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Doing what is right in our own eyes

Rev'd Brian Talbot writes:

“In those days there was no king in Israel; all the people did what was right in their own eyes.” (Judges 17:6; cf. Judges 21:25; Deuteronomy 12:8)

All of us fear chaos, mayhem and uncertainty. We like our routines. Sometimes we don't like change. Sometimes we feel that the world, or society, or our church is out of control. We turn on the news and we see people's inhumanity to others, lack of civility, infractions of the Ten Commandments, and so on. As

we search for new meaning and purpose, we worry that the LORD is very far away, and yearn for the 'good old days', which historians might argue weren't that great.

We all like certainty, stability and predictability. We're wary of straying from the usual and the secure. We worry that what made the church meaningful for us in the past, is being lost in all the change. As wonderful and brilliant as our routines, our procedures, our explanations of New Church teaching and interpretations of the Bible are, the LORD wants to continually improve them, so that they can express more nuance. But the law is not just tangible in our Bibles, accessible to our senses or from our memories. As the Apostle Paul says: "the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life." (2 Corinthians 3:6) As Jesus says: "It is the spirit that gives life; the flesh is useless. The words that I have spoken to you are spirit and life." (John 6:63) I wonder whether we need to make sure that there is mercy in our appealing to the laws in the Bible. (Matthew 9:13; 12:7) "The life which flows from the Lord through the Word is the light of truth working on the intellect, and the love of good working on the will." (*De Verbo* §2)

I find it difficult to argue that there are no moral standards. Are standards slipping? Is this too pessimistic? Even Plato was arguing that standards were slipping in Ancient Greece! I wonder to what extent, it is a spiritually unhealthy question? To start with a negative, might mean that we produce even more negativity? We always have to be on our guard. (cf. *Secrets of Heaven* §§2588:9; 2689:3-4; 2718:7)

Also our reality is not just governed by laws that are outside us. There are more spiritual laws that come from within us, which are part of the new covenant. (Jeremiah 31:31, 34) We are involved in a process whereby the LORD continually gives us a new heart and a new mind. (Ezekiel 11:19; 18:31; 36:26-27) We have to hear the LORD speaking through our appeal to Scripture or the Writings. If all we hear is fear or loyalty to tradition, then we need to question how or whether the LORD is speaking through us. The faithful 'Jew' in us loves to rely on how we've been brought up, or what we've been taught is being a good, faithful Christian, when possibly the LORD is moving us forwards.

So what is the King in us? Swedenborg doesn't interpret the verses at the start of this article. But we could turn to the prophet Micah:

"Now why do you cry aloud?

Is there no king in you?

Has your counsellor perished,

that pangs have seized you like a woman in labour?" (Micah 4:9)

The 'king' in us is our ability to authoritatively communicate and mediate Divine ideas from the written and living Word – "truth of doctrine [and good] from the Word" – and Swedenborg's theological Writings, motivated by loving kindness from the LORD. (*Secrets of Heaven* §3365:1; §10173:1; *Apocalypse Explained* §§278:10; 721:12) It is when we personally defend and protect what we see as the truth or God's ideas, or personally discern or discriminate between different plausible options or alternatives, (*Secrets of Heaven* §10540:7; *Apocalypse Explained* §278:10) using the 'wisdom of Solomon': "Give your servant therefore an understanding mind to govern your people, able to discern between good and evil". (1 Kings 3:9)

The bad 'Jew' in us has stalled in our spiritual progress. Our righteousness needs to exceed that of the Scribes and Pharisees, to experience heaven, or greater wisdom, or deeper

compassion, or more profound experiences of the LORD himself. (Matthew 5:20) We can sometimes misuse our knowledge of the Bible to suit our mood, without realising that we've ossified, and we're extinguishing "spiritual life" or no life motivated by kindness, because we fail to consider that the LORD is perfecting us or progressing us. (cf. *Apocalypse Explained* §§315:22; 589:2; 617:17; 717:17) We can refuse to entertain more humble, empathetic and inspiring interpretations of the Bible. (cf. *Apocalypse Explained* 417:12e) Like the good, young man we have to "relinquish the things of" our false ego or foolish sense of autonomy, which lead us instead of being led by the LORD. (cf. *Apocalypse Explained* §§934:3; 893:4; 1085:3)

Like the Babylonians – because we have the desire to be in charge and in control – we are a law unto ourselves: our "justice and dignity proceed from" ourselves, and "their own might is their god!". (Habakkuk 1:7, 11; cf. Romans 2:14) This reminds me of "Ah, you who are wise in your own eyes, and shrewd in your own sight!" (Isaiah 5:21)

All of us can suffer from pride in our own convictions or perspectives. We can be so persuaded of our 'truth', that we close our minds to alternatives. That applies to whatever 'label' we give ourselves: traditional, conservative, revisionist, progressive, liberal or whatever. Each of us can reason for or against religious or spiritual truth, even depending on how static or dynamic it is. Sometimes it can be difficult to distinguish between our own understanding of our church's teachings and those from the LORD. (cf. *Secrets of Heaven* §§AC 215; 1072:5e; *Apocalypse Explained* §§376:37; 844)

I find the discussion so far rather negative and pessimistic. We should be wary that we might be in a state of temptation or crisis of the spirit, in which we are midway between doubt and hope, negativity and affirmative outlook. A pessimistic perspective might lead to "utter stupidity and insanity", and "darkness". We all suffer from bad moods, cynicism and pessimism! At such times "one small difficulty has more validity than a thousand proofs". (*Secrets of Heaven* §§2338; 2568:4; 6479)

Is there another model that we can use besides assuming that there is no king, or no guiding principles or dominant interpretation of the Word? Is there another model which doesn't seem to imply that people around us are ignoring or dismissing church teachings or traditions? I find great comfort in the teachings of the Church about the Ancient Church: the religious age following Noah. These ancient people were motivated by kindness and goodwill. It didn't matter what explanations of God people had or what rituals they used to worship God, they looked at the heart or spirit of what people believed and did. (*Secrets of Heaven* §§1285:3; 1316; 1799:5; 2385; 3268:2) It is similar in heaven, and it is usual for the angel in us:

"Those who are guided by kindness Hardly even notice evil in another but pay attention instead to everything good and true in the person. When they do find anything bad or false, they put a good interpretation on it. This is a characteristic of all angels – one they acquire from the Lord, who bends everything bad toward good." (*Secrets of Heaven* §1079:2 [Lisa Hyatt Cooper])

Another problem I see is that everybody doing what is right in their own eyes, is actually what heaven is about. Admittedly angels are guided from within by the LORD but that doesn't mean that they should all be the same. No two angels are alike. They don't have the same faces, nor do they have the same feelings, nor do they have the same understanding of how the LORD works. Every angel embodies what is Divine in a different

way. Angels are perfected individually and collectively by truer perspectives and the arrival of new people. Heaven has “an infinite variety” of beliefs, degrees of kindness, different types of nuanced thinking, and countless ways of worshipping the LORD. (*Heaven and Hell* §§20; 41; *Heavenly Doctrine* §26; *Last Judgment* §§12-13) Without this variety heaven cannot be perfect or continue to perfect. (*Heaven and Hell* §§56; 71; *Last Judgment* §12:4)

Church people are rightly concerned about issues of sexuality and the church’s teachings about committed, faithful, heterosexual marriages. Some would see this current situation of questioning and discussion as a ‘free-for-all’, or giving into secular ideas, where others see it as a chance to deepen our understanding of these issues. It is indeed troubling for those who take the Bible literally, and believe God created people male and female, and intended heterosexual couples to marry. (Genesis 1:27; 5:2; Matthew 19:4; Mark 10:6)

I believe that there is hope in the inner meaning of the Bible. We have to interpret “Therefore a man leaves his father and his mother and clings to his wife, and they become one flesh.” (Genesis 2:24; cf. Matthew 19:5; Mark 10:5-9) “not only naturally, but spiritually”. (AE 725:3; cf. HH 372) This verse refers to our identity or personality being infilled with “celestial and spiritual life”. (AC 135; cf. also AE 555:14) Further, a person “will leave the evil and falsity which he has from his religion and which defile his understanding”. (AE 710:26) Again, the reciprocal joining or linking between the Lord and our heart and mind has been “established from creation”. (AE 983:2e-3) So the inner level of meaning of the Bible challenges each of us to look at our ‘traditions’: the interpretations of the Bible or the explanations of God that we use at the moment, and consider whether the LORD is leading us to something wiser, more loving, more nuanced, more reflective of the developing angel within us. People’s spirituality is far more important than how they experience their sexuality. Our religious values and principles being joined to our kindness and helpfulness motivated by humility and empathy, is “the fundamental marriage in the LORD’s kingdom”. “The Lord’s providence is concerned first and foremost with that joining together of the two.” (AC 3915:1; 3951:1)

I look back at my life and some of the issues that I’ve had to work through:

- women in ministry: there are still New-Church people who believe in a male-only priesthood or ministry, and that is fine.
- divorce: marriages are to continue to the end of life (CL 276) People are not to separate what God has joined together. (Matthew 19:6; 5:31, 32; Mark 10:1-12, especially 10:9; Luke 16:18; CL 255; 468) How do we know which marriages God has ‘joined together’? If adultery or marital infidelity, “malicious desertion” and “manifest obscenities” – whatever they are – is the only valid reason for divorce, why don’t we take adultery also of being unfaithful to God, as the Old Testament prophets did? (Jeremiah 3:9; 5:7; Ezekiel 23:37,45; Hosea 2:2; 4:13-14) Some New-Church people believe that divorce is very much a last resort, and some believe it is definitely a ‘no-go’ area. This raises the question of whether domestic violence is a sufficient reason for divorce.
- marriage between people of different religions (Deuteronomy 7:3, 4; Numbers 25:1-9) which at least some angels regard as “detestable”. (AC 8998:1; HH 378; CL 242; cf. CL 80; 239; 531)
- marriage between people of different races

In each of these examples I believe that I have found greater spirituality within the written laws. In Matthew chapter 5 our LORD Jesus, finds greater meaning in the Ten

Commandments. Our continual aim is to find greater meaning. The angels are perfecting till eternity, and so should the angel in us. (AC 3308e; 6232:2; HH 158##; 273; 469; DP 334)

Revd Brian Talbot