

## **Sermon by Rev. Richard M. Baxter**

**June 1993**

### **People Of the Book**

I have spent a lot of time in the hospital. I was there so long that I changed roommates many times, and as was always the case, sooner or later it would come out that I was a minister, and a religious discussion would ensue.

One roommate had a rare form of terminal cancer and a very talkative wife. I overheard that they were members of the United Pentecostal Church. Immediately upon arrival at the hospital, they made contact with their local church, and their side of the room was soon flooded with members bringing food and with visits from the minister. (The irony was that the patient couldn't stand the sight of food and didn't want to talk to anyone.) Meanwhile, I was just recovering from my own severe treatments. I did not feel in any mood to take on the Pentecostals.

But one day a nurse blew my cover by calling me "Rev." The talkative wife immediately followed up, and I explained as briefly as I could that I was the pastor of a church in Washington near the White House, hoping that would satisfy her. She responded by saying that her church, the Pentecostal Church, was founded upon the scripture verse from Matthew that says: "Go and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit."

"What scripture verse is your church founded upon?" she asked.

The Swedenborgian Church has such an individualistic approach to religion that I don't think it ever occurred to me to hold up one particular scripture verse as representing the whole church! Well, being the quick-witted, resourceful person I am, I coughed several times, had a pain or two, and wished that I smoked a pipe so I could conveniently put it in my mouth and gain some time to think. I finally replied that our church was founded upon the scripture from the book of Revelation that says, "I, John, saw the Holy City, New Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven."

How did I do? Is that what you would have replied?

She stated that she had often studied the Book of Revelation but couldn't make much sense of it. It had so many mysteries and prophecies! She asked me if I thought a certain prophesy applied to a present international situation.

I said, “Well, try this outline and see if it helps. Try to think about Revelation as prophesy about yourself, about inner dynamics within yourself—not about the Nazis, the Russians, the Middle East, the Chinese. It’s not about somebody out there, but about what is going on inside you.”

I said that the Book of Revelation can be divided into three parts. The first part is the message to the seven churches. Each of the churches was in some kind of physical or spiritual trouble, but, if each persisted, it would be given a reward that was particularly relevant to them. (A branch from the Tree of Life, the bright and morning star, the hidden manna, the crown of life—all symbols for Christ elsewhere in the Bible.) They would all receive Christ in a form that was particularly appropriate for them, considering the path and the struggle that the seven churches were going through.

The middle part of the book—the part about the beast and the dragon, the plagues, and the trumpets— represents our spiritual battles.

The third part, about the Holy City, describes the goal. It is a transformation of the original Garden of Eden. The Tree of Life is still in the center, but instead of the simplicity—instead of the innocence of ignorance of the Garden of Eden—you now have the complexity of a city, which implies a complex web of relationships. It implies the developing sophistication of being aware of the world but not conformed to it— the innocence of wisdom.

In this spiritual journey, you have all the experiences of life—all the ups and downs of everything that happened in the Old Testament and New Testament, leading up to the reward and goal of Christ—and the innocence of wisdom that comes with dwelling in His presence.

This woman had never heard any explanation like this before, and it clearly gave her something to think about. Just then the nurses and doctors came in to look at her husband and me, and we never did have an opportunity to discuss what I had said. So I am not sure what kind of impression it made on her, but I think the impression was a positive one.

The exchange also gave me something to think about. As I lay back and reflected on the conversation and the difference between our two scripture verses, it occurred to me that hers was an action statement— and her church was very busy being active!

The scripture verse describing the descent of the Holy City, on the other hand, is a vision statement. There is a difference of feeling between the two. The scriptural basis that says “go teach others” implies the known, suggesting that you have a list of what you are going to teach them. The scriptural basis of a “descending holy city” implies

mystery. It is introspective. We are paying attention to getting in touch with our own inner world, which we see pictured in the Biblical vision.

The difficulty with a vision is that you must describe it pretty completely before it makes much sense to others, and then you must interpret the symbolism of the vision and make it relevant to contemporary life. Maybe that is why we Swedenborgians feel so inadequate when we try to answer a question as to what our church is all about. Where do you start?

You could start at the beginning with the creation story. We see the creation story as a parable showing the potential, the growth that human beings are capable of, from the first ray of light that is the dawn of consciousness until the sixth day, when we have developed into mature men and women.

But our scriptural basis is wider than the creation story, even though that seems to be the one we teach over and over again. The creation story shows the pattern of our potential. Our actual story is much longer and more circuitous than that. As our scriptural basis, we see within the books of the Bible that have an inner sense two parallel stories: the historical account of people, places, and events of the literal story—and within that account a deeper spiritual level that reflects our individual journeys.

Therefore, the scriptural basis of our spiritual journey begins with Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden, in a simplistic relationship with God. It proceeds through infancy and childhood, illustrated by the children of Abraham. There is a necessary period of desert wandering on our own before we can claim the Promised Land. There is struggle before we can assume the kingship of adulthood. Our so-called “mid-life crises” can be compared with the division of that kingdom, with the “ways of the world” pulling us one way and the biblical prophets pulling us another—calling us to our former ideals. The New Testament shows us a deeper maturity based on the inner meaning of Jesus’ parables. The Book of Revelation ties together many of the biblical themes into a vision of spiritual maturity in the Holy City.

But I say to you today that, even with this all-encompassing vision, our scriptural basis would be spotty and incomplete unless we made as our scriptural basis all the books of the Old Testament: Ruth, Esther, Job, Ezra, Nehemiah, and so on, which have so much to tell us about brave human beings caught in desperate circumstances.

A scriptural basis should also include the Apocrypha—those books that cover that 400-year period between the Old Testament and the New Testament. The Washington church received a Tiffany stained-glass window from the Brooklyn church. No one knew anything about the window. We found, from the Tiffany Studio catalog, that it was of the Archangel Raphael. Raphael is only mentioned in the Bible in the apocryphal book of Tobit. In thirty years of association with this church, I doubt if I have ever heard

reference to the Apocrypha. I thought, “This window must be some kind of mistake!” But I looked up Raphael in Swedenborg, and there he was. (I have always found Swedenborg to be wider than the church.) In *Apocalypse Revealed* (AR 548), Swedenborg said that the archangels such as Raphael represent ministries in heaven. Raphael had three ministries in the Book of Tobit: (1) guiding wayfarers, (2) healing the sick, (3) and arranging propitious marriages. Do these sound like good subjects for a New Church window?

But our scriptural basis has to be even wider than that. It has to include a proper recognition of the letters of the early church. Again, Swedenborg makes many references to them, but the church usually has not. In the 1850s, the Reverend Bayley, a New Church minister, gave a series of lectures at Brighton, England. The questions and discussion from the floor centered around the letters of the early church. Dr. Bayley gives a brilliant defense of the Swedenborgian theology based on the letters and their proper translation. His answers have been an inspiration to me. I have Xeroxed the whole book and have it on my desk all the time. I commend them to you.

You can see by now that I am uncomfortable singling out one verse as being our scriptural basis. My reflection in the hospital convinced me that our scriptural basis has to be the whole Bible.

We must have the full scope, the *big* picture: our potential described in the creation story, and then our spiritual journey from the Garden of Eden to the Holy City. This prepares us for all kinds of ministries both here and in heaven. Our task as a church is anything that involves spiritual growth—churches, groups, retreats and retreat centers, personal counseling, wedding ministries. The danger is that the vision becomes just an umbrella under which a collection of individualists pursue their own thing. We need to ask how the vision connects to the task of community if each of us is on our own individual pilgrimage. We need to ask how the vision connects with our individual gifts to enable us to support and implement the vision. The vision can empower us. The vision should empower us. The vision must empower us.

This convention session we have asked ourselves: Who are we? Where are we going?

I know the answer. We are the People of the Book, and we are on a journey from the Garden of Eden to the Holy City. I'll see you there!