

Church Growth: Where it Starts

First of Three sermons by Rev. Michael Gladish
for June 28th, 2020

“Enter by the narrow gate; for wide is the gate and broad is the way that leads to destruction, and there are many who go in by it. Because strait is the gate and narrow is the way which leads to life, and there are few who find it.”

– *Matthew 7:13-14*

We have been trying to grow the New Church for over 200 years now, certainly not long in the face of eternity, but one might have thought, with all the billions of people in the world, we would have had greater success than has been the case. Of course, we don't know people's spiritual states, but surely New Church growth must be measured in some way by commitment to the Lord in His second coming, so anything short of that doesn't really count.

And the Writings do imply that the church will grow, but they never quite say how large. The main teaching about this is in explanation of Revelation 12, where the woman clothed with the sun is given wings of a great eagle and flies into the wilderness to be “nourished for a time, times and half a time” from the presence of the serpent (see vv. 6 & 14). This, we are informed, represents the New Church being preserved among a few “while provision is made for it to exist as has been provided,” that is, among many more (AR 546).

But it is notable that the teaching does not specify slow or rapid growth, only that “the church should at first be among a few, and that it should successively (gradually?) increase among many.” And this will be so because in order for the truths of the New Church to be accepted, “the falsities of the former church must first be removed” (AR 547). Surely this does not only mean the falsities among other people whom we might see as potential converts. There are falsities in our own lives, too, and if we operate on false premises, we are sure to get poor results. In any case, only the Lord can grow His Church, so our most important responsibility is to grow our faith in Him. And since there is no faith without charity, and charity wants to help people... well, you get the point: when we are true to our faith, the church will grow.

In this connection there is a popular misunderstanding (uh, oh! - a falsity?) in the New Church arising out of the well-known prophecy of the dream in Daniel, chapter 2, involving a great image representing all the churches in the history of the world. In the dream this image was struck and smashed by a stone cut out without hands, which then “became a great mountain [rock] and filled the whole earth” (v 35). This also, we are taught, represents the New Church, but there are two things that are critical to understand about the way it is presented here. First, the stone is not the New Church, it is the truth about the Lord Himself, the Rock upon which the church must be founded. And second, the earth is not the natural world, *it represents the church!* Thus the meaning of the dream is NOT that the New Church will grow, but that the truth of *faith in the Lord* will grow until it fills this New Church! (see TCR 788). This is not to say that the church will not grow. It will, and more importantly “it will endure forever” *but only as the falsities of the former church are removed.*

So now let's look carefully at the verses from the Sermon on the Mount where the Lord talks about the strait gate and the narrow way. Clearly this is about the life that leads to heaven or hell, and again, there is a common misunderstanding about this in the church (uh, oh! – another falsity?), to the effect that the narrow way, the way to heaven, is *difficult*. But if that word appears in your version of *Matthew* it's a mistranslation! The word really is "strait," or as we might say, *constricted*. And why is it constricted? - because it's not well trodden; it's not the popular way, not the beaten path! (see HH 534). And you know, when a path – particularly a path through the woods – is not well used it tends to become overgrown. And yes, this MAY make it difficult to find, but that's not the point of the teaching. The point is that the path to heaven involves *self-constraint*, or as we say, self-discipline. We have to keep our focus on the Lord and not allow ourselves to get distracted by all the worries and allurements of the world.

Remember Peter, walking on the water in a stormy sea. He was fine until he took his eyes off the Lord and began to worry about the wind and waves. Remember, too, the Lord said, "***Come to Me***, all you who labor and are heavy laden, and ***I will give you rest***. Take My yoke upon you and learn from Me... ***for My yoke is easy and My burden is light***" (Matt 11:28-30).

But look again at the verse about the broad and narrow ways. The Lord doesn't say there are many who COULD or MIGHT go in by the wide gate and the broad way, but rather that there are many who *do* go in there, in contrast to the few who even *find* the strait gate and the narrow way. This is not a conditional statement, but is put forth as a simple truth, and so, presumably, applies to the New Church as well as any other.

But surely, you might say, the "many" and the "few" are words that have a spiritual meaning, and are not just to be taken literally. Well, yes. No doubt. But it is at least curious that these words are not expounded in the Writings, except to say that "many" is a word often applied to truths, because truths are multiplied without number. On the other hand, the Writings say a lot about the **few** PEOPLE who –

- Believe in the Lord.
- Believe that life flows in from the Lord.
- Undergo any real temptations.
- Believe that they will live after death.
- Do not want to domineer and possess all things of others, or
- Are even regenerated, least of all to the celestial degree.

Although some of these statements are clearly made with reference to the state of the Christian Church in decline prior to the Last Judgment, the fact is that considering the whole world's population they all apply today just as much as they did when they were written. So what we have in the doctrine essentially is an affirmation of the Lord's words in *Matthew*, indicating that there will ***always*** be few who find the strait gate and the narrow way, compared to the many who don't, or who, finding it, disparage it or decline to enter into it.

In any case, all this is consistent with the teaching that the Lord's church exists with everyone who believes in God and shuns evils as sins against Him, however they understand Him. Considering the spiritual equilibrium between heaven and hell, this could be about half the world's population (see HH 589-600, esp. 593). But narrowing it down even further, we read that the church exists *specifically* only where the Lord is known and the Word is truly understood. ***This is the New Church*** and it is compared to the heart and lungs in the greater body of the universal church (see SS 105). This heart and lungs not only make up a small percentage of the whole body, either by weight or by volume, but the general body is in serious TROUBLE if they grow out of proportion to their proper role in that body. In short, they don't have to be big to do their work, but they DO have to be healthy and strong.

Even the oft-quoted teaching in AC 9925 about evangelization, that it "involves declaring the truth about the Lord, about His coming, and about the things of which He is the author, namely, things that belong to salvation and eternal life," has to be understood in its proper context, which is the explanation of the spiritual meaning of Aaron's ministry *inside the tabernacle*, and which is translated in at least one version of the Writings as *preaching the gospel*. Yes, *of course* this can and should be done outside the church, too, but it is noteworthy that the context of that specific teaching is *within the church*. (So, are *we* "in the church"? Well, let's put it this way: the heavenly doctrine is our invitation: it's up to us whether we accept that invitation or not.)

But what are we getting at here? What is the Lord really telling us about evangelism and church growth?

Well, first of all, He is NOT saying we shouldn't share our faith. Far from it. There are many teachings that emphasize our responsibility to share the love and wisdom we have from Him, and to share it as broadly as possible *where-ever there is an affirmative response*. The next sermon in this series will address that process in some detail.

Meanwhile, the Lord warns us not to expect too much of others. The teachings about the slow *and modest* growth of the New Church are not intended to be depressing or discouraging, but to prepare us realistically for what will or won't happen when we do.

The critical point today is what we should expect of *ourselves*, because the real responsibility for the growth of the church is actually within us who are – hopefully, at least to some extent – already IN the church. After all, if the heart and lungs are not healthy the whole body suffers. In fact, heaven itself suffers, since we have the special role of providing a physical basis or foundation for the loves and wisdom of the angels. And by the way, remember that passage about why the growth of the church will be slow? – because the falsities of the former church have to be removed first? There is a second reason given in that same passage, namely, that the church will grow on earth *as it grows in the heavens*, and that growth depends on us doing our part to be prepared for one of those heavens.

And this is important, too: we don't prepare for heaven, we **are prepared**, and that preparation is done by the Lord. We can no more **think** our way into heaven than we can take the initiative to **act** our way in. The Lord Himself is the way, the truth and the life. He alone can change our loves to make us acceptable in heaven. OUR job is to take Him seriously and do what He says **because He says it**. – not because it will make us happier or more successful; not because it will make us more worthy, or grow the church, or even so that we can be a blessing to others; only because we are willing to turn our lives over to Him and so let **Him** reform and regenerate us.

This is not easy. Perhaps some of you have had the privilege of visiting or even nursing someone in his or her last days on this earth. Most people when they get to that point are really ready to go. If nothing else they just want to get it over with, to have an end of their suffering. But the body clings to life in this world and does not “want” to let go. Well, it's not something we like to think about, but the truth is, it's exactly the same in every one of our spiritual lives every day. The loves of self and the world do **not** want to let go. They cling with all their might – and with the daily encouragement of evil spirits from hell – to a sense of entitlement, wisdom, and personal virtue. They resist anything that requires real emotional, intellectual or physical sacrifice. In short, that thing we call the *proprium* really is a big deal, and it takes a load of discipline to bring it under control.

Can we do it? Can anyone do it? Well, frankly, no. No, we can't. But the Lord is good, and wise, **and all-powerful**. What is impossible for us is entirely possible for Him. So He can break that *proprium* down and give us new life according to His Word if we let Him. Our job, our responsibility, then, is very simple: it is to focus our attention as much as possible on Him, not to worry about our own lives (what we shall eat, or what we shall drink, and what we shall put on – naturally OR spiritually), in fact, not even to be concerned about whether we are really on the way to heaven or not, but rather to devote ourselves as unselfconsciously as we possibly can to learning and accepting His teachings into our working lives.

In the end, this is the only way the church will grow. In any case it is the only aspect of church growth that is truly under our control. We can be kind and generous, we can contribute in a hundred different ways to the church as an institution, and we can share the teachings everywhere we go, but again, only the Lord can grow His church. And He will do so just insofar as the falsities of the former church are removed from our lives and the new heaven grows in strength and numbers as a result of our commitment to Him.

Amen.

Lessons: *Genesis 17:1-9*
 Matthew 7:1-14
 Apocalypse Revealed #547