

DOCTRINE FOR THE YOUNG

THE CHURCH

by the Rev. Daniel W. Heinrichs

What is the Church? This is apparently a very simple question. But is it? We speak about going to Church. People ask: “What Church do you belong to?” We speak of the New Church and the Old Church. People mention, in conversations on religion, the Baptist Church, the Methodist Church, the Catholic Church, etc. From these few examples it is obvious that there are many different ways in which we think of the Church, and speak of it. This being the case, it is useful for us to consider this question and clarify our thoughts about it.

When we are very young—just little children—we tend to think of the Church only as a building where we go to worship the Lord. As we grow older, we begin to realize that there are more church buildings than the one we go to. As we go to Church we see other people going to Church. We then learn that not only are there many different church buildings, but there are different religions which are referred to as Churches, such as the Lutheran Church, the Presbyterian Church, and so on. So our idea of the Church expands from the single thought of buildings to various religions or faiths.

As we grow still older we learn that in our own Church we have different societies situated in different places. For example, there is the Church in Bryn Athyn; the Church in Pittsburgh; the Church in Washington; the Church in Caryndale; in Glenview; in Durban; Detroit, and so on. We learn still further that all these Churches are really one Church—The General Church of the New Jerusalem. So our thought of the Church grows to include the idea of larger and smaller organizations of men.

But what is the Church? If you look under “church” in the Potts’ *Concordance* you will find twenty-six pages of references to the Church in the Writings. In addition, they will refer you to twenty-eight different headings—all referring to the Church and explaining more about it. So our question “What is the Church?” is not a simple one that can be answered in a few words—there are hundreds of pages in the Writings from which we can learn more and more about it. In this article then, we will only speak of a few very important ideas about the Church which the Lord reveals to us in His Word.

The Writings tell us that the Church exists where the Word is and where the Lord is known in the Word. But the Word not only tells us about the Lord, it also teaches us how we ought to live with our fellow men—it reveals the life of charity. And so we are taught that the Church exists with those who not only know the Lord as He is revealed in the Word, but who live the life of charity which the Word teaches. We see from these teachings that the Church exists within men—in their minds and hearts. We may say then that the Church exists with those in whom the Church is—the Church, in reality, is a state of life.

This is a very important idea for us to have. We so often tend to think of the Church just as an organization of people—like our local society of the Church. But from these teachings we can see that it is possible for the Church to exist even when there is no organization. The Church can exist with just one person, a family, or a group of people who read the Word, know the Lord and live a life of charity according to the teaching of the Word. This idea is particularly important for people to have who cannot live near an organized society of a Church. The Church can be in them and thereby also in their home.

The Lord also reveals in the Writings that there is the Church Specific and the Church Universal. In what we have said about the Church thus far, we have been speaking of the Church Specific. It consists of those who have the Word, know the Lord and live the life of charity taught in the Word.

The Church Universal consists of all those who believe in a God, and who try to live the way they believe God wants them to live. Things that they believe to be wrong and evil, they shun. Things that they believe to be right and good, they do; because they believe this is the way God wants them to live. They may not know that the Lord Jesus Christ is the One only God of heaven and earth. They may have confused erroneous ideas of what is good and evil, but as long as they believe there is a God and try to live the way they think He wants them to they are of the Church Universal.

In the Lord's sight the Church is one. The Church Specific is like the heart and lungs, and the Church Universal is like the rest of the body, which is sustained by the heart and lungs.

At the present day, the New Church is the Church Specific. We have the Word in its fullness and completion. It consists of the Old Testament, the New Testament and the Heavenly Doctrine, which we call the Writings. Let us remember, though, that being baptized in the New Church, and belonging to it, does not mean we are necessarily in the Church. We are only in the New Church if it is in us—in our minds and hearts; only if we read the Word, know the Lord as He reveals Himself there, and live the life of charity taught in the Word. If we do this, the Church will be in us, and we will then be truly in the New Church.

As New Church people, we have a great responsibility. We know that the health of the body depends on the soundness of the heart and lungs. So, also, do all those countless people in the Church Universal depend, for their spiritual health, on the soundness of the Church Specific. Each one of us, individually, and all of us, collectively, have the responsibility to see to it that the Church Specific is in a sound and healthy condition in order that the Lord's Church on earth may be firmly established and grow and prosper until it fills the earth.