

The Influence of Spirits

a sermon by Rev. Michael Gladish
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Nothing could be much more common in Scripture than the statement that “an angel of the Lord appeared” and brought a message of some kind, either to a leader of the people or to someone who was about to be given a special responsibility. Remember they were angels who rescued Lot from Sodom. And it was an angel who stopped Abraham from sacrificing his son, Isaac. Jacob *wrestled* with an angel and famously saw angels going up and down a stairway to heaven. Even Baalam’s donkey saw an angel, who blocked his path on his way to curse the tribes of Israel. Gideon was encouraged by an angel to rise up against the Midianites, and Samson’s parents both saw the angel who promised them their son. Again, it was an angel who appeared to Zacharias, Mary, Joseph, Elizabeth and the shepherds at the time of the Lord’s conception and birth.

So too, it was an angel of the Lord who sometimes brought bad news or disaster to the people, as when they disobeyed the Lord by not completely conquering their enemies in Canaan (Judges 2) or when David “numbered” the people (2 Sam 24). The book of Revelation is also full of visions of calamities that occurred when angels blew their trumpets and poured out plagues on the earth.

In short, the appearance of angels, while dramatic, is a common occurrence in the Word, and for that matter so is the appearance of evil spirits, demons or devils, especially in the New Testament. Today, however, if you talk about seeing angels people look at you with sympathy, as if stress or sickness or some sort of medication has affected your thinking, and if you talk about the influence of spirits of any kind in your daily life they think you’re some kind of nut.

Emanuel Swedenborg certainly encountered this problem when he reported his experiences in the spirit world, and he confronted the skepticism of his readers directly near the beginning of the *Arcana Caelestia*, writing,

“I am well aware of the fact that many people will say that nobody can possibly speak to spirits or angels as long as he is living in the body, and that many will call it delusion. Some will say that I have spread these ideas around so as to win people’s trust, while others will say something different again. But none of this deters me, for I have seen, I have heard, I have felt.

(Indeed) “The human being has been created by the Lord in such a way that while living in the body he could at the same time talk to spirits and angels, as actually happened in most ancient times, for being a spirit clothed with a body he is one among them. But because, after a period of time, people have so immersed themselves in bodily and worldly interests that they hardly care about anything different, that path has therefore been closed. But as soon as the bodily interests in which a person is immersed retire into the background the path is opened and he finds himself among spirits and shares his life with them” (AC 68-69).

Now, of course, it’s not just a matter of being conscious of the spirits who are with us. The fact is, whether we believe it or think about it or have any awareness of it or not, as we read in our third lesson this morning, we could not live without this constant association! Remember,

“Man is totally unaware of the fact that the Lord is governing him by means of angels

and spirits, and that at least two spirits and two angels are present with everyone. (But it is) by means of the spirits (that) he is in communication with the world of spirits, and by means of the angels with heaven. Without this communication with the world of spirits by means of the spirits, and with heaven by means of the angels, and so by means of heaven with the Lord, a person cannot exist at all. His entire life depends upon that link, and if the spirits and angels were to withdraw he would perish instantly” (AC 50).

This passage, like many in the teachings for the New Church, calls our attention to the fact that all life flows from the one Source, and that if we are not connected to that Source we simply cease to exist – like the light of an electric bulb that goes out the minute it is unplugged, or the flame of a gas lamp the minute the gas runs out, except that it’s worse than that because even our bodies are made of matter that is perpetually created and maintained by the energy flowing from the Divine love and wisdom, and if that were cut off it would be as if the whole lamp (and not just the light coming from it) disappeared, there being nothing out of which it could take form.

In fact, then, there are TWO kinds of connectedness that we all have with the Lord, one that provides the framework for our thoughts and affections – sort of like the lamp itself, and the other that provides for the thoughts and affections – sort of like the electricity that flows into the lamp. Since it is the Lord’s life flowing into us in both cases, in the New Church we call this operation *influx*. Direct influx from the Lord into the world of matter is called just that, “direct” or *immediate* influx. But the influx that affects our minds does not come directly from the Lord because if it did we would not have any freedom; we would just think and feel whatever the Lord imposed upon us. We would be like animals, which, incidentally, do receive direct influx from the Lord – which accounts for their natural instincts.

Instead, the influx into our minds comes *indirectly*, through the thoughts and affections of many others including angels and spirits who have something in common with us. So we call this “indirect” or *mediate* influx. And this is really what we’re talking about today.

So the question is, what is the nature of this influx, or in terms of the third lesson, what is the nature of this “government” or “communication”? Obviously it is not something of which we need to be conscious, it works – it must work – whether we realize it or not, sort of like the air going in and out of our lungs every so many seconds. We CAN be conscious of it, that IS possible, but just as in our daily lives we can’t think about our breath all the time, it is not only unnecessary, it would be a huge distraction to be conscious of the influence of spirits all the time. Yet they are as present as the air we breathe. Indeed, they inspire thoughts and feelings just as the physical environment inspires the senses. (note: the root meaning of the word, inspire, is “to breathe in.”)

But how does this work, and why is it important to know about it? To follow through with the analogy, can’t we just accept it and live with it, just as we accept and breathe the air around us? Well, yes, but think for a moment about the effects of toxic fumes or other pollutants in the air: if we’re unaware of how harmful these can be we might easily subject ourselves to very dangerous environments, the effects of which may not be obvious but still can hurt or even kill us.

To put it in the starkest terms, the Lord cannot relate directly to anything in us that is contrary to His own love and wisdom. As we read, “The Divine cannot regard anything but what is Divine, and it cannot regard this anywhere but in things created by itself” (DP 53). Therefore the Lord has the most intimate relationship with those highest angels who are the most highly developed and most perfectly formed according to His good and truth. These are the ones who have most

fully been “created” by Him – in His image and likeness. But these angels in turn, being less than perfect, can provide a positive influence on others who are somewhat less developed, inspiring and encouraging them in ways that are accommodated to their states. And these in turn can reach down a little further to still others who are slightly more removed from the Divine perfection, and so on, until the intense heat and light of heaven has been so moderated that people at all levels of regeneration have access to exactly what they need at any given moment to receive and maintain their lives. In a way this could be likened to the power lines coming out of a generating plant. The extremely high voltage would kill the first person they touched, but as it is stepped down gradually through a series of transformers it is accommodated to the needs of factories and office buildings and homes and ultimately computers like the one that was used to write this sermon – where the microchips inside run on extremely low voltage.

Now, given all the levels of accommodation that the Lord provides it should be obvious that what we receive is what we are able to receive. And in spiritual terms what we are able to receive more than anything else is what we want to receive. In other words, when it comes to the Lord’s life, that is, His love and wisdom, the question really is, what do we want? The Lord said, “Ask and you will receive, seek and you will find; knock and it will be opened” He also said, “Whatever you ask in prayer believing, you will receive.” But generally speaking the Lord does not send direct messages of instruction through angels to people in the world. Again, this CAN happen, as is so often recorded in the Word, and primitive cultures especially seem to have access to such revelation. But for us the question is, what’s the point?

We read, “The spirits adjoined to a person are such as he himself is, in respect to affection or love, but the good spirits are adjoined to him by the Lord, while the evil spirits are summoned by the person himself. The spirits with a person, however, are changed in accordance with the changes of his affections” (HH 295). Again, concerning written revelation we read, “It is believed that mankind might be more enlightened and become more wise if he could have immediate revelation through speech with spirits and with angels, but the reverse is the case.” The reason is that “enlightenment by means of the Word is effected by an interior way (that is, through the will into the understanding), while enlightenment by immediate revelation is effected by an exterior way (that is, through the hearing into the understanding).” And the point is that when the will is good, written revelation is sufficient and preserves our sense of freedom, but when the will is evil then direct instruction in the truth is useless as it does not affect the will – because the will “either casts it out, or suffocates it, or falsifies and profanes it.”

Therefore “no leave is given to any spirit or even angel to instruct anyone on this earth in Divine truths, but the Lord Himself teaches everyone *through the Word*, and teaches him so far as the person receives good from the Lord in the will, *and this the person receives so far as he shuns evils as sins*. Again, everyone is in a society of spirits as to his affections and thoughts thence, in which he is as one with them, *wherefore spirits speaking with a person speak from his affections and according to them* (and) Because everyone is in a society with spirits who are of the same religion with himself, *therefore spirits speaking with him confirm all things which he has made a part of his religion*” (de Verbo 29).

In fact, the danger of trying to *contact* spirits or angels, even for what may seem to be good reasons, is that the ones we attract to ourselves and who will speak to us cannot be any others than those who agree with and will confirm the things we already believe! So we run the risk of simply reinforcing preconceived ideas, or worse, obtaining information that appears to have the stamp of heavenly or Divine authority but that is really harmful to ourselves or others.

Of course, this can happen when we read the Word, too, if we only see the parts of the story that we want to see, or interpret them according to our own bias. That's why the Lord insists that our first obligation is to shun evils as sins against Him, THEN pray to Him and read His Word for instruction as to how we can improve our lives.

So much for "channeled" information or direct contact with spirits. The basic teaching of the New Church is that generally speaking it doesn't do any good because – with rare exceptions – it simply feeds the proprium or ego what it wants (or more of what it already thinks), and, since most of us are struggling with evils and falsities at some level in our lives it gives the evil spirits who are with us direct access to our thought processes, allowing them to lead us away from our commitments, and ultimately from the peace and joy of heaven.

On the other hand, there is something awesome and (here's that word again) **inspiring** about just knowing that we have two angels (or angelic spirits) and two evil spirits with us at all times. For opens this helps us understand where our moods and even many of our good or bad ideas come from – so that we can respond to these influences in real freedom and strength. In addition this knowledge can free us from a false burden of responsibility that often comes with shunning evils as sins against the Lord, for if these evils were truly ours, shunning them would be like shunning ourselves – which in fact some people seem to try to do, punishing themselves with guilt and misery and other forms of self-denial. But if we believe – as is the truth – that all evils come from hell, shunning them can be a rather simple matter of rejecting unwanted influence and then maintaining a joyful sense of our own integrity – or rather the integrity that comes from the Lord.

Knowing about the influence of good and evil spirits also helps us to understand the nature of the spiritual balance in which we live. We read,

“The reason that spirits who communicate with hell are also adjoined to man is that man is born into evils of every kind, consequently his first life life can only be from them. Therefore unless spirits of a nature like his own were adjoined to him he could not live, nor indeed could he be withdrawn from his evils and reformed. He is therefore held in his own life by evil spirits and withheld from it by good spirits, and by the two kept in equilibrium. Being in equilibrium he is in freedom, and can be withdrawn from evils and turned towards good, and good can also be implanted in him, which would not be possible at all if he were not in freedom" (HH 293).

Other passages in the Writings make clear that the temptations we feel as battles within ourselves are really battles between angels or good spirits on one side and evil spirits on the other. But since *WE* are neither good nor evil, only instruments of choice, our job in temptation isn't nearly as gut wrenching as it may seem to be; all we really have to do is choose which spirits we will favor and then act as they would have us act. True, there may be a feeling of loss in the short term, as we continue to live with good and evil motives, but the more we align ourselves with our "guardian angels" the more we will be free of the conflicting influences from hell.

Again, when we are discouraged, it helps to know that we are not alone, but that the Lord's love and wisdom are available to us through spiritual companions who are exactly right for us, and who, though unseen and even unconscious of us as individuals living in the world, still provide emotional stability, hope, confidence, and of course the all-important link through heaven to the Lord. It also helps to know that when we go to the Word in humility and prayer that link will be strengthened by the association of specific angels with what we read (SS 62-65, HH 310).

“Thought,” we read, “brings presence,” and thought from the Word brings the presence of angels who can minister to us – not so much by thinking of us (much less talking to us) but just by being with us, being who and what they are with us, giving us strength simply by being strong.

In Psalm 91 we read of the Lord, “He shall give His angels charge over you, to keep you in all your ways. They shall bear you up in their hands, lest you dash your foot against a stone....” This, of course, is the same verse that the devil quoted while tempting the Lord (Matt 4:16), so we need to remember that it can’t be applied frivolously. The Lord sends His angels to prepare us for eternal life in heaven, not to protect us from any special dangers in this world! Yet if we will look to the Lord and choose especially to accept and live according to the teachings of His Word, He WILL send His angels, they WILL encourage us, and we WILL experience the peace of heaven in their presence. For in that case we will actually be in heaven with them – in spirit – and we will also feel the power of the *Lord’s* presence through them.

Amen.

Lessons: *Matthew* 10:1, 5-8 & *Mark* 1:21-34, Children’s talk on Casting out Evil Spirits
1 Samuel 18:1-12
Arcana Caelestia #50 (below; see also HH 249 & 293-6, AC 761, 5976-5993)

“What the Most Ancient Church understood by 'the image of the Lord' exceeds everything one can say about it. Man is totally unaware of the fact that the Lord is governing him by means of angels and spirits, and that at least two spirits and two angels are present with everyone. By means of the spirits he is in communication with the world of spirits, and by means of the angels with heaven. Without this communication with the world of spirits by means of the spirits, and with heaven by means of the angels, and so by means of heaven with the Lord, a person cannot exist at all. His entire life depends upon that link, and if the spirits and angels were to withdraw he would perish instantly.

[2] “As long as a person remains unregenerate he is governed in an entirely different way from when he is regenerate. As long as he is unregenerate, evil spirits reside with him, who have such dominion over him that angels, though present, can accomplish little more than simply distract him from plunging into utter evil and so divert him towards something good. Indeed they use his own unregenerate desires to divert him towards good, and his illusions of the senses to do so towards truth. At that point he is in communication with the world of spirits by means of the spirits who reside with him, but not in the same way with heaven, for the reason that evil spirits have dominion and angels simply forestall them.

[3] “When however he is regenerate it is the angels who then have dominion, and they breathe into him every kind of good and truth, as well as a horror and dread of evils and falsities. Angels do indeed lead, yet they are but servants, for it is the Lord alone who, by means of angels and spirits, governs a person. Now because this is done through the ministry of angels, it is said here, in the plural first of all, 'Let Us make man in Our image'. Yet because it is still He alone who rules and disposes, it is said in the following verse, in the singular, 'God created him in His image'. This the Lord also states plainly in Isaiah,

‘Thus said Jehovah, your Redeemer, He who formed you from the womb, I Jehovah make all things, stretching out the heavens Alone, spreading out the earth by Myself.’ - Isa. 44:24.

“Angels themselves also profess that no power at all resides with themselves but that they act from the Lord alone.”