

Our Connection to Heaven, part 3: Bringing Heaven to Earth

A sermon by Rev. Michael Gladish
Mitchellville, MD, August 7th, 2016

Now it happened, as Jesus sat at the table in the house, that behold, many tax collectors and sinners came and sat down with Him and His disciples. And when the Pharisees saw it, they said to His disciples, “Why does your Teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners?”

When Jesus heard that, He said to them, “Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick.... I did not come to call the righteous, but sinners, to repentance.” (Matthew 9:10-13, Mark 2:15-17)

If someone were to tell you – today or any day – that the church is the Lord’s heaven on earth, based on your experiences so far the chances are pretty good that you would find yourself suppressing a wry smile.

The problem, of course, is that often when we think of “church” the first things that come to mind are all the obligations associated with it, like meetings, contributions, work “parties,” music and ritual we may not enjoy – even doctrinal intimidation. And then there are “those people,” you know, the ones that sort of rub you the wrong way or ask you nose questions, or give you the feeling you’re being evaluated – and somehow judged.

Granted, these can all be significant challenges, but please note that apart from the word, doctrinal, they could apply to any human organization, whether a business or a team, a fraternity, a service group or even a medical community. In fact, if you substitute the word, informational, for doctrinal, recognizing that specialized knowledge can be intimidating in any field of human endeavor, all these challenges occur quite normally in our relations with others simply because we all have our own ideas, our own personal commitments, and our own tendencies to be defensive or judgmental about others. This is not a church problem, it is a human problem, and it should not cloud our understanding of what the church really is or can be.

The church is or should be defined as the Lord Himself defined it – which is really interesting because at no time in the New Testament does He ever do this; it is only in the doctrines of the New Church that we get a clear, explicit definition, which we’ll come to in a minute. Rather in the Gospels we find only three references to the word translated “church,” where it is mentioned but not explained. The Acts, the Epistles and the book of Revelation all reference the church extensively, but again, it’s a given, it’s NOT explained. In all these works our main clue to the meaning is the original Greek word, from which we get the Latin, *ecclesia*, and then the Anglicized term, *ecclesiastical*. And what it means is “called out” – not the way we use the expression today, but rather *chosen*, or called from among many to be part of a select group.

This is essentially the same concept expressed in the term, the elect, which is based on the same compound of Greek words as is “the church.” And again, this term is not explained in the New Testament, and so there’s been a lot of misunderstanding about it, too, until now. But here’s what we know. The Lord certainly does call, choose and “elect” every one of us out of our selfishness and worldliness to be saved, to go to heaven, and to live in real love and wisdom forever.

He does “not call the righteous, but sinners, to repentance.” But we very obviously have the freedom to reject this call if we’re not interested.

So what is this thing we call “the church,” what is its real use, and how does the corporate organization support that use?

The basic definition is found in *The New Jerusalem and its Heavenly Doctrine*, a tremendous little book that has a summary of all the basic doctrines of the New Church. There we read,

“What makes heaven with a person, also makes the church. For as love and faith make heaven, so too love and faith make the church. So from what has already been said about heaven it is plain what the church is” (NJHD 241).

OK, so backing up a few pages in the same book we find this:

“There are two things which make up the life of a person’s spirit: love and faith. Love makes up the life of his will, and faith that of his intellect. The love of good and faith in truth from it make up the life of heaven; and the love of evil and faith in falsity from it make up the life of hell.”

Again, “Love to the Lord and love towards the neighbor make heaven, together with faith, but faith only to the extent that it has life from those loves. Since both those loves and the faith from them are from the Lord, it is plain that the Lord makes heaven” (NJHD 230-231).

It follows, then, that

“The church is said to be where the Lord is acknowledged and where the Word is known. For the essentials of the church are love and faith in the Lord from the Lord; and the Word teaches how a person must live, in order to receive love and faith from the Lord” (NJHD 242).

Note that the emphasis here is entirely on the Lord. The reason love towards the neighbor is also essential is because the Lord loves all of us – even the worst of us! – and so if we love HIM we will have His love in us, and therefore love those He loves (AC 2023; see also 1 John 4:20-21).

But as the quoted reference shows, in order to achieve this love we need the Word to teach us about it, and as the book goes on to explain, we also need “doctrine” from the Word to understand it properly. This, then, is what the church is all about. It is not a social club; it is not a social service agency; it is not a business, and it is not even really an organization – except insofar as the organization supports the love and faith that are its core, just as the human body supports and expresses the life of the mind. The church as a body of believers is important, but what we do AT the church should reflect who we are AS a church, and that is ALL about the Lord – as He is in Himself and as we find Him in the good qualities of our neighbors.

So, for example, if we accept a responsibility within the organization, whatever it may be, we should do it from a love for the Lord and with a genuine love for those who might be affected by it. Whether we are working alone, weeding a garden, say, or painting something, or working

with others, our concern should be for the good that can result, NOT personal recognition, pay-back or even an expectation of social comfort. On the other hand, as the angels find the delight of their lives in serving others, *and that delight is always reciprocated by others*, it is reasonable to hope that in the church, as in heaven, we will find the mutual support that we need to love the Lord and have faith in Him.

But why would you come to a church to weed a garden, paint or do any other organizational work, anyway? If the purpose of the church is to learn and practice love for the Lord shouldn't everything we do relate to religious education and worship?

Well, yes; in a way, yes. But when we do building maintenance we provide a space for that to happen. When we hold committee meetings, plan a budget or provide a social opportunity at the church what we are really doing is preparing a means for the Lord to work with us not just as individuals but as a body of members in a specific place, manner and time. We are inviting Him to soften the hard edges of our own personalities and learn good things from our own efforts and our interactions with others.

It's EASY to love the Lord in isolation. It's easy to love the human race in the abstract. But people, well, people challenge us, even when we know they're right. And that can be very important for our spiritual growth! So, in a sense coming to a church event can be an exercise in charity, an opportunity to practice what we say we believe by sticking with it even when we feel out of place. After all, if we can't get used to working together in this world how can we expect to enjoy working together in heaven? Perhaps this is one of the reasons that the word, church, is so ambiguous! On one hand it is a very personal, individual thing; on the other it is an institution and is also referred to that way throughout the heavenly doctrines.

Bearing this in mind, here's another important teaching about references to heaven in the Word:

“When the word, heaven, is used the Church should also be understood, since the Lord's heaven on earth is the Church, and each individual person in whom the Church exists has heaven as well within him; for the Lord is within him, and where the Lord is, so is heaven. *Furthermore the Church makes one with heaven, for they are linked together inseparably and are dependent each on the other.* The Word is what joins them together; the Word has the Lord within it, and the Lord is the Word – John 1:1ff” (AC 10131).

This is the specific point of all our lessons today. We are looking at our connection to heaven and we are seeing that it occurs *in the church*, and that “*heaven and the church are **linked together inseparably and are dependent each on the other.***” This is powerful stuff and can't be brushed off lightly! At the same time it is not so much about an organization as it is about a frame of mind *and a willingness to work together within the organization that is dedicated to the love and faith that connects us to the Lord.* And let's be clear: there is no other institution in this world as clearly and directly dedicated to this purpose as the church is. Government can't do it; social agencies can't do it; self-help groups can't do it, and we can't do it alone! The church is the only institution on earth where the Lord is or should be front and center – through doctrine, teaching and preaching from the Word, and through the practice – and you know it *takes* practice – of genuine charity toward our fellow-members in the light of His Word.

So who did the Lord call to His church? And what sort of people can we expect to find in it? Well, think about it. The Lord said He “did not come to call the righteous, but sinners, to repentance.” That includes each of us, and so the people we should expect to find in the church for the most part are people just like ourselves, that is, flawed and at times difficult to get along with, but, in providence, hopefully, all wanting and trying to accept the Lord’s call to be better. And the thing is, if we want to have a better experience with *other* people in the church we have to figure out ways of *being* better people for *them*.

Sounds trite, doesn’t it? But really it’s the very heart of what the church is about, that is, bringing heaven to earth, first in our own lives and then, with the Lord’s help, in the lives of those others who are – and we need to assume they ARE – trying to do the same.

The Lord said, “Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick.... I did not come to call the righteous, but sinners, to repentance.” And real repentance takes time. It’s not an event, it’s a process. Of course this process has a beginning – when we first acknowledge the Lord and so in a spiritual way join the church. But that alone doesn’t make any of us the kind of person we would want others to be for us. In fact the church as a corporate body could in many ways be likened to a hospital, a place where sick people come to get well – which means that there are a lot of sick people hanging around: sick, *but hoping and striving to get better*.

And here’s the thing. As flawed and fallible as we are, we can still all support one another – just as the angels in heaven do – both by affirming and by challenging one another, as long as it’s done (and received) in a spirit of genuine charity from the Lord. We read,

“Whether you say the Church present in a person, or heaven present in him, or the kingdom of God present in him, or the Lord present in him, it all amounts to the same thing; for the Church is the Lord’s heaven on earth, the kingdom of God is heaven and at the same time the Church, *and the Lord is the Source, indeed the Sum and Substance of their existence*” (AC 10357).

This is what it’s all about. This is how we are connected to heaven right here in this world. If it’s not comfortable, if it’s not inspiring, if it’s not helpful to you maybe this is not the sort of connection you want right now. On the other hand, as there are many communities or societies of the heavens, so there are many communities or societies of the church. Each of us has our own place – which may or may not be the same as our next door neighbor’s. The important thing is that we find the place in the church where we do belong, and then contribute to it – not for our own sakes but for the Lord and for the sake of others whom He loves, that all our lives in this world may be enriched and as many as possible can be led to their places in heaven.

Amen.

Lessons: *Genesis 12:1-9*
 Children’s talk on the Call of Abram out of Haran

Mark 2:13-17
Arcana Caelestia #10760-10766 (old translation)