

Church and the Human Form

A sermon by Rev. Alan Cowley,
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"The lamp of the body is the eye. Therefore, when your eye is good, your whole body also is full of light. But when your eye is bad, your body also is full of darkness" (Luke 11:34)

There is a reason we are all here this morning.... If everything in our lives made sense; if the entire world was perfectly clear; if we already understood everything there is to know; we would not need to be here would we? We all come here with circumstances, prejudices, pains, fears, hopes, opinions, and curiosities. None of us have life all figured out, none of us know exactly how we should act, or exactly what we should be doing, given all of the events, and sights and sounds which we have preceded this moment in time.

In the children's talk this morning, and in our lessons, we were looking at some of the things the Lord tells us about the eye. Jesus tells us in the Gospels that the eye is the lamp of the body and that if our eye is good, then our whole body will be full of light, yet if our eye is bad that our body will be full of darkness. And when we think about this on the natural level, it can be hard to understand why Jesus would have made such a basic comment. Of course our eyes need to be good in order to see the world in front of us with clarity! But there is a very interesting natural element to our sight which might be able to help us understand how profound this statement from the Lord really is on the rational and spiritual levels; the levels on which we might be trying to figure out our lives, wishes, and actions.

When our eyes take in light and through the optic nerve transmit the data to our brains, there is an interesting phenomenon that takes place. When the information originally transmits, it is upside down. It is not until the brain interprets the information that it is flipped right side up so that we can understand what we see in a way that makes sense. In other words our eyes rely on the brain to make sense of what is seen, and only a correct understanding of what we see could possibly be useful to us.

In a way, we all have come here this morning, having used our minds eye to see the life we have lived so far, and the circumstances we have to work from, and not everything that we have seen makes sense. In fact, if left to our own understanding of life, the image we have taken in would stay upside down and inverted from a correct understanding of the life the Lord wants us to live. So we have come here this morning in the hope that turning to the Lord in His Word will bring us some clarity, and help us to understand our lives from a view that is right side up. We cannot see life right side up on our own, just as our eyes cannot see anything without our minds to receive and interpret. There is an interdependence between our eyes and our brain, and between our spiritual sight and the Lord's Word. In Psalm 119 the Psalmist reminds us of this saying "Your Word [the Lord's Word] is a lamp unto my feet, and a light unto my path."

And the eye and the brain are not the only parts of our bodies which rely on other parts for proper functioning. In fact, every part of our body serves some use to the whole, and the whole cannot perform well or with health without the individual functioning of each part.

The Lord in the Heavenly Doctrine for the New Church tells us that this is not only true of our individual bodies, but is also true of the church, as well as being true for every heavenly community, and on the broadest level is true for heaven as a whole. Heaven as a whole is in the human form, and when we speak about the entire complex of heaven we use the term the "grand man of heaven". And what this means is that heaven has different parts, and organs, and that each

part or organ serves a specific use to the whole, just like the eye serves the specific use of filling the body with light.

There is a great passage in 1 Corinthians chapter 12 in which Paul is pleading with the church in Corinth to function better together. We can imagine the circumstances they might have been dealing with, the people of that church were struggling with all of the cultural influences infiltrating their lives and worship from the surrounding pagan society in Greece. And because of those circumstances, the people of the church were at odds with each other, probably arguing over how the church should be, and what practices were most important, and what influences were harmful; and when a church is faced with these issues it is very easy for one group to think that the church would be better off without the voice of their opposition! But in Chapter 12 Paul reminds the Corinthians that they are all a part of one body, and that they cannot succeed without one another. He says:

For as the body is one and has many members, but all the members of that one body, being many, are one body, so also is Christ. For by one Spirit we were all baptized into one body whether Jews or Greeks, whether slaves of free and have all been made to drink into one Spirit. For in fact the body is not one member but many.

If the foot should say, "Because I am not a hand, I am not of the body," is it therefore not of the body? And if the ear should say, "Because I am not an eye, I am not of the body," is it therefore not of the body? If the whole body were an eye, where would be the hearing? If the whole were hearing, where would be the smelling? But now God has set the members, each one of them, in the body just as He pleased. And if they were all one member, where would the body be?

But now indeed there are many members, yet one body. And the eye cannot say to the hand, "I have no need of you"; nor again the head to the feet, "I have no need of you." No, much rather, those members of the body which seem to be weaker are necessary. And those members of the body which we think to be less honourable, on these we bestow greater honour; and our unpresentable parts have greater modesty, but our presentable parts have no need. But God composed the body, having given greater honour to that part which lacks it, that there should be no schism in the body, but that the members should have the same care for one another. And if one member suffers, all the members suffer with it; or if one member is honoured, all the members rejoice with it.

The church in Corinth is not the only church susceptible to such divisions. All churches have these kinds of struggles, as I'm sure we all in this church, here specifically in Mitchellville Maryland and in the New Church as a whole, can feel. We struggle with what the Word says, we struggle with cultural influences, we struggle with different personalities, and we struggle with the different church uses which at times may seem incompatible. But these struggles don't mean that an individual in the church should abandon the body when body is struggling, just as these struggles don't mean that the body should abandon any individual who might not agree with the body's direction.

Now, this is very clear to us when we think about the essential functions of a church. We know that if we abandon the Lord's love for every individual's salvation the church would no longer have a purpose. We know that if we abandon the Lord's Word the church would no longer have a means to salvation. We know these things just as we know that our bodies must have a heart and lungs. But the further we get away from those central uses, the more difficult it becomes to see the necessity of each organ, part, or use.

To move slightly out from the essential heart and lungs, let's think about the kidney as an example. The Heavenly Doctrine explains that in the grand man the Angels who make up the kidneys are those who are in interior truth with a love to explore, examine, separate, and correct (Cf. AC 10032; HH 96-97). I chose to look now at the kidneys first of all because we know that they are essential to the health of the body since they are a filter for our blood. They separate out toxins, regulate electrolytes, and help to stabilise our blood pressure. When our kidneys fail our bodies cannot go on living.

The second reason why I wanted to look at kidneys is because in the functioning of the church, they would represent some of the least popular people and uses. No one enjoys being criticised, yet we must be critical in determining what is true and what is false. No one likes to have their lives examined by another person or group, and yet without those who care about the purity of the truth our church teaches, we would spiral downward into a false sense of morality which would lead us to harm others not help them. We must have people in the church who love to examine the way our church functions making sure that the collective life we lead together adheres to the Lord's Word.

But there has to be a balance to the critical processes of the kidneys in our church body. If all we heard were criticisms of the way we live and love, few people would be happy, and few people would act in useful ways because they would be too depressed about their current state to do so. The balance in the body comes from hormones excreted from the hypothalamus and pituitary gland in the brain. The primary hormone which brings this balance to critical examination is oxytocin. Oxytocin, as well as dopamine, increase our sense of happiness and empathy. So we can imagine that the people in a church body associated with the hypothalamus would be the people who pay attention to the needs and loves of other people. They notice who is hurting, who is depressed, and who is in need of inspiration. They work to balance the harsh feelings brought on by honest self-examination by showing the happiness and benefits to come in the future.

Now we could spend all day, looking at the various parts of the human body and the uses they serve to the whole, and how each part is interdependently necessary to the whole, but let just one more example help to round out our understanding, and inspire a sense of unity among all of us brothers and sisters in the church.

In a rather obscure passage from the Spiritual Diary Swedenborg relates a story about meeting someone who he had known in his life time who had since passed into the other world. He described this man as someone who would get very angry when he would pray for something and not get it. And yet he says that when this man came out of his state of anger he would return to a simple state of obedience to the Lord. Swedenborg identifies that this man in heaven was a part of the grand man's earlobe.

Now think about this for a second. The earlobe seems relatively useless doesn't it? What does it do? Maybe it is just a place to put a beautiful earring.... But, it is a part of the body! It is a part of the grand man! And as such, what would happen in our body if we were to get an infection or abscess on our earlobe? Our immune system would do everything it could to fight the infection, and everything it could to heal.

We are all a part of one body. And though in this world that body is bound to be imperfect, bound to have sickness, and bound to struggle within itself, we must work together to bring peace within struggle, to heal sickness, and to grow toward perfection. And here is the most important part of all of this. We are all here for a reason. And that reason is not just to answer our own individual questions, the reason is not just to bring our church into a healthy state within itself. The reason

why we are all here, in this church, is to come together as one body to work for the happiness and salvation of those within our influence.

We are told that the Lord's ruling love is for the salvation of the human race. He demonstrated that most notably through taking on a human body and fighting in temptation to restore order and freedom in the world and in our lives. The Heavenly Doctrine also tells us that heaven as a whole, the grand man, works together for that same purpose. The sphere of the grand man is the sphere of divine truth conjoined with divine love expressed in the use of leading people to heaven. And since the Lord's church in this world is meant to reflect heaven, the purpose of church is also to lead people to heaven.

We cannot do that as individual members. A hand can help a person up, but it cannot perceive that someone is down. A heart can express love, but it will only be true love if it is filled with wisdom as the lungs fill blood with oxygen. It is also true that the heart and lungs can become unhealthy, and the only way to keep that from happening is through regular exercise in the rest of the body, and a healthy diet, so our muscles and digestive system must get involved.

In the Lord's Prayer we pray that His kingdom will come, "as in heaven, so upon the earth" we say. As a church we hope to grow into the reflection of heaven and work in conjunction with heaven and the Lord to teach and lead people to the blessed state of salvation. We can only do that together, and we can only do that with the Lord. We all came here this morning hoping for direction, inspiration, comfort, and fellowship. May we depart with the knowledge that all of these things will be more immediate and more perfect, the more that we work in conjunction with each other, interdependently focused on the uses we love to do for the church, for our loved ones, and for society.

We came to church for a reason this morning. And though we may mostly think about church as an individual act, an act which hopefully helps us individually grow toward heaven, it is also very important to remember the individual contribution you all make to our body as a whole. And also that we, as a church, must work together, not only for ourselves and our own salvation, but for everyone else around us and within our influence.

To close I would like to revisit one of our lessons from the work *Heaven and Hell*, and instead of hearing this as if it were only about heaven, or the human body, let us think about it from the perspective of a church. How do the different people and uses in this church fit together into the "inclusive body"?

The reason why so many varied elements act as one in an individual is that there is nothing whatever there that does not contribute something to the common good and do something useful. The inclusive body serves its parts and the parts serve the inclusive body, because the inclusive body is made up of parts and the parts make up the inclusive body. So they provide for each other respectively, they focus on each other mutually, and they are united in the kind of form that gives every single component a relationship to the inclusive entity and it's well-being. This is what enables them to act as a single unit. (HH 64)

Lessons: Luke 11:33-36; Psalm 139:13-16; Heaven & Hell 59, 63, 64; Arcana Coelestia 4528.

Amen