

The Slow Growth of the New Church And What We Can Do about it

A sermon by Rev. Michael Gladish
Mitchellville, June 23rd, 2019

“Now a great sign appeared in heaven: a woman clothed with the sun, with the moon under her feet, and on her head a garland of twelve stars....

“And she bore a male Child who was to rule all nations with a rod of iron. And her Child was caught up to God and His throne. Then the woman fled into the wilderness, where she has a place prepared by God, that they should feed her there one thousand two hundred and sixty days.”

~ Rev. 12:1, 5-6

It is probably no exaggeration to say that the teachings about the slow growth of the New Church are part of our institutional identity. On one hand we worry about how few people commit themselves to membership and participation in the church; on the other hand we take comfort – and even make excuses for this – based on the clear statements in the doctrines that it will be a slow process for three very specific *spiritual* reasons.

But really, what can we make of these teachings and what particular responsibilities, if any, do they suggest to us nearly nine generations since the beginning of the New Church in 1770?

The situation is laid out for us in the book of Revelation, chapter 12, where we read about the woman clothed with the sun, in labor and pain to bring forth a son, and who having done so was immediately threatened by a great red, seven-headed dragon, also called “that

serpent of old, the Devil and Satan.” And so, as we read, she was given the wings of a great eagle to fly into a wilderness where she would be protected and nourished “for a time, times and half a time from the presence of the serpent.”

In the explanation of these verses we are shown that the woman represents the New Church “at first among a few,” and that the wilderness represents the existing Christian Church “devastated as to truth” because of the complete misinterpretation and misrepresentation of what is written in the Word, a grave threat signified by the fiery red dragon (AR #546). Examples of this are the teachings of some churches that their priests have the power to control people’s spiritual lives, and those of other churches that people can be saved by grace through faith alone, apart from life according to the Lord’s Word. In contrast, the male child in the vision, who would “rule all nations with a rod of iron,” represents the new doctrine that is brought forth and developed by the New Church, and that will rule in the minds of all who love the Lord and actually do His will, thanks to the power of its natural, rational arguments (the rod of iron).

But our specific focus today is the woman’s flight into the wilderness, why this is necessary, what it accomplishes, and most of all, what this has to do with us.

So let’s begin with the seven-headed dragon, which incidentally bears a striking resemblance to the monstrous Hydra of Greek mythology. The big challenge with the Hydra was that any time one of its heads was cut off it would regrow another, sometimes two or more, so it was extremely hard to kill. The dragon of Revelation poses a similar problem in that it represents all the false claims and reasonings of people who persist in teaching falsities no matter how many direct quotations one brings forward from the Word to correct them. You counter one argument, and up pops another. You go af-

ter that one and still another confronts you. The point is that once a whole system of thought has been developed based on any given premise – in this case a false premise – it is very hard to break it down and get rid of it.

For that reason it is necessary – at first, when the church is young and the doctrinal understanding of its members is just beginning to grow – that it be separated and protected from the attacks of people and organizations that would tear it to pieces. Many of you know what it's like to try to argue with a fundamentalist, or someone steeped in any particular doctrine that differs from the New Church. And it's not just that *they're* stubborn; part of the problem is that we don't know our Bibles well enough to make a convincing case in the face of the evidence they present. So we need time to prepare; and the church as a whole needs time to prepare. Furthermore, it's not just doctrinal understanding that we need, it's a life of genuine charity that allows the Lord to enlighten us (AE #730). And here's a curious thing: the Writings often discuss the fact that the general history of churches is that they begin in charity and end up in bitter doctrinal divisions. In the New Church it seems to have been just the opposite: we began with doctrinal arguments – even in the Writings themselves – and we are only now, after 260 years, beginning to appreciate the vital importance of personal and institutional charity in the life of the church.

But what is this wilderness into which the church flees? And how does a wilderness nourish the church when it signifies a state of devastation as to the truth?

The answer to this question is given in *The Apocalypse Explained* #764 which carefully notes that even in churches where faith alone is the doctrinal standard there are many people who understand that the quality of their lives matters, *and who live good lives despite the bad doctrine*. So, we read, “in that church there are dragons who

separate faith from good works not only in doctrine but also in life; ***but others in the same church who live the life of faith, which is charity, are not dragons***, although they are among them, for they do not know otherwise than that it is according to doctrine that faith produces fruits, which are good works, and that the faith that justifies and saves is believing what is in the Word, ***and doing it.*** So these reasonings about faith alone are really “only with the learned leaders of the church, and are not known to the people of the church because they are not understood by them, therefore ***it is by the latter that the New Church which is called the Holy Jerusalem, is helped and also grows.***” Remember, “the earth ***swallowed up the flood*** which the dragon had spewed out of its mouth” (Rev. 12:16).

In practical terms what this means is that the New Church in its infancy (or at least its doctrinal infancy) both can and MUST learn to thrive among the good people of the “old church” and NOT turn away from them. It means the old idea of “circling the wagons” and building isolated communities to avoid any influence from the people around us may have been seriously flawed. According to the Writings these are the very people that can help us thrive until we gain the strength of our own convictions and learn – with their support – how to stand up for ourselves. In fact, this is consistent with what Joshua and Caleb reported back to the people after spying out the land of Canaan during the exodus, Canaan obviously representing the church. As we read,

“The land we passed through to spy out is an exceedingly good land. If the Lord delights in us, then He will bring us into this land and give it to us, ‘a land which flows with milk and honey.’ Only do not rebel against the Lord, nor fear the people of the land, ***for they are our bread***; their protection has departed from them, and the Lord is with us. Do not fear them” (*Numbers* 14:7-9).

Note the words, “they are our bread.” Bread represents goodness, or the good of love. Note, too, that this incident ends with the people wanting to stone the two spies, though they were prevented from doing so. And isn’t that just like us today, preferring doctrinal integrity over charity, even though there is no such thing as doctrinal integrity without charity! Again, these people have a lot to teach us – maybe not about the truth as such but certainly about the good of life and a simple, earnest love of the Lord.

The theme is repeated again in the later conquest of the land, when the Lord pointedly said that this conquest would be “little by little” lest the land become desolate before them, with crops destroyed and wild animals (dragons?) roaming out of control (Ex. 23:29 & Lev. 26:23).

Still, why does the growth of the New Church have to be *so slow*? Why can’t people who are trying to live good lives see the plain truth that the Writings so clearly present? Why don’t they literally jump on the bandwagon with us?

Well, the parable of the sower (Matt. 13) comes to mind. The seeds of truth fall on all kinds of ground, and this is the case both within the New Church and outside of it. So in addition to our lesson from *The Apocalypse Explained* (#732) we read,

“It is of the Lord's Divine providence, that the church should at first be among a few, and that it should successively increase among many, *because the falsities of the former church must first be removed*; for before this, truths cannot be received, since truths, which are received and implanted before falsities are removed, do not remain, and they are also dissipated by the dragonists” (AR #547).

How, then, are these falsities removed? On one hand we might think it is just a matter of instruction, but that assumes people are willing to learn. More importantly it is a matter of regeneration, which is primarily about shunning evils as sins against the Lord. As you heard earlier,

“There are several reasons why this New Church that is called the Holy Jerusalem is at first to be with a few, afterwards to be with more, and finally to reach fullness. First, its doctrine, which is the doctrine of love to the Lord and charity towards the neighbor, cannot be acknowledged and thus received except by those who are interiorly affected by truths, and those only can be interiorly affected by truths who have the ability to see them, and those only see truths who have cultivated their intellectual faculty, *and have not destroyed it in themselves by the loves of self and of the world*” (AE 732).

Notice the two fundamental conditions for receiving the faith of the New Church: education (cultivating the rational faculty) and self-discipline (overcoming the loves of self and the world). As to the first, real education is not just Science, Technology, Engineering and Math, it is learning about the spiritual causes of things and *how to think* from those causes about the human experience – in this world and the next.

As for overcoming the loves of self and the world, the only way we can really do this is to look to the Lord and shun them as sins against Him. Otherwise it is all still tainted with self-interest. The Writings teach repeatedly that this is the one discipline that will provide for the acceptance of anything the Lord has revealed (see, for example, *Faith #12*).

Sadly, it's kind of a given that many people are just not doing this. They're too caught up in the obligations and pleasures of natural life, and many simply don't trust what they've heard or read about the Lord enough to believe they need to approach Him, anyway. Thus the dragon of false doctrine is joined by spiritual apathy and cynicism, adding to the hindrance of church growth. And no wonder, when you consider all the abuses that are being revealed even today in churches all over the world! Of course the hope – implied in the teaching – is that when these abuses are fully exposed and the underlying falsities are fully appreciated, the way will be opened for a new kind of church, and we believe that will be the New Church.

But let's not be deceived. It's not ALL about everyone else. At least one of the factors in the slow growth of the church is that WE are not living our faith as well as we could. With regard to the cultivation of our rational faculties, this is challenging, it takes time, and like Martha in the gospel story we are all pre-occupied with many practical things. How often do we pause to think deeply, read conscientiously, check our assumptions and reflect on the spiritual causes of things in our lives? And when it comes to the love of self and the world, well, just like other people we worry way too much about our reputations, honor and gain to think of sacrificing any of that in the effort to share what we believe. Honestly, none of us wants to look foolish in the eyes of our possibly more astute or knowledgeable neighbors. And so we hold back. And yet that very willingness to sacrifice everything for the Lord is what caused the early Christian Church to grow amazingly quickly.

Still, there is another factor in the slow growth of the New Church as discussed in our third lesson, and that is the influence of people already in the world of spirits – something we've reviewed over the last several weeks. The point is that when a stronger, clearer influence from that world in favor of the truth reinforces the thoughts and affections of people on earth, we are more inclined to believe it,

and so the church grows. But remember, everybody in the other world comes from this world, so the influence of spirits only improves when WE improve, and then – just the same as in this world – we can join those in the world of spirits who are having a positive influence on people everywhere.

In short, the reasons for the slow growth of the New Church are no mystery. On one hand it is because many people still believe in the fundamental falsities of the Christian world, and on the other hand it is because many, disgusted with those falsities, have rejected all religion in favor of a worldly life. But it is also because WE are slow, reserved and hesitant in OUR practice of the principles that this growth requires.

Finally, though, however gradually, the New Church WILL thrive and grow when we really dedicate ourselves to the truth, when we really shun the evils of selfishness and love of the world, and when we ourselves really *practice* lives of genuine charity toward our neighbors, sharing the wisdom we have received, not for our own comfort and convenience but for *their* eternal peace and blessing.

Amen.

Lessons: *Exodus* 23:20-33

Children's talk on the slow, gradual conquest of Canaan

Revelation 12

Apocalypse Explained #732