened from the spiritual light of the Word through influx from the Lord out of heaven, and for the reason that they acknowledge the Divine in the Human of the Lord, and are from Him in spiritual affection for truth. These and no others receive spiritual light, which continually flows in through heaven from the Lord with all who read the Word; from this they receive enlightenment.” (AE 759:2e)

“Consequently the Lord's resurrection on the third morning, Mark 16:2, 9; Luke 24:1; John 20:1, embodies in the particular and the specific senses the truth that He rises daily, indeed every single moment, in the minds of regenerate persons.” (AC 2405:8e)

“Consequently 'certainly visiting' is used to mean in the spiritual sense deliverance from falsities and thus introduction into things that belong to the Church and the Lord's kingdom, that is, the Lord's coming in love and faith among those who will belong to the new Church.” (AC 6895:2e)

“There were other comings of a less visible nature, such as those at times when inspiration was received and the Word was given by means of it, and later on through the Word itself. For the Word has the Lord present within it; every detail there comes from Him and has reference to Him” (AC 4060:5)

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