

Using the Lord's Creation

by the Rev. Eric Carswell

It is important for us to acknowledge and believe that everything that the Lord created has a good purpose. All things that exist, even those that are disorderly, have a use or purpose. All that we see around us has a reason for existing. We live in the natural universe with its qualities of fixed time and place, with all of its wonders, its everyday elements, and its qualities that can fill us with sadness or horror. This world has many of its qualities because the purpose of our natural lives is that we are to establish our eternal character by making choices. Day in and day out we are choosing all sorts of things. What to do and not do, what to say and not say. At times we consciously or unconsciously choose to let external circumstances determine what we do. But even this is a choice.

What we think, say, or do is important because each of these is an expression of some value or desire that we have. Stated in black and white terms, we can choose to love and obey the Lord, and we can choose a life that fundamentally denies Him and the order He has created. We can choose to live a life that cares for the people around us or we can be crudely self-centered or materialistic. Upon considering these contrasting positions we often find ourselves with mixed motives or feeling somewhere in the middle between what is good and what is evil.

The Lord created this world as a place of choice. His hope is that we will freely choose to turn to Him, to love what He loves, and to live according to the order that leads to usefulness and happiness. More than anything else, though, He ensures that we are free to choose what values we will hold and seek to embody in our daily choices.

This world is created with the necessity of choice being forced on us. There are finite limits to everything in our experience—limits of time, distance, energy, and resources. We know we can't do everything. We know we are called to choose good and not evil, but even here there are so many good and useful things we could do each day that we have to choose some. A person who was bedridden might decide that the most useful thing he could do was spend a part of his day in quiet prayer, reflecting on the needs and hopes of others. As he turns his mind to the community of people he knows, and especially if he includes the people and events he hears about in the news, he could find that he hardly has the waking time to accomplish his task. Each of us has to focus on what we can do that will best serve the goals we seek to accomplish.

We also face limits on a larger scale than just our own personal lives. This natural universe and the earth that we live on are the Lord's. This earth is created for human beings. It has served them as a home in the past, does so for billions today, and is to serve for billions of billions in the future. We are stewards of this world. What we as a human race do today will affect the quality of the world that future generations have to live in.

This world is an amazing creation. If we have open eyes and a willing heart, we can see the hand of a loving, heavenly Father in so many of its qualities. And the world is remarkably durable in some ways and very delicate in others. In the last several decades we have been learning in so many ways how the Lord has created it as a complex, interconnected system which maintains a

dynamic balance. The power and complexity of ecological systems have many times humbled us. Over and over again, human beings have affected some change that was thought to be all for the better, only to discover that there were ramifications to their choices far beyond what they ever considered. For example, there have been times when a pest or predator species has been drastically reduced or eliminated in an area and only years later the importance and use of that species to the welfare of many other aspects of the ecological area has become evident.

Happily, the Lord has made this world with remarkable self-correcting and self-cleaning qualities. But we also know that there are limits to the earth's ability to maintain its balance. The earth is not that much different from our own natural bodies in this regard. The Lord has created our bodies in such a way that they adapt to wide variations in eating, sleeping, and exercise. Our bodies can take limited amounts of potentially harmful food or conditions and not suffer lasting damage. They are remarkably resilient, but when they get out of balance there can be catastrophic results.

For example, our natural bodies require us to consume and retain a certain amount of water on a regular basis. We can get this water in part through the food we eat and through many liquids we drink. Usually it is not something we pay any attention to. But in Third World countries one of the highest causes of infant mortality is severe dehydration brought on by an intestinal bug from drinking unhealthy water. Because the intestinal bug keeps these little children from being able to adequately absorb the water they drink, they can die rapidly.

Another example is our bodies' ability to adapt to extremes of heat and cold. While we may not like these extremes, most of us, with a little care, can continue to function and remain healthy whether it is above 90° Fahrenheit or below 0°. But, in those same conditions, many people can die of overheating or becoming severely cold.

Our bodies can adapt only so far. And this is part of the finite quality the Lord intended in this natural world. When a person's body does reach the limit of its ability to adapt and becomes seriously out of balance, it can have terribly harmful, even deadly, consequences. Our bodies can quietly and invisibly work to cope with a problem, giving us little indication of stress being produced, until the problem overwhelms the system's ability to adapt. At times the result is major and sudden systemic failure.

We know this is also true of the world we live in. The earth is the Lord's. He has created it as a temporary home for human beings while they are choosing the qualities that will define their eternal lives. This world adapts to a remarkable number of things, but there are also limits to this ability to adapt and self-clean. We need not envision an ultimate catastrophe to be concerned about this issue. We can simply want to hand over to future generations an earth that has so many blessings which we love and benefit from.

We can be concerned for the welfare of this earth for many reasons. We can be concerned on a civil basis, because we believe in obedience to the laws of our country. We can be concerned on a moral basis, because we care about the world we all share now and what we will pass on to our descendants. And we can care on a spiritual basis, because we recognize the Lord's presence and purpose in the earth's qualities and features.

All things that the Lord created were created for a purpose. The usefulness of anything—including each of us—depends on how well it serves to cooperate with His purposes. *Our* cooperation determines not only our usefulness but also our happiness and the fundamental quality of our lives. The Lord has told us that, “the happiness of the angels consists in use, from use, and according to use” (*Arcana Coelestia* 454) and that “life is imparted by the Lord from use, by way of use, and according to use” (*Arcana Coelestia* 503). In *Conjugal Love*, it is stated:

The whole of heaven is viewed by the Lord as a world of useful service, and angels are angels according to the service they render. The pleasure in being useful carries them along, like a boat in a favoring current, bringing them into a state of eternal peace and the rest that comes with peace (207:7).

What constitutes a misuse or waste of this world’s resources? What would be a waste of energy or materials? What would be the benefits and the consequences of specific choices? The reason the Lord created this world is that He wants us to freely choose the life that leads to heaven. Any choice that contributes to that goal is truly useful. Any choice that doesn’t, that leads us away from heaven, is destructive and evil. The material things that surround us aren’t in themselves intrinsically good or evil. It is *how* we use them and even more so *WHY* we use them the way we do.

The Lord has given us remarkable latitude in how we live our lives. Perhaps you are familiar with what the Lord has said in the book *Heaven and Hell* about how it can be perfectly allowable to enjoy so many qualities of this world:

A person may acquire riches and accumulate wealth as far as opportunity is given, if it is not done by devious or deceitful means; that he may enjoy delicious food and drink if he does live for these things; that he may maintain as large a home as he can reasonably afford, have conversation with others similar to himself, frequent places of amusement, talk about the affairs of the world, and need not go about like a devotee with a sad and sorrowful countenance and drooping head, but may be joyful and cheerful; nor need he give his goods to the poor except so far as affection leads him; in a word, he may live outwardly precisely like a worldly person; and all this will be no obstacle to his entering heaven, provided that inwardly in himself he thinks about God as he ought, and acts sincerely and justly in respect to his neighbor (358).

The Lord wants us to have a happy life. But fundamental happiness will come from the way we wisely use the time, energy, and resources around us. It won’t come from—or be prevented by—what we own or don’t own, by whether we have certain options to do this or that particular thing. All of us in this congregation have discretionary time and resources that far exceed what most people in this world experience. Looking over our shoulders, much of the world’s population would see us as incredibly wealthy and powerful. But we know all too well that this perspective doesn’t necessarily add to our contentment or happiness. Some of the richest people are among the most unhappy.

The earth is the Lord's. Everything that He has created can be useful, often in many different ways. As you go about living your life today may you reflect on the wonder of creation. May you see something of its incredibly complex system of useful parts, interrelated and serving each other. All of them work together to provide a world in which you and I can live, and in which new human beings can be born to make the essential choices that will lead them to a dwelling place in heaven or in hell. The earth is the Lord's. May we pray for the understanding and the desire to care for it wisely.

Amen.

Readings from the Lord's Word: Genesis 1:1-5; Psalm 24:1-2; *Divine Providence* 3.

All books mentioned, other than those from the Bible, were written by Emanuel Swedenborg and are often referred to collectively in the New Church as "the Heavenly Doctrines" or "the Writings." We believe that they are equally the Word of God as the revelation of the Old and New Testaments.