

Making Your Proprium Work for You

A sermon by Rev. Michael Gladish
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Jesus said, “I am the light of the world. He who follows Me shall not walk in darkness but have the light of life” (John 8:12).

He also said, “You are the light of the world.... Let your light so shine before men that they may see your good works and glorify your Father who *is* in heaven” (Matt. 5:14, 16).

Our subject today is something you could only hear (or read) about in the New Church, and not just because we have an unusual word to describe it but because the whole concept is new to the New Church and a vital part of understanding how the Lord’s life works in us.

It’s about what we call “the *proprium*.” So what is this? Well, it’s actually a Latin word that is – or can be – a little awkward to translate into English, so in many translations of our teachings it is simply left in Latin with the idea that its meaning will become clear with use, and in context. Basically it means *what is one’s own*, or at times *what appears to be one’s own*, including a *sense of ownership* even though the thing referred to really is *not* our own. For example, we have a sense or feeling that life is our own, but we know, at least intellectually, that it is really the Lord’s life IN us. Just so we have the feeling that our thoughts and affections are our own, when we know – or ought to know – that every bit of what we think or love flows into us from sources in the spiritual world. But all that *seems* to be our own in so far as we choose to accept it and dwell on it. In fact the ONLY thing that is REALLY our own is that ability to choose.

Still, as odd as the word, *proprium*, may seem, various forms of it have found their way into English. For example, we talk about *appropriating* things, meaning to assume or take ownership of them, and we talk about feeling *proprietary* about things or ideas, meaning they belong to us, and not to someone else. In Commonwealth countries corporations are often listed as *proprietary* businesses, because they belong to the owners. It’s actually a legal term referring to the limitations of liability.

But in the life of religion *proprium* refers to our spiritual states. In THIS context it often has a very negative connotation, referring to a selfish or self-centered (we might say egotistical, even narcissistic) view of life. But here’s the thing: unless we have a sense that life is our own we will inevitably fall into the trap of believing that we’re all just pawns in Somebody else’s chess game, that we’re moved by forces beyond our control, and that therefore nothing we do really matters. So we would lose our sense of freedom and responsibility, our motivation, our initiative, and ultimately the joy itself of living – which really depends on the idea that we are autonomous and that we can and do personally make a difference.

On the other hand, when we recognize that all life and power is the Lord’s but that He gives it to us to enjoy *as if it were our own* according to the choices we make from day to day, we have the potential for a tremendous sense of freedom *and* responsibility, powerful motivation, nuanced initiative and incredible, heavenly joy.

All this is so important that along with our teaching about the *proprium* we also have a well-

defined, related doctrine sometimes referred to as “the as of self.” As we read, and as we see illustrated in a great deal of what is written in the Gospels, it is vital that we take the initiative to ask, seek and knock at the door of opportunity to learn and do the Lord’s will, but that *when* we ask and co-operate with Him *He will do the works in and through us* and make *us* feel fulfilled. This is so much the case that we read in the book about Divine Providence that “The more nearly a person is conjoined to the Lord the more distinctly does he appear to himself to be master of himself, and yet the more evidently does he recognize that he is the Lord’s” (DP #42). It’s a matter of choosing, and once we choose, the Lord can flow through us. To use a crude analogy, it’s almost like turning on a tap, or choosing which of TWO taps to turn on depending on what you want to receive.

Again, there are LAWS of the Divine Providence, all of which relate to the single principle that people are and must be free, specifically, free to think and act according to our own reason. But once we are convinced that something is right the only way we can enjoy that freedom is by honoring that conviction and doing it (DP #43).

Now all this may seem too obvious to take seriously, and it *might* be if it weren’t for one thing, and that is the contrasting doctrine of almost all the Protestant churches, which clearly teaches that people can do NOTHING of any spiritual value for themselves, so it’s pointless or even counter-productive to try, but instead we must rely entirely on faith – and faith alone – in the sacrificial suffering and death of Christ to appease the wrath of an angry Father-God and so provide *vicariously* for our salvation. To be sure, Christian preachers usually do teach the importance of good works, but only as expressions of that saving faith, *not* as having anything to do with salvation itself, that is to say, with our eternal happiness and well-being.

This brings up two logical questions. First, how is a decision to have that faith not an act of free choice, made from our sense of self? The only alternative is predestination. And second, if it is an act of free choice, how is it not just as corrupt as any other decision made from our *proprium*?

The answer to both of these questions is that we cannot escape the *proprium*. It is *who we are*. It is the very basis of our identity, our individuality. But when a decision is made from the *proprium in a co-operative response to the Lord’s commandments* then it is NOT self-centered but is actually inspired by the Lord, and so it is good, healthy, heavenly, and in fact necessary for our salvation. So the better question we are asking today is this: how can we take *advantage* of this *proprium* to make it work for our eternal good?

There are at least three ways that may apply successively, one after the other: in the first place we have what the doctrine calls “mediate good,” in this case the determination to do good *for the sake of some worldly reward*. This is purely an investment in *our own* natural lives, but it serves as a means to get us in the habit of useful service to others. The Lord has provided all sorts of social incentives (and constraints) to encourage this, to the point that it is almost impossible to escape, or, to put it in more positive terms – as the Writings do – He makes it for all practical purposes EASY to get started on a good and useful outward life (and hard not to; see DP #281-283). Parents and teachers all know that this is an important element in the education of children, taking them from purely selfish states to the beginnings of consideration for others, and the Lord uses it for all of us in the beginning of our regeneration.

Then comes the realization that every *lasting* good is from the Lord, and so in an effort to secure

our *eternal* life we may determine to learn from Him, believe in Him and do what He teaches. This is a step up from where we were before, but still, the *proprium* is leading the effort with a view to our own advantage – like the two disciples who wanted to sit on thrones in heaven with the Lord. In the same vein, I know a minister in our church one of whose motivations for going into the ministry was to put himself in the unavoidable position of studying the Word – for his own personal benefit – since he was not sure he would do it otherwise. Of course, if that were the only reason for becoming a minister it would lead to a pretty selfish career, but as one contributing factor it can help compensate for any necessary sacrifices and help sustain the man in periods of discouragement about his use to other people. The words “enlightened self-interest” come to mind.

But the thing that seems most important, and most truly enlightened about the role of the *proprium* in our spiritual lives is that in the end we can determine, as if of ourselves, to learn and do what the Lord says just because He says so, to please Him and all *others* who stand to benefit. Obviously this is a pretty advanced state, and again, we say “as if of ourselves” because we know that all the power and all the influence that enables us to do this come from Him. But the really great thing about it is that *we get credit for it*, that is to say, He attributes the benefits of this decision to us just as if we came up with it all on our own. So we feel blessed, and feeling blessed we ARE blessed because, well, in the end, spiritually, our perception *is* our reality.

OK, now let’s back up a minute. If our perception is our reality, must we therefore conclude that the whole idea of the *proprium* or that the whole idea of human freedom is just an illusion?

It’s a tricky question, especially because the word, illusion, carries such negative connotations, as if it were some sort of deception. So the doctrine of the New Church uses the word, *appearance*, instead, meaning *the way things appear*. This is NOT an illusion, but a real expression or manifestation of the truth, which is that the very nature of the Lord’s love and wisdom is to provide for human life in His own image and likeness, with freedom and rationality and a sense of responsibility that can lead to a tremendous sense of blessing – *for us, apart from Himself* (see TCR #43). But since He is the source and substance of everything, the only way He can set this up is by providing the *appearance* that life is our own. And this appearance *becomes a reality* when we act on it, since acting on it attracts the consequences that make us feel happy or sad, wise or foolish, angry or fulfilled.

For example, let’s say you suddenly have an urge to do something nice for someone. Where does that urge come from? – your heart? – your liver? – your brain? We know it comes from the Lord through the spirits who are present with us, but we receive it as if it were our own and then we decide to act on it. This decision, and more importantly this action creates a new objective reality that is not the Lord, not the spirit who inspired it, and not an illusion in any sense of the word, but *your own feeling of accomplishment*. And curiously, this very feeling of accomplishment can be the basis for a new influence from the *dark* side of the spiritual world that suggests an attitude of pride, conceit or superiority on account of that good work. But this, too, needs to be seen for what it is, an influence, so that we can make a new decision, *as if of ourselves*, not to accept that attitude, but to enjoy the peace and blessing of knowing that *the Lord is working in us and through us*.

This is what is meant by the apparent contradiction of the Lord’s saying on the one hand that HE is the light of the world, and on the other hand that WE are the light of the world. Everything

good and true is from Him and IS HIS, but He gives it to us to USE as if it were our own so that we can feel His love and wisdom working in ourselves and *enjoy and really OWN that feeling*.

So, contrary to the impression some in our church may have, the *proprium* is not necessarily evil. But as you heard in the third lesson (NJHD #144-147), it may be good OR evil depending on the choices we make. In fact, the *proprium* is the very essence of our being. It is the basis of our free will. It is the ONE THING the Lord gives us that is NOT HIS OWN. And yet through this precious gift He allows us to feel His life as if it were our own so that we can, in fact, take the initiative to do the good works that will define us as individuals even as they allow His light to shine through us – each one of us – in some unique way. And these works – not faith alone, not some vague sense of forgiveness or goodwill, and certainly not any vicarious Human sacrifice – will confirm and establish His kingdom within us. They will make us feel fulfilled and useful.

Now then, getting back to the contrasting doctrine of the protestant, evangelical church, we need to be clear that in referring to it we are not referring to any particular people, but to a concept that can be very destructive of spiritual life. The problem is that as soon as we accept the idea that Someone else has done all our work for us, and that all we need to do is have faith in that idea, all our incentive for doing anything about it vanishes into thin air. It would be like going to a doctor and getting a prescription, and on walking out the door saying “I believe in this” but not doing anything to comply with the doctor’s orders. In that context it’s worth remembering that the very word, salvation, is based on a root meaning health or well-being, and there’s no way we’re going to be healthy if we have a problem and we don’t do anything but believe what the doctor says. No wonder so many people in faith alone continue to experience major disorders in their lives – and we will, too, if we don’t get busy and apply what we know.

So again, how can we make salvation our own? How can we experience the peace and fulfillment of heaven? – by doing what the Lord teaches! And we will do this not of or from ourselves, but *as if* of ourselves, knowing that the Lord alone can inspire it, the Lord alone can direct it, and the Lord alone can empower it. All the same, WE will be doing it because WE will be acting on that precious gift of freedom created by the perfect balance between good and evil in our lives. WE will be taking the initiative to turn the tap, tip the balance and experience the deep satisfaction of co-operating with the Lord. WE will be doing it because WE will be choosing to let His light shine through us, warming our hearts in the process. So the Lord will bless us with a heavenly *proprium*, a heavenly feeling of freedom and responsibility, heavenly peace, and a heavenly identity that can accept and reciprocate the Lord’s love as if it were not His own, so that He is not just loving Himself.

Amen.

Lessons: *Leviticus* 10:1-3 and *2 Samuel* 6:3-11
 Children’s talk on the Power of the Word
 (in conjunction with the Sunday School curriculum)

Matthew 5:1-16 (with reference to *John* 14:12-24)
The New Jerusalem and its Heavenly Doctrine #144-147