

The General Conference of the New Church

APOCALYPSE STUDY GROUP

**Presentations made at the launch ceremony
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Presentation by the artist, G.Roland Smith

It might have made my job easier if, like John, I had been granted some direct and dazzling vision, but no such luck! All I had to go on was the Biblical account, the deliberations of the Apocalypse Study Group, and an occasional nudge from Emanuel Swedenborg.

Those of you who know Christopher Hasler will not be surprised to hear that the whole thing was probably one of his mad ideas. Ten years ago he telephoned one evening asking if I would care to do one or two illustrations of the Apocalypse. I remember saying that this was not really my line – that I didn't do 'realistic' figurative work. "Oh, that doesn't matter," he said, "use your own style." So I did. If he had told me than that what they really wanted was a complete series of 25 pictures, I think I should never have embarked on it.

Let me explain that Christopher has been wonderfully supportive throughout. He has been my constant go-between – my link with the Group and their studies. We did not always agree, of course. If Christopher doesn't like something, he says so. And if I am determined not to change something, I don't. But usually there has been a useful interchange of ideas, and, thanks to Christopher's patience and hard work, I have been able, I think, to sense what the Group was trying to do. He never tried to dictate, but was always ready to suggest how problems might be resolved. I wish he were here because he occupies a central, pivotal position in the whole enterprise.

So how did we work? First, Christopher would send me the reference for a particular passage, together with a page of notes. Whereupon I would go all broody for several days at a stretch, just sitting scribbling and worrying. Gradually, some sort of rough pencil composition would begin to come together. I would then send a copy back to Christopher and would not have long to wait for a reaction, usually favourable but with reservations. Provided that any amendments were not too drastic, I would then transfer the design to a decent piece of water-colour paper and draw everything in heavy black outline, like the leading in a stained glass window. Copy back to Christopher – anxious pause! Any corrections at this stage would NOT be welcome. The colouring stage is the most enjoyable – and the most hazardous – first with water colours and then with coloured pencils. It all takes a very long time.

As everyone knows, The Apocalypse is full of symbols. The problem for an artist is that it is literary symbolism – not visual symbolism – designed as ‘poetry’ rather than ‘painting’. For example, a figure like the Son of Man with snow white hair, blazing red eyes, and a sword coming out of his mouth, is not difficult to decipher – white hair for outward purity, piercing eyes for visionary perception, and a sword for power. But if you paint someone, just like that – literally – you will find that you have created a monster. You have to select and adapt. It’s rather like characters in dreams who seem perfectly plausible until, in the light of day, they are shown to be quite impossible. Sheep with seven horns and eyes all over can so easily look ridiculous.

Perhaps the most difficult thing is to draw an acceptable picture of God. It simply cannot be done, because everyone’s imagery is different. William Blake tried and nearly succeeded, but the best we can really hope for is a diagram. There are several such figures in this series – they appear in different guises.

Picture 3. Maybe we could look at no.3 – Christ Knocking. I wrestled desperately with this figure. Christopher’s first reaction was plainly disapproving. He did not like it. “Too severe, too remote, too extra-terrestrial.” I felt that, in this instance, I had to stick to my guns. “I’m not changing it,” I said. Half an hour later Christopher ‘phoned again. “You’re quite right. Leave it alone.”

I feel this may be one of the more important pictures - even though there is nothing much going on. Compare it, if you will, with Holman Hunt's "Light of the World". My God is not always comforting.

Some people may think that I have taken too many liberties and removed these images from their proper context. Those who think this sort of thing should always be deadly serious will be offended, I think. "These are not the sort of visions that John would ever have seen." "No they are not." But are they the sort to which we can relate today?

Picture 7. In no.7 you will find a guillotine. You will find no mention of it anywhere in the Bible – the French Revolution had not taken place, so what am I playing at? Well, the text does say something about "beheading", and those characters hiding under the altar seem to epitomise the ever-present threats of violence in human society. In a sense, we are all awaiting decapitation.

Picture 10. In a similar vein, maybe, if we look at no.10 – "Locusts from the Abyss" – we see what could be a squadron of helicopter gun-ships. Despite the crowns on their heads and the lush foliage left untouched, they clearly represent something decidedly unsavoury arising from the depths of the unconscious. These poor fellows are in a state of torment (from which, incidentally, they will eventually be released, so we're told.)

Picture 12. "Two Witnesses" is also an anachronism since it shows a modern courtroom with a legal drama in progress. The judge may not look quite as 'heavenly' as he should, but the 'Two Witnesses' in sackcloth in the foreground should be clear enough with their two tablets of Mosaic Law. The same characters are seen above as corpses, and then again at the top after acquittal. I originally had those top figures in celebratory mode wearing full evening dress but Christopher wouldn't have it, so I gave them something a bit more leisurely. The little mischief-maker at the bottom is "the beast that ascends from the bottomless pit". And don't overlook the murky 'jurymen' – six on either side – 12 in all.

Picture 17. Those pictures where there is a lot going on tend to be less successful than those where the situation is simple. Let me refer to the "Seven Bowls of Wrath".

It may not be immediately clear that this is an operating theatre. The patient on the operating table is oneself. He is in a bad way. The whole episode is absolutely dreadful. A battle for the spiritual life of the individual – Armageddon! There are supposed to be seven of these plagues, and there is no anaesthetist in sight. Here’s a dried up river bed making way for the ‘Kings from the East’ – and the three frogs hopping about. We see great hail stones – and there’s that beast again. There is an earthquake going on down there. Presumably the operation is a success and the patient survives.

Picture 21. As you might expect, most of these pictures are about the perpetual conflict between good and evil. Several of them, therefore, are clearly arranged with an upper and a lower - an upstairs/downstairs situation, usually with the goodies at the top and the baddies at the bottom. No.21 shows this. The seven-headed dragon is not having a good day. We see him bottled up inside this pit, or whatever it is. This angel has the matter in hand. At the top of the picture, however, is an old-fashioned classroom with the master on his white throne, and his pupils – post mortem – lining up to present their homework for assessment. The truant (?) figures at the top right don’t want anything to do with it. Who can blame them? It is an educational judgment.

Picture 22. It’s all very worrying. Morality is inclined to be worrying. But one or two of the pictures are so simple. They are not difficult to take in fairly quickly, especially when the “message” is cheerful. Take no.22 ‘Holy City as a Bride’. The city is foursquare. I tried to make it as luminous as possible with the pearly gates like street lamps. If you look very carefully you may see the ghost of a modern city with skyscrapers. The ‘husband’ here is part of the cityscape itself with the bride adorned facing us above. The angel with his measuring rod appears as a businesslike surveyor, and John with plan and pencil in hand is ready to take the divine specification. Note that at the very bottom of the picture there is an ordinary path leading away into the distance – a “way in” to the Holy City for the likes of you and me – a secret entrance, so to speak.

Picture 23. Another one with which it is perhaps not too difficult to identify is the “guiding Angel”. The poor old chap on the right will be only too familiar to some of

us. Here he is, newly arrived from earth. He has not yet had the benefit of any celestial surgery. The seven bowls with the seven last plagues are still in evidence. But he is good hands, and he being pointed in the right direction.

Picture 24. What do angels wear? Not so long ago, in history, there was no problem. Flaxman, Blake and the great renaissance painters all knew perfectly well that angels wear long flowing white robes with zip fastenings behind the shoulders to attach the wings – standard issue. But Swedenborg’s new breed of working angels render all that obsolete. Since they have specific jobs to do they must surely dress accordingly. That is why in “Worship God” the angel looks as though he has stepped out of the Russian revolution. A lot of people won’t understand this. They may think that I am making light of holy things but I much prefer the idea of a functional heaven than the more static view of the early ecclesiastics.

Picture 19. I don’t intend to mention all 25 pictures but a few words about no.19 – the “Fall of Babylon” – could be helpful. It all looks pretty disastrous! At the top we see a smouldering heap – all that is left of ‘that great city’, and gloating over it are two vultures – ‘foul and hateful birds’. This whole section is a diatribe against materialism and profiteering – the whole destruction of luxury and trade – things for which Babylon, as a seafaring nation was, I suppose, famous. Most of the picture is to do with the sea. A ‘mighty angel’ hurls a ‘great millstone’ into the sea, causing an enormous tsunami. Notice, incidentally, that the angel is at the same time a square-rigged ship in full sail. Make of that what you will. The resulting upheaval throws the entire merchant fleet into disarray, and an assortment of luxury items ends up at the bottom of the ocean – guitar, jet plane, motor launch, wristwatch, hot-water bottle, pipe, wine, supermarket trolley – and, of course, Baby Lon herself.

I think I should mention that I am just an illustrator. I’m not in the business of telling other people how they should lead their lives – I leave that to the clergy. The little homilies that accompany the pictures in the catalogue may help you to readjust your priorities, but the pictures are just a kind of sounding board with which to explore ideas. Make of them what you will.

Finally, may I offer my warmest thanks to all members of the Apocalypse Study group for giving me this golden opportunity. Ten years purposeful work has been a treasured experience, and I am very grateful. I have already mentioned how indebted I am to Christopher Hasler, especially for his tact and patience. Bruce Jarvis has valiantly held the entire enterprise together, not an easy task, especially towards the end with deadlines to meet and people in need of co-ordination. Thanks also, not least, to David Friend and Howard Turner for some tricky logistics concerning transport, storage and display. I am grateful to Micah Duckworth for skilfully computerising the catalogue. Thanks to Clifford Curry for his help with projecting these pictures today. And to printers, photographers, frame makers, and anybody else who has been involved. It has been a privilege to work with them all.