

The Warning about adding to the Bible

In every talk I give on this Programme, I draw upon the teaching which is given in the theological Writings of Emanuel Swedenborg. Much of that teaching is concerned with the deeper, spiritual sense of the Bible, or Word of the Lord, and some of my talks have specifically dealt with this. Ages old as the Old Testament is and concerned so much with events which on the surface have no immediate relevance to us today, yet there lies within a deeper meaning which very much applies to today and in fact is of real concern and practical importance for us.

In some places such a deeper meaning within is not difficult to see. Samson's struggling with a lion and afterwards finding honey in the carcase holds within it, for instance, teaching concerning our struggles in temptation; how the forces of evil which we are at times called upon to wrestle seem to be as strong as a lion; after which, if we overcome them, there is a sense of genuine delight and pleasantness.

To cite another instance, several chapters of the first book of Kings are taken up with a description of the building of the Temple of king Solomon and the description, down to the smallest details, can make for tedious reading which leads us to wonder why it is in any way important for us to know about such things. But there is something very beautiful here. Every person must strive to build within their lives, their heart and mind, a dwelling place, a Temple for the Lord. And, understood in the light of the deeper, spiritual sense, this is what the long description of the building of Solomon's Temple in the first Book of Kings is all about.

It's the same when we come to the New Testament, and here I am referring particularly to the Gospels and to the Book of Revelation. Think of all those times that the Lord healed people. The lame, the blind, the deaf, the dumb, the paralysed, the possessed, Jairus's daughter, the man born blind, Bartimaeus, Peter's mother-in-law. And even then, there are indications that there were many more. They describe healings which historically took place, yet these incidents also speak about and promise healing of the individual's spriritual diseases and handicaps.

For we too are spiritually blind and deaf and dumb and lame and possessed. And here is what, in the light of the spiritual sense which is contained within, these miracles as recorded in the Gospels describe.

In fact it can be said to be the principal purpose for which a new Revelation needed to be given, that the spiritual sense of the Word should be known. Otherwise, and as has happened in some instances, much of the teaching of the Scriptures would be put on one side, only to be referred to for study purposes or curiosity's sake. This has happened. The Book of Leviticus is a case in point. But it is happening and has happened with much else besides. On the surface, and as it stands, so much of the Old Testament (in particular) gives the impression of being completely irrelevant to life as we know and experience it today. Family quarrels and jealousies, tribal warfare and politicking - these are all there, but seeming to have so little to do with life in the modern age. But with the revelation of a spiritual meaning within, all this changes.

For all that people are attracted by the concept of a deeper, spiritual meaning within the Word; though they sense and can agree that to put it in its simplest terms, there must be much more to the Scriptures and in the Scriptures than first meets the eye; they are uneasy, even troubled, by the possibility that such a deeper meaning could constitute an "adding" to the Bible, something which would otherwise seem to be forbidden. There is a warning at the end of the Book of Revelation which reads, "For I testify to every man that hear the words of the prophecy of this book, If any man shall add to these things, God shall add to him the plagues that are written in this book: and if any man shall take away from the words of the book of this prophecy, God shall take away his part out of the book of life, and out of the holy city, and from the things which are written in this book." (Chapter 21: 18-19).

Strictly speaking the warning refers only to the Book of Revelation, but even if it did refer to the whole of the Bible it is important for us to realise that the explanations and teachings given in the Writings of Emanuel Swedenborg are not an adding to it. To the contrary, they are an unfolding of what has always been there. From the beginning those books we refer to as books of the Divine Word - Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and so on - have contained within them an inner, spiritual meaning.

The Lord was there with the writers of those books, guiding and supervising their selection of stories as they wrote, so that their books could act as a containant, or as a vehicle, of His Wisdom, and would hold within them layers of meaning, people on earth understanding them according to their natural sense, and the angels of heaven understanding them according to their spiritual sense.

It is clear, for example, with regard to the Gospels, and as we noted earlier, that what is written there is but a fraction of what took place during the Lord's life on earth, and the Gospel writers did a great deal of selecting. But their selection was very much guided by the Lord so that what they included in their Gospels could serve as a basis and containant of deeper senses within.

The point I want to stress is that those deeper senses, or that deeper sense, has always been there. True, knowledge of it was not made known before now, but nevertheless it was still there. Nothing has been added. Rather, there has been an unfolding of what was always there within.

The story of Creation in Genesis Chapter 1 illustrates the point. Right from the beginning that story has contained within it a spiritual meaning which the Lord intended would one day be explained to mankind. Here is a story which He knew could and would contain the wisdom of heaven itself about how a person is regenerated and made new, step by step and stage by stage. The seven days of creation are the seven successive steps involved in regeneration and they describe the way, by means of regeneration, a new person is created within us.

Differently from allegory, which is a reading of a meaning into something, we are talking here of the unfolding of something already there. It is not a reading of anything into the Scriptures or an adding to them.

What then, you must be wondering, is meant by the warning about "adding to" and "taking from" the Bible. Indeed, how is it possible to "add" to it or to "take" from it? Of all people none were more zealous in guarding the texts of their Scriptures, making sure that nothing was added to or taken from them, than the ancient Jewish scribes.

And yet, in another sense, they were outstandingly guilty of "adding to" and "taking from" those Scriptures. By their traditions, for example, they did much to "take away" from the force of the Ten Commandments, and at the same time "added" trivial burdens to the keeping of them. And it is in this sense of "adding to" and "taking from" that we are to understand the warning given here at the end of the Book of Revelation and a similar warning which is also given in the Book of Deuteronomy.

When one stops and reads and reflects upon it, it becomes apparent that there are two great truths which are insisted upon in the Book of Revelation, the divinity, indeed the sole divinity, of our Lord Jesus Christ, and the necessity of obedience to the Ten Commandments. To add to, or to take away from the words of the prophecy of the book is to add to so as to weaken or to destroy, or to take from, those truths. To wade in with some man made doctrinal innovation so as to cloud or obscure these great truths is to add to or take away from them. And this is why there is such a strong warning against it. We are all tempted at times to rationalize about our behaviour and we try to convince ourselves that one or other of the Ten Commandments doesn't mean exactly what it is saying or doesn't apply in our particular set of circumstances. Also, there is a widespread tendency to find a kind of refuge from the harsh reality of certain acts and behaviour by calling them other names. The softening, 'playing down' process gets under way. Robbery is called embezzlement. Adultery is referred to as 'an affair'. Here is how we can "add to" and "take away" from the Bible. Add to it our own ideas and rationalizations. Take away from it its force and power. And this cannot but have its consequences with us. As in Proverbs 30, verse 5, "Every word of God is pure: and you shalt not add unto His words, lest He reprove you".

Earlier I indicated that the Word of the Lord, or Bible, is the meeting point, in a very real sense, of heaven and earth, between angels and men. Angels understand its inner meaning while we on earth understand its natural meaning. And that is a very wonderful thing. And it indicates how important and useful our reading of the Word can be in lifting us up into the sphere of heaven and into the company of the best possible spiritual associates.

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