



Where Does Swedenborg Fit in Today's Conversations about the Bible?



by Jim Lawrence

The Christian Bible is without doubt the most culturally influential book in the history of the world.

Representing one third of the world's 6.2 billion people, Christianity is both the largest and the fastest-growing faith tradition on the planet. The Judeo-Christian scriptures exist—by far—in more printings, editions and translations, and in more people's upbringings and active spiritual imaginations, than any other text in the history of humanity.

Compared with the foundational scriptures of the world's other major faith traditions, the Christian Bible is also the subject of more interpretive traditions than any other, and we're having quite the donnybrook within Christianity on how to read the Bible. Should we take it literally? Should we take it figuratively? Should we take it with a grain of salt, since it was written so long ago? And where do Swedenborgians fit into the present picture?

Four Approaches to Bible Interpretation Today

In a broad sense, there are today four general attitudes toward scripture. First, there are those who take the Bible literally—that is, as the inerrant Word of God in its literal sense. Com-

prised mostly of evangelicals and fundamentalists, this group claims God, not humans, as the author of scripture. The people who scribed the books of the Bible were but physical agents for God's words to us, and furthermore, what God is saying in scripture is clearly spoken. The text gives its full message in its literal and plain words. Despite the disparaging this approach has endured for some time now, this group remains surprisingly large and fairly constant in its numbers.

Swedenborg's way of reading the Bible is not entirely foreign to Christian tradition.

Second, there are many Christians who believe the Bible—though of inspired authorship—to be a historical document written by humans bound in their own historical context. The Bible has flaws, peculiarities, and difficult-to-recover contexts for the religious Jews and Christians who wrote these texts long ago. This group holds that God may have inspired these writers in an extraordinary way, but to get at their meaning the scriptures need to be interpreted through careful study of the original languages and historical analysis of the life and times of those who wrote the texts. The only real meaning of the text is what that inspired human author meant to say to that audience back in that context. Then perhaps we

can make some extrapolations to our own context.

This category of believing Christians formed the basis of what became a liberalizing trend in Western Christianity that launched powerfully in the nineteenth century and took over most of the major universities and seminaries by 1900 or so. This group probably reached its peak about twenty-five years ago and has begun to wane rapidly since then.

A third quickly growing group, located especially in North America, can be gathered by combining a number of new approaches to the Bible. As a broad collective of scholars and clergy from most mainline, Catholic and Orthodox traditions, this group regards the text with a new openness, especially by valuing what the reader brings to the text. Though there may be varying degrees of interest in what the author meant, how the reader reads it is more important. These "reader-centered" interpretations employ numerous literary and ideological techniques for reading meaning *into* the text. Explorations of scripture as literature, as history with spiritual lessons and as narrative stories that can be subjected to numerous creative literary engagements are all valid ways to interpret scripture.

Within this group is a significant contingent that regards the text as a testimony to the spiritual ignorance of

continues on page 72

The Editor's Desk



First things first: if you have not already done so, it is time to commit to attending Annual Convention 2008 in Bridgewater, Massachusetts. On page 78, you will find a registration form, or call Central Office at 617.969.9240.

Annual Convention is a time to participate in the serious business of the

denomination and the Swedenborgian House of Studies, and witness the ordination of our newest ministers. It is, as well, a time to break bread with old friends from across the continent and make new friends, to experience a variety of worship services, and to support young Swedenborgians as they meet for fellowship, creative worship and fun.

Services will be conducted at three of our Massachusetts churches: worship at the Elmwood Church at the conclusion of the COM meeting; worship at

the Bridgewater Church on Saturday morning; and the ordination service at Cambridge Chapel on Saturday evening. A reception at Harvard Divinity School will follow ordination.

On Friday night we will share a picnic, followed by joining the tradition of Fourth of July fireworks, provided by the Town of Bridgewater. See you there. ☼

Herb Ziegler

New Pension and Benefit Services

The Retirement Committee of General Convention announced a new relationship with the Ministers and Missionaries Benefit Board (MMBB) to provide pension and benefit services for our ministers and church employees. This service replaces the services provided by John Hancock. After some investigation, the committee found that the return on investments, as well as the services offered, were not only better than what we had, but also directed specifically toward ministers.

Rev. Kevin Baxter learned of MMBB several years ago from his father-in-law, Rev. Dr. Everett Goodwin, an American Baptist minister. He saw that the tax planning guides and articles for ministers and churches from their publications were informative and comprehensive. When he discovered that any church, not just Baptist, with congregational structure could join, he began urging the retirement committee to investigate it.

As with John Hancock, ministers will have a funded pension plan and life insurance. In addition, they will have disability insurance and an option for a standardized, comprehensive health insurance plan purchased through MMBB. Further, our rela-

tionship with MMBB allows ministers to invest in personal 403b plans for self-directed retirement savings. Most importantly, this program allows ministers who are working in non-church-sponsored ministries to participate in the plan. Many are unaware that federal tax provisions for ministers apply in retirement. MMBB is aware of these provisions, and works with ministers to maximize their pension income.

In addition to increased benefit services for our clergy, MMBB offers benefits for our churches. MMBB will work with church treasurers and boards to clarify issues surrounding ministerial pay, compensation, and benefits. Moreover, it will allow churches to offer benefits to their non-ministerial employees.

Commenting on the new relationship, Rev. Baxter said, "While I do not sit on the Retirement Committee, nor am I a financial planner, accountant, or fortune teller, I believe the relationship with MMBB will help our denomination bring more of its gifts, truth, and love into the world. I encourage ministers and churches to talk with their MMBB representatives, visit their website (www.mmabb.org) and explore this incredible organization we have partnered with. I believe the relationship with MMBB will be looked upon by ministers and churches as a landmark event for years to come." ☼

Church Calendar

June 29– July 1: Council of Ministers • Bridgewater, Massachusetts

July 2–6: Annual Convention • Bridgewater, Massachusetts

July 11–14: Gathering Leaves • Purley Chase, England

July 20–26: Paulhaven Camp

July 26–August 2: Almont Camp

August 2–17: Fryeburg Camp

the Messenger

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A Failure of Nerve Revisited

This article is a response to a review of the book, *A Failure of Nerve: Leadership in the Age of the Quick Fix*, that appeared in the March issue of *The Messenger*.

by George Dole

Having followed up on Andy Stinson's recommendation of Edwin Friedman's *A Failure of Nerve: Leadership in the Age of the Quick Fix*, I find my own response to it to be very different from his. My main problem is trying to compress my comments into reasonable compass, for there is a great deal that could be said.

Perhaps I can best begin by describing failure of nerve on my part—a major, six-figure failure. When Lois and I were buying our present house here in Bath, we had to choose between a fixed-rate mortgage and an adjustable-rate mortgage at a lower interest rate. The thought of an adjustable rate raised my anxiety level, and I played the part of a “highly anxious risk avoider” (Friedman, p. 13). A growing number of people, obviously, did not, and I think those now faced with foreclosure would quibble with Friedman's statement about “the ultimate unimportance of mistakes when the quest is driven by adventure rather than certainty” (p. 43). So too would

most parents of teen-age drivers, for that matter.

This may serve to introduce a theme, namely that I find Friedman failing to live up to his own principles in several very significant respects, perhaps the most noticeable being his condemnation and practice of either/or thinking—“driven by adventure *rather than* certainty” (emphasis mine), for example. It is surely ironic that in the second paragraph of his critique of either/or thinking he states that it is “always symptomatic of underlying emotional processes rather than of the subject matter” (p. 39); and “rather than” is one of his favorite phrases. He writes of “anxiety *rather than* adventure” (p.

Basically, he seems to see nothing in our current society except pathology—anxiety, regression, and sabotage of leaders.

47), wants parents to “focus on the emotional processes in their own relationships rather than on their children” (p. 113), wants leaders to focus “on the way people function in a relationship rather than on their stated values and beliefs” (p. 121), recommends “adaptation to strength rather than to weakness” (p. 54), criticizes “a focus on immaturity rather than on strength, an orientation toward others rather than toward self” and a “focus on empathy rather than responsibility” (p. 134, see also p. 135), criticizes the tendency “to think of self as a concept that occupies our minds rather than as an entity that occupies space” (p. 165), and describes his own “concept of differentiation” as “a focus on strength rather than pathology”—and this is just a selection from a significantly larger store.

Let me pause a moment and address

the negative role assigned to “empathy.” According to Friedman, “However lofty the original concept of empathy (a word that only came into the English language in 1922), societal regression has distorted it to the point at which it has become a power tool in the hands of the weak to sabotage the strong” (24). First of all, the *concept* of empathy has been around a lot longer than the *word*. The concept is precisely stated in *Divine Love and Wisdom* 47, and it is synonymous with love. The love that *DLW* is talking about is not vulnerable to emotional blackmail, and I am disappointed that Friedman makes no mention whatever of the possibility of “tough love.” His assumption that empathy “promised that projecting one's own person into the skin of another would enable one to understand the other person fully” could hardly be more diametrically opposed to *DLW* 47's statement that “Feeling our joy in others, though, and not theirs in us, is not loving.” On page 137 he tells us that “I am concerned here not with the ‘true’ meaning of empathy but with its use,” which tells me that he is a willing party to its misuse.

The second major way in which I find Friedman practicing what he condemns is in the matter of focusing on “strength rather than pathology.” Basically he seems to see nothing in our current society *except* pathology—anxiety, regression, and sabotage of leaders. While he does say that “Despite the fact that things seem to be getting worse, that is, more toxic, the entire system may be adapting for the better” (pp. 156-7), he never suggests that this may be happening in society in general. He reminds the reader over and over and over again that this society is anxiety-ridden and regressive.

Let me be a bit more specific. To il-

continues on page 70

Contents

Where Does Swedenborg Fit in Today's Conversations about the Bible?.....	65
The Editor's Desk.....	66
New Pension and Benefit Services	66
Church Calendar.....	66
<i>A Failure of Nerve Revisited</i>	67
2008 Nominees	68
Meet the Nominees	68
Convention 2008 Application....	74
General Council Spring Meeting Report	75
Passages	75
Lecture Themes for Fryeburg New Church Assembly	76

2008 Nominees

The following people have been nominated by the nominating committees of General Convention and SHS.

- **Vice-President** (1-year term): Jim Erickson.
- **Recording Secretary** (1-year term): Susan Wood-Ashton.
- **Treasurer** (1-year term): Rev. Susannah Currie.
- **General Council layperson** (3-year term, two to be elected): Deane Currie, Herb Ziegler.
- **General Council minister** (3-year term): Rev. Randy Laakko.
- **Communication Support Unit (ComSU)** (3-year term): Rev. Sage Currie.
- **Education Support Unit (EdSU)** (3-year term): TBD.
- **Financial and Physical Resources Support Unit (FPRSU)** (3-year term): Helen Sioris.
- **Information Management Support Unit (IMSU)** (3-year term): Dagmar Bollinger.
- **Ministries Support Unit (MinSU)** (3-year term, two to be elected): Gloria Toot, Deb Smith.
- **Committee on Admission into the Ministry (CAM) Layperson** (3-year term): Mareta Tafel.
- **Swedenborgian House of Studies (SHS) Board of Trustees** (Representative class, 3-year term, two to be elected): Bill Coffman, Rev. Jane Siebert. (At-large class, 3-year term, two to be elected): Jennifer Lindsay, Rev. Kathy Speas. (At-large class, 2-year term): Tom Neuenfeldt. (At-large class, 1-year term): Lisa Oz.
- **Nominating Committee** (5-year term, two to be nominated, one to be elected): Mary Ann Fischer, Rev. Wilma Wake.

Meet the Nominees for 2008

The April issue of *The Messenger* reported the balance of candidate statements.

Vice-President

Jim Erickson

I consider my nomination for vice-president to be a fortunate opportunity to continue serving the New Church. Soon after my introduction to New Church teachings nearly twenty years ago, I began attending the Virginia Street Swedenborgian Church in St. Paul and working on committees. Before long I became a member and was elected to the board of trustees, and then president.

Within a year of becoming a member I found myself traveling to LaPorte, Indiana to meet for the first time a group of Swedenborgians outside of St. Paul. I was there to facilitate sessions on stewardship and got to know them. I was very impressed with them, and knowing the congregation in my home church, concluded that if there were other opportunities for me to serve I would eagerly do so. I was elected to General Council and after two terms continue to serve as vice-president of Convention.

My background is one that I hope can help to make a contribution to the important work done by General Council. In my life I have been a teacher and director of a school, started two businesses, was the anthropology specialist for a museum, and a historian. I have had unpaid positions as president of a medical facility, a social service representative to the U.S. government, and other offices.

In my local church I serve as chairman of committees dealing with stewardship, building and grounds maintenance, and historic preservation. I was appointed librarian, archivist, and superintendent and teacher of the Sunday school. I also sit on a commit-

tee for planning and scheduling worship services. When needed, I write and deliver sermons and lead Sunday services.

In addition to performing local church duties, I hope to continue my work as vice-president of Convention.

General Council (layperson)

Dean Currie

I have served on General Council for four years, and I would be proud to serve again. Our denomination has three critical decisions to make over the next two years: replacing our longtime treasurer, Larry Conant; replacing our longtime executive, Martha Bauer; and considering the future location of our Central Office. We also continue to ponder our organization's structure. These are important issues and I would like to continue being a part of the group planning these things.

I continue in marriage with my wife, Susannah and I continue to be blessed by my three children, Grace, Benjamin and Sage, whom I love dearly.

Herb Ziegler

Being a small organization is both an asset and a liability. We, the General Convention, are probably the smallest continent-wide denomination. We benefit from the family-like sense of community our size affords, but we face size-induced challenges in funding the base infrastructure required to provide services to our constituent members.

I offer my candidacy for a second term to work with the president, officers and members of GC, and the members of Convention to find the best solutions for sizing our plans, expectations, and services to conform to a budget that promotes sustainability by avoiding deficits.



General Council (minister)

Rev. Randy Laakko

I was ordained in 1965, serving half-time in the Philadelphia and Wilmington churches from 1965 through 1967. I have been pastor to the Wilmington church from 1967 to the present. I have worked on numerous boards and committees over the years, serving as chairman of the Council of Ministers for eight years during the 1970s and early 80s. In 1984, following the Rev. Dr. Cal Turley's sudden death, I was elected president of General Convention, and served through 1990.

My love and dedication for, and experience in, the church will serve well should I be elected to the General Council.

Ministries Support Unit

Deb Smith

I am an early childhood educator, and I have been with the Region of Waterloo Children's Services (Ontario) for the past 20 years, and working in the service of adults and children for the past 30 years. For the first 10 years I was an early childhood educator in centre-based care. I have worked as a home child-care caseworker, and for the past 10 years, in the Child Care Subsidy Office, determining eligibility for child-care assistance for families.

Prior to joining the Region, I was the assistant supervisor at the Kent Infant Toddler Centre, a child and parent centre for teen moms returning to high school. I also was the lead teacher in the infant room at Sunnybrook Crèche, a workplace day-care centre. In my capacity as a home child-care caseworker, I had the opportunity to organize and present training for the Region's home child-care providers and

worked with the Home Child Care Association Conferences

For the past 10 years I have been the United Way rep for Children's Services in Waterloo and have co-planned and implemented a variety of fundraising activities. Currently, I am on the board of directors at my home church. I lead the Fellowship Team, which plans and organizes events throughout the year. In 2004, I served as co-chair of Annual Convention, held at St. Jerome's College in Waterloo. I was previously the youth leader at the Church of the Good Shepherd for 10 years.

I am proud to say I have three grown children, Lyndsay, James and Stephanie Wilson. I have always tried to participate in activities of service to those around me. I feel it is important to take time to refresh ourselves, gain new perspectives and keep current with the changes that continue to present challenges in our daily working lives. I feel I have the skills to offer to MINSU, and would like the opportunity to offer my support on this committee.

SHS Board of Trustees



Bill Coffman

I would consider it a great privilege to serve again on the SHS Board of Trustees. Having served one term several years ago, I feel that my past experience and knowledge of the board and its functions would be an asset. I am very excited about the vision and plans for the ongoing development and education of seminary students for our church.

I have been a member of the Urbana Swedenborgian Church since 1992, and have served on the church board for a total of 14 years, including 12 years as treasurer. In addition, I have served as chair of the planning

committee for Convention at Urbana in 2000 and 2006 and have been active in the Ohio Association of Swedenborgian churches. Also, I am the co-chair of a church-community organization to raise funds for restoration of our historic Hamill organ.

My professional background includes 32 years in teaching and administration in the Ohio public school system with a B.A. in political science and M.A. in economic education. I have been on the faculty of Urbana University since 1999 and am at present an associate professor in the College of Education, where I serve as director of field placement. My responsibilities include oversight of all student teacher education and sports/health studies field experiences as well as leading the student teaching seminars.

In addition, I serve on the Urbana University Admission and Academic Standards Committee, the Teacher Education Advisory Committee and various other University committees.

Tom Neuenfeldt

Some of you know me through my affiliation with Almont New Church Assembly. I have previously served as president of the Assembly, and currently am a member of the ANCA Maintenance Fund Board. Last year you may have seen me in my job of assistant airport shuttle driver for Annual Convention in Holland, Michigan. These experiences have allowed me to be of use. This desire to be of service is why I hope to apply my many years in the field of education to the Board of SHS.

I am partially retired from our local public school system. I have had the opportunity to be a special education teacher, a special education supervisor, an elementary principal, a high school principal, a school superintendent, and a university instructor. I am currently the part-time assistant superintendent

continues on page 71

A Failure of Nerve

continued from page 67

illustrate his contrast between focusing on strength rather than on pathology, he remarks that "Statistics phrased in terms of the rate of death rather than the pure number always seem ominously determinative" (p. 106). As an example, he observes that when it is reported that a particular diet reduces your chance of a sudden heart attack by fifty percent, this ignores the fact that the number of people who die of sudden heart attacks is two in ten thousand. This means that the diet may save the life of one person in ten thousand. (It comes to mind that Jesus recommends leaving the ninety-nine secure sheep and going in search of the one that is lost.)

I would leave aside the fact that I find the thought of "only one out of ten thousand" a good deal more "ominous" than the prospect of a fifty percent improvement (for word junkies, this is an example of preterition). I would focus on the fact that these statements occur in a chapter intended to show that we have become a nation of data junkies. He describes doctors as driven by a need to keep up with new discoveries and as overwhelmed by the sheer mass, which may well be the case in a good many instances. However, he then goes on to say, "What I have described here about medicine is not about medicine; it is about a chronically anxious society" (p. 107). He paints a picture of people going from conference to conference, buying book after book, in a desperate attempt not to fall behind.

As I think about the people I know—the members of my family and my church, the storekeepers, the city employees, the factory workers, my fellow clergy—the only one who comes even close to this definition is my son Andrew, who is on tenure track and is currently working on his first major scholarly book. He does indeed have to

keep up with what is being published on Schleiermacher, but he tells me that "There isn't all that much." On any given weekend (the favorite time for conferences) the number of people attending conferences is a minute fraction of the total population, but Friedman chooses to focus on that minute fraction and take it as normative for the whole "chronically anxious society." In a new book (that I haven't read), *The Age of American Unreason*, Susan Jacoby maintains that "America is now ill with a powerful mutant strain of intertwined ignorance, anti-rationalism, and anti-intellectualism," blaming a culture of "infotainment," sound bites, fundamentalist religion, and ideological rigidity. This certainly does not suggest an obsession with data, with keeping up with the latest developments in thought.

Eventually, there were some signs that I found encouraging. Most of what Friedman says about differentiation on page 183 is very much in accord with what they tried to teach me experientially in Clinical Pastoral Education almost fifty years ago. When I found (on p. 150) his statement in relation to catching a cold—"it is not merely the presence of the pathogen that causes pathology but also the response of the organism that 'hosts' it," I wrote a big TA DA! in the margin. I'm not sure, but I think this is the first "both/and" in the book (it's about two thirds of the way through). On page 173 he states that "the universal tension between the forces for individuality and the forces for togetherness must be kept within some balancing range," and he returns to this theme on page 184. However, in this latter case he speaks of the need "to achieve some balance" (emphasis mine). In physics, there is indeed a kind of static balance that can be "achieved," as when equal weights are placed on the pans of a scale, and once it is achieved there will be no motion unless the balance is disturbed. There

is also dynamic balance, as when the forward inclination of a moving body balances the speed of its motion—look at a photograph of the start of a sprint, for example—and the result of this is progress. Dynamic balance is never "achieved" once and for all. It has to be constantly maintained.

Here I find Robert Kegan's *The Evolving Self: Problem and Process in Human Development* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1982) marvelously sane. He sees our psychological development fueled by the tension between our need for autonomy and our need for togetherness. Sometimes we need to be held, and sometimes we need to get loose, and Kegan says that the ideal context for growth will have three characteristics: "It must hold us. It must let us go. And it must stick around so that it can be reintegrated." (p. 121) I am reminded also of Robert Greenleaf's book, *Servant Leadership: A Journey into the Nature of Legitimate Power & Greatness* (New York: Paulist Press, 1977). In his Foreword, Stephen Covey describes the servant-leader as "one who seeks to draw out, inspire, and develop the best and highest within people from the inside out" (p. 3). This sounds a great deal like the task of the church, and is surely reminiscent of Jesus' admonition that "whoever wishes to be great among you must be your servant" (Matthew 20:27).

I've gone on longer than I had hoped, so let me get in three quickies before I close. On page 124 he suggests that "some kind of conceptual leap is needed beyond what has come to be termed *emotional intelligence*" (emphasis his). I would highly recommend the chapter on "The Roots of Empathy" in Daniel Goleman's *Emotional Intelligence: Why It Can Matter More Than IQ* (New York: Bantam Books, 1995). This includes a careful description of the phenomenon and of its neurology, and says to begin with, "Empathy builds on self-awareness." If you read

the whole book, you may agree with me that Friedman has quite a bit of catching up to do.

The second is his description of what it took for a Jew to survive in a Nazi death camp: you needed to be "committed to endure and . . . constantly on the lookout for another piece of bread that might be clutched in an already dead person's hand" (p. 153). To anyone who has read *Man's Search for Meaning*, this is little short of appalling. The author, Viktor Frankl, was there.

I cannot be quite as quick about the third because I feel I should, in all fairness, quote Friedman at some length.

While I cannot prove the following in any substantive way, it is my perception that the togetherness force is blinder to the value of the individuality force than the individuality force is to the value of joining. By this I mean that the move toward togetherness is in some way more natural; that protoplasm at any level seems naturally to join with other protoplasm, with little concern for the preservation of individuality. And precisely because of that fact, the forces for individuality must be more vigilant. (p. 177)

What alarms me is the ease with which the unproven "perception" of the first sentence has become the "fact" of the third. I do not know whether it means he is a careless writer, a sloppy thinker, or someone who actually believes that his perceptions are facts simply because they are his perceptions. None of the alternatives inspires confidence.

The most affirmative note on which I can close is to say that I have no doubt whatever that there are situations in which Friedman's approach is called for. I share Friedman's distaste for post-modernism and ideological thinking, for example. There are times, surely, when we cannot afford to be luke-

Meet the Nominees

continued from page 69

responsible for curriculum development and special education services. My 34 years of school work have taught me that the most important aspect of education and life is developing trust and relationships. In 1999, I was honored as the Michigan Elementary Principal of the Year, and, in 2000, as a National Distinguished Principal.

My wife, BJ, introduced me to the Swedenborgian Church 36 years ago. Through the teachings, her love, and our Detroit and Almont connection, my life has unfolded into a useful and fulfilling journey both personally and professionally. I am honored to be considered for this position on the Board of SHS, and I look forward to the opportunity to serve the church if I am elected.

Lisa Oz

I am a producer, writer, actress, and co-host of "The Dr. Oz Show" on Oprah & Friends' XM radio telecast.

warm, even though we may not be able to see things in black and white. I am also mindful, though, of Luke 14:28, "Which of you, intending to build a tower, does not first sit down and estimate the cost, to see whether he has enough to finish it?" At the Red Sea, the Israelites did not move forward until the waters had parted. At the Jordan, the waters did not part until the soles of the priests' feet touched their surface. Which image is appropriate for our own time and place?

My own reading of the present state of our larger society is one that I find quite widely shared. It is that our willingness to take financial risks without counting the cost has led us to live far beyond our means, and that we are far more at risk from extremism than from moderation. I think Susan Haack was really on the mark when she entitled her little book *Manifesto of a Passion-*

Together with my husband, Mehmet, I have co-authored three *New York Times* best-selling books, including the series, *YOU: The Owner's Manual*. I am the President of Ozworks LLC, a media and investment consulting company, and Pine Room Pictures, a production company specializing in family-friendly media.

I was raised in the General Church and educated at The Academy of the New Church. I received my undergraduate degree from Bryn Mawr College (1985) and went on to study at Columbia University's Union Theological Seminary.

I've always considered myself blessed to have been introduced to the writings of Emanuel Swedenborg at an early age. It is my heartfelt desire to apply those teachings in my daily life and to share them in an accessible way. I am interested in serving on the board in order to work with like-minded individuals, promoting the dissemination of Swedenborg's insights. ☼

ate Moderate. The opening lines of William Butler Yeats's poem, *The Second Coming*, say what is very much in my heart:

Turning and turning in the widening
gyre

The falcon cannot hear the falconer;
Things fall apart; the centre cannot
hold;

Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,
The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and
everywhere

The ceremony of innocence is drowned;
The best lack all conviction, while the
worst

Are full of passionate intensity.
Surely some revelation is at hand;
Surely the Second Coming is at hand.

Rev. Dr. George Dole is pastor of the Swedenborgian church in Bath, Maine, a translator for the New Century Edition of the theological works of Emanuel Swedenborg and adjunct professor at the Swedenborgian House of Studies.

Conversations About the Bible

continued from page 65

those who wrote it, and they “preach against the text.” But even this strategy affirms the Bible as an important “tent of meeting” and biblical discourse as a place for spiritual and social transformation. For group three, there isn’t any single meaning of a text, but many possible meanings that might bring different sorts of folks in different sorts of settings closer to God and more meaningfully onto their spiritual path.

Finally, a fourth group believes the Bible can’t be saved; the text is hopelessly anachronistic and inapplicable to the contemporary world. I’ll set this last group aside for the purposes of this article, though an implicit Swedenborgian answer to them can be discerned in what follows.

Where is Swedenborg's Way?

What the first three groups have in common is that they take scripture seriously as a place to engage the ultimate questions of religious life today. Not so much as *whether* God is present, but *how* God is present in the Bible is the rub, and the differences about that tend to divide Christians in a pronounced way.

Swedenborg fits snugly in none of these groups, though he affirms some aspects of the first three. He stands with the literalists in the radical position that God is the author of scripture in the sense that God worked through the human agents of the original texts in ways about which they were unaware. Swedenborg stands with group two in asserting that knowledge of the original languages can be very important for plumbing the full depths of the divine utterance in the text. He especially valued knowledge of Hebrew. And Swedenborg stands with group three in affirming that there are many simultaneously true meanings possible.

That is, the same biblical passage can be understood as saying true things to many different kinds of questions at once.

Swedenborg’s way, however, rests on a bold revelation about the Bible that none of the other groups share, and that is that the Bible’s text is divinely designed with inner rooms, inner spaces, and inner meanings within the literal words and sentences. In fact, far from being a historically-bound text tied to the thoughts of the authors, or tied to the plain meaning of the literal text, or limited by the ideas and spirituality of the creative contemporary reader, in every verse of scripture in these inner rooms of the text God is sharing knowledge and information about God’s self, about the spiritual history of the world, about the nature of God’s very intimate relationship with humanity and how that works, and especially about the reader’s own soul journey.

Swedenborg’s way of reading the Bible wasn’t entirely new. He can be grouped loosely with an allegorical tradition that once flourished openly and with support from orthodoxy up until the Renaissance and Reformation, when that approach went underground into Christian Kabbalist and Masonic movements.

For most of Christian history until the Reformation, some of the greatest biblical interpreters explored inner levels of meaning within the literal text of the Bible: Origen, Augustine, Jerome, the Venerable Bede, Bernard of Clairvaux, Erasmus. This “inner sense tradition” believed the Bible’s plain words contain hidden inner levels—levels that speak to the work of Jesus Christ, the moral and spiritual life of Christian faith, the ultimate destiny of the creation. But by the time Swedenborg produced his extraordinary exposition of the inner senses of scripture, that entire concept had virtually vanished

even from historical awareness, and after Swedenborg’s day it never made any kind of serious comeback and only became further and further lost as a religious resource.

Swedenborg's New Microscopes and Telescopes

How Swedenborg learned his way of reading the inner senses of scripture is a terrifically interesting tale worthy of a book, but for the purposes of this brief article I will simply leave it as a simple point that Swedenborg’s way of reading the Bible is not entirely foreign to Christian tradition.

Swedenborg, as well-known as he became in the nineteenth century, and as popular as many of his ideas became, never found great reception for his claims about the inner senses of scripture. Perhaps that is getting ready to change, for his lens on biblical spirituality offers a way that could outfit quite a number of contemporary seekers. He demonstrates a powerful case for a divine mind behind the text; he values the integrity of the text and supports careful study of it; he encourages a reader-centered approach in the sense that the text has not been exhausted and each person can approach it with an open heart for personal meaning; and he provides coherent structures for understanding a very complex book.

Let’s summarize his approach—and lenses are a good place to start. As an accomplished explorer of the “Book of Nature,” Swedenborg loved instruments which extended sight. Both the telescope and microscope were in early but very exciting phases of development, and Swedenborg even learned to grind lenses himself for making superior microscopes.

Microscopes helped Swedenborg and others to see vast universes lying within the minuscule, and Swedenborg perceived deeply enough through microscopic sight to propound an atomic theory of matter 200 years before

Einstein.

As for the macro side and looking through telescopes, he was such a good astronomer that he was offered the chair of astronomy at the University of Uppsala, and through telescopic sight he famously deduced the earliest theory of the nebular hypothesis about the formation of our solar system.

In a story now legendary, while struggling on a multi-volume work on the human body Swedenborg experienced a Christ visitation, which he interpreted as a commission by the Lord to take up a new mission, a seemingly strange one for a scientist: to reveal to the world the deeper mysteries in the Bible. Swedenborg began to experience a state of consciousness that put him, as he interpreted it, in a spiritual world that was as normal and stable a place to move around in as this physical world. Whatever one may choose to surmise about these claims, it is a matter of record that he put aside all his work in natural science in order to work on the Bible—but he took his telescope and his microscope with him.

Swedenborg reported being shown in the spiritual world how much of the Bible was written with inner levels of meaning through a fact of reality not hitherto understood very well, which is that the spiritual and natural worlds are connected by correspondences, and that the Bible's literal (or natural) text was likewise but an outer manifestation of a vast spiritual realm, which could be interpreted if you learned how to read correspondences.

However, just as with the vast solar system or the interior spaces of molecular life, you cannot see correspondential levels with the naked eye. You need special lenses. You need, in fact, a spiritual microscope and a telescope. Swedenborg ground a spiritual microscope that he placed upon the text. Suddenly, a horse wasn't just a powerful and beautiful animal capable of tra-

versing great distances faster than any other beast; a horse was also the power of understanding by which one could traverse a vast landscape of meaning. A "day" in the creation story wasn't a literal twenty-four hour period of time, but a vast phase of human evolution in this world.

For eight years Swedenborg placed a microscopic lens of correspondence upon Genesis and Exodus and revealed a universe of spiritual thought addressing all the great questions of why we are here, who God is, where humanity has been on its long journey, where God wants us to head and how to live so that we can get there.

Swedenborg also found that the lens of correspondences could be ground so that it revealed telescopic vistas. The spiritual telescope could take in the whole text at once from the Garden of Eden to the Holy City and see a quaternity of interlocking and mutually enriching stories in the intergalactic structure of the text: the literal story of a specific historic people within which are three other stories of the human race, of the Messiah and of the individual human soul.

For twenty-seven years Swedenborg worked to see better all the spiritual understandings that were produced through what I like to call biblical spirituality. Indeed, the first rule in the "Rules of Life" found in his papers after his death was the practice of regular meditation on the sacred scriptures.

Where Is Swedenborgian Biblical Spirituality Today?

As already noted, Swedenborg's spiritual ideas have been much more popular in Western culture than has been his method of reading scripture. And also as already suggested, perhaps this may change. In the current climate in which new ways of appreciating scripture are gaining ground, I believe Swedenborgian biblical spirituality has a fresh opportunity to engage the larger

world with a larger world of the Bible.

Doing biblical spirituality in the Swedenborgian way invites people to believe that the search for God can be answered in a productive way through the biblical encounter. The Swedenborgian approach also offers a generous journey that affords more than one valid approach. It tends to open doors, not close them. And appealing to those with a preference for structured meaning in the universe, the Swedenborgian way offers rich frameworks for viewing the great questions of the spiritual life: Who is God? How do I relate to the human community? What great purposes—and foibles—have been unfolding in history? What is the nature of the spiritual pilgrimage that is my own life?

As religious trends go, there is an upsurge of interest in the Bible, and that is good for us. We have a lot to bring to the present conversation. Longtime seminary professor of Swedenborgian Bible, George Dole, has a new work just published: *A Book About Us: The Bible and Stages of Our Lives*. This slender but deeply rich book is an inviting place to start a new Bible study group in your church or circle. Our seminary on its web site offers for free helpful reading group study guides available in both five-week and 10-week formats, and George has even agreed to serve as a resource person to group leaders free of charge (www.shs.psr.edu/program/book_about_us.asp).

I encourage our churches to promote their ministries as offering new looks on the Bible—to go into business assertively offering spiritual microscopes and telescopes for the many who desire to see with new eyes. ☸

Rev. Dr. Jim Lawrence is Dean of the Swedenborgian House of Studies at Pacific School of Religion of the Graduate Theological Union in Berkeley, California. He teaches in the fields of the history of Christianity and Swedenborgian studies.

184th Session of the General Convention of the New Jerusalem

2008 Registration Form



July 2–July 6, 2008

Council of Ministers: June 29–July 1

Convention 2008 will be held in Bridgewater, Massachusetts on the campus of Bridgewater State College. To learn more about BSC, browse to www.bridgew.edu.

Teen Program: The Convention sponsor program allows youths aged 13–17 to attend Convention without parents. An adult sponsor must be named who will attend Convention and agree to perform certain duties and take responsibility for the minor in place of the parent. Parents must arrange for and notify a sponsor prior to Convention. Children under the age of 13 cannot attend Convention without a parent or legal guardian. Parents must complete and mail the registration form below. A letter providing some information about the teen program, along with a sponsor information form and medical release form, will be sent upon receipt of registration. For more information, assistance or clarification regarding the youth program or logistics, please contact Kurt Fekete, youth director, at kfekete@hotmail.com, or 207.892.4646. We look forward to seeing lots of teens this year, and we're certain that the teens will discover Convention 2008 to be a fun and spiritually enlightening event. The program begins Wednesday, July 2, and is supervised by Kurt Fekete.

Lodging: We have reserved the newest dormitory on campus. Room styles are singles and doubles in a suite configuration, all air conditioned. The most common suite configuration is one double room with two single rooms and one bath per suite. There are two elevators. This residence hall is located near East Campus Commons, which houses the dining hall. You may register for any number of days from June 29–July 6.

Name		Attending Women's Alliance luncheon?	Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/>
Name			Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/>
Street		Apt.#	
City		State (Province)	Zip
Day Phone	E-mail	Home Church	
Names of children accompanying you			
Requests (dietary, mobility, roommate)			

Payment Information

All prices are in US currency. If you pay with Canadian funds, please add \$5.00 for handling for each Canadian check. All bills must be paid in full before June 15. No registration refunds after June 1. Bills may be paid by Visa or by MasterCard. You may call Central Office to make a secure credit card payment at 617.969.4240.

Visa ☐ MasterCard ☐ Expiration Date: _____

Card Number: _____

Signature: _____

Send checks payable to The Swedenborgian Church to:
Central Office, the Swedenborgian Church
11 Highland Ave., Newtonville, MA 02460

Registration	Amt	#	Total
Adult	\$95.00		
Youth League teen	\$80.00		
Child (11–13)	\$55.00		
Child under 11	\$45.00		
Family maximum	\$275.00		
Late fee after June 1	\$80.00		
Women's Alliance lunch	\$10.00		
Room & Board	# Days	#	Total
Single	\$68.00		
Double	\$52.50		
Grand total (from both Registration and Room			\$

General Council Spring Meeting Report Passages

General Council met by conference call on April 5, 2008. Rev. Kathy Speas opened the meeting with prayer.

Addressing concerns about financial markets, Larry Conant, treasurer, reported that Convention funds are performing well enough to maintain our 2008 budget. GC will review market effects at both the pre-Convention and fall meetings.

The Chairman of the Council of Ministers (COM), Rev. Andy Stinson, reported that:

- COM issued a call for a new editor of *Our Daily Bread*
- All of the minister peer supervision groups are meeting this year
- Several requests have been received from ministers for continuing education funds
- A COM handbook in preparation will be presented for COM's approval at Convention 2008.

General Council received a report on the online Swedenborgian Community from Susan Wood-Ashton. This ministry continues to expand its programs, and is researching the possibility of offering some translations of its site content into Korean and Spanish. The Steering Committee will be investigating linking with other internet religious and spiritual sites, such as BeliefNet.

The president, Chris Laitner, reported that Dr. Robert Head, Urbana University President, will be leaving at the end of May to assume the leadership position of another university. A Presidential Search is under way through UU's Board of Trustees.

Legal work to create a correct deed for the denomination and the St. Louis Church is ongoing. The intent has been agreed to, but final wording is still being crafted.

The four officers of Convention, working as the Central Office Review

Committee, have been authorized by General Council to determine whether Central Office should remain in its present location or be moved, and, if so, where. A final report will be presented at the pre-Convention General Council meeting.

Rev. Andy Stinson, chair of the denomination's Retirement Committee, explained the committee's decision to move the retirement program to MMBB, and asked General Council to vote to expand the role of the Retirement Committee so it would include the ability to offer annuities, life and disability insurance, and group medical coverage to ministers and employees of the denomination. General Council voted unanimously for this expanded role. The description of the Retirement Committee and its duties will be included in the *2008 Convention Journal*.

Chris Laitner reported that the structural posts in Wayfarers Chapel are rotted at the base and must be repaired, the first repair of this type since the Chapel was built more than 50 years ago. General Convention is the owner of the property, so it will receive more information about the repairs and contracts at the pre-Convention meeting.

A committee of five was appointed to review the ideas generated from General Council's February, 2008 strategic planning meeting, and to present specific recommendations to General Council at the pre-Convention meeting. A full report will be presented on the floor of Convention.

The pre-Convention meeting will be held on Wednesday, July 2 at Bridgewater State College, from 9:00 AM to 5:00 PM, and the post-Convention meeting will be held on Sunday, July 6, from 11:30 AM to 1:30 PM. The fall meeting of General Council will be held from Thursday evening,

Baptisms

Molly Elizabeth Callaghan, daughter of Patrick Callaghan and Katelyn Lord, was baptized into the Christian faith at Fryeburg New Church in Fryeburg, Maine on April 6, 2008, Rev. Ken Turley officiating.

Deaths

Rebecca Boxwell, mother of Barbara Boxwell and a friend of the Swedenborgian Church and the Michigan Association, died December 12, 2007. A graveside service will be held June 30 in Peabody, Massachusetts.

Nov. 6 through noon on Nov. 9.

The meeting closed with a prayer compiled from "sentence prayers" submitted by several members of General Council. ☿

Closing Prayer

Hear us, Lord, as we pray for Your guidance and support, asking that You open our hearts and our eyes, and give us the wisdom to make the best decisions for your church here on earth.

May we find strength through You to further Your work in the descent of the New Jerusalem. We pray that we find the good in each of us and the patience to wait on the Lord's leading. Our church needs us, Lord; please instill dedication in our minds, along with love and understanding in our hearts, so we can fulfill our commitment to the work of the Lord's New Church. Our work is ongoing; not a closing, but a beginning.

We walk not into the night; we walk toward the stars.

This we pray, O Lord, our God. Amen.

About the Swedenborgian Church

Emanuel Swedenborg was born January 29, 1688 in Stockholm, Sweden. Although he never intended a church denomination to be founded or named after him, a society was formed in London 15 years after his death.

American groups eventually founded the General Convention of Swedenborgian churches. As a result of Swedenborg's spiritual questionings and insights, we as a church exist to encourage that same spirit of inquiry and personal growth, to respect differences in views, and to accept others who may have different traditions.

Swedenborg shared in his theological writings a view of God as infinitely loving and at the very center of our beings, a view of life as a spiritual birthing as we participate in our own creation, and a view of Scripture as a story of inner-life stages as we learn and grow. Swedenborg said, "All religion relates to life, and the life of religion is to do good." He also felt that the sincerest form of worship is a useful life.

Lecture Themes for Fryeburg New Church Assembly 2008

Spring is in full bloom, and it's time to be thinking about warm summer days at the Fryeburg New Church Assembly—basking on the porch, swimming in the Saco River, attending the lecture series, engaging in the exchange of ideas, and just spending quiet time alone or with friends and family. Below are the lecture themes.

Go to the website, www.fryeburg.org, for more information and registration.

Week 1, Biblical Theme: "A Book About Us"

In recognition of Rev. Dr. George Dole's contributions to the Assembly and his life-long expertise in biblical studies, we are approaching the first week's biblical theme a bit differently this year. We will look at the biblical narrative as a whole; lecturers will choose any aspect of the Bible narrative they would like, focusing through the lens of George's latest work, *A Book About Us*.

The general theme will be the biblical portrayal, through correspondence, of the birth and growth of the relationship between God and human beings over the course of their lives. Each lecture will focus on a specific period or dynamic of that process. While it is not

required or necessary, if you would like to read George's book ahead of time it can be ordered at www.swedenborg.com, by phone from the Swedenborg Foundation at (800) 355-3222, or via email at info@swedenborg.com.

Week 2, Doctrinal Theme: "Being the New Church in a New World"

Jesus Christ and Swedenborg are both clear and adamant that faith, doctrine and worship are nothing if they are not lived out in the context of the world. The theology, interpretation of the Bible, and understanding of the Divine and human that the Lord gave Swedenborg to present in his thirty volumes of writing has come to be known as "New Church," and forms the basis for the world view of Swedenborgians everywhere. Meanwhile, the world we live in, more specifically the society, culture and technology we live with, are changing at a remarkable pace.

In these lectures we will examine the issues, blessings, conflicts and problems that face those who attempt to be the New Church in a new world.

We hope to see you there.

Rev. Ken Turley

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