

DOCTRINE FOR THE YOUNG

WHAT IS NEW ABOUT THE NEW CHURCH?

by the Rev. Daniel W. Goodenough

What's in a name? The New Church, for example. Why do we call it "new"? Partly, we call it new because the disciple John saw the *New Jerusalem* descending from God out of heaven, and this new city represents or stands for a *New Church* which the Lord promised to build. It would be a New Church to take the place of the First Christian Church which lost sight of the paths to the Lord. But that still doesn't explain *how* it is new.

What really is new about the New Church? The true answer is, everything. Everything is new about the New Church primarily because now we can *clearly understand* the Lord and His ways and what He wants for us and from us. It is not that New Church people act completely different from everyone else. In fact, we worship in more or less similar ways as other people (though many people love the quiet, joyful peace of New Church worship, especially at weddings and memorial services). We go to work and school; we enjoy sports; we vote and take part in the life of community, society, and church. We should live useful and productive lives, in outward ways not too different from the lives of many other people. The New Church is not new because its members' lives are *outwardly* very different from the lives of various other religious people you run into. What is new is how our lives can become *inwardly* new—new in the way we think and feel, new in the way we do things, new in what and how we love. For love is our very life. We are not what we do; we are what we love and take delight in. This is what the Heavenly Doctrine for the New Church tells us.

The newness of the New Church is not from ourselves, but from the Lord, because He has now revealed things that people have not known before. (These things are not new to Him, of course, but they are newly revealed on earth.) The Heavenly Doctrine, given by the Lord through Emanuel Swedenborg, teaches us plainly and directly many things that for hundreds, even thousands, of years people have wondered about but not understood. Who really is God, and what is He like? Is He Human? What does He want from us, and what kinds of things should we do to serve Him? Will He raise us up when we die? How? When? How can people live after death? What does being saved really mean? And how can all this have any connection with our daily life? Does God care about the little things we do from day to day? Does He even care about the big things we do? How can our own individual lives have any meaning to God? Countless numbers of people wondered about God and His ways for so long, and many people are wondering the same things today. Many have wondered for so long that they have even given up hope of finding satisfactory answers.

But these answers are just what the Heavenly Doctrine gives us, in a beautifully full outpouring of love and wisdom from the Lord through heaven. In the Heavenly Doctrine the Lord teaches us plainly and directly about Himself, explaining clearly who He is, so that we may know. And He tells us about His ways—not only why He wants us to be happy, but also what we can do so that He can make us happy. He tells us about the life after death, in great detail, and He explains

precisely how the spirit—the real person—is drawn out of the body, not after waiting for many years in a rotting grave, but immediately after we die. He tells us what life in heaven is like, so that we can use our lives on earth to get ready for true happiness—not worshiping, or praying, or singing all the time, but by loving our neighbors in all the ways we can find to do good to Him. And He shows us how to understand the beautiful hidden truths in the Old and New Testaments. One of the most wonderful things of all, He tells us how we can work for conjugal love (true married love)—not just the temporary romantic love described in movies and books, but the permanent conjugal love between two people who will grow to love each other more and more in marriage forever. And who does not want that?

Of course, these blessings cannot be given to us unless we learn to receive them, so the Lord teaches us also what evil is, and exactly what we must do to get rid of evils in ourselves so that we will want His blessings. The Heavenly Doctrine says a lot about evil, not to irritate us, but so we will know enough about evil to be able to recognize it in life.

These and many more are the answers that the Lord gives us. The basic answers are really pretty simple, yet the more we learn about the Lord's wisdom the more we find out that there is more to know, especially about the Lord Himself. We can never know it all, and we wouldn't be very happy if we could, but the Lord shows us how we can enter ever more fully into His wisdom forever. That is the reason the New Church puts so much emphasis on reading the Lord's Word—in the Old and New Testaments and the Heavenly Doctrine. It is easy to forget the Lord's wisdom unless we continue to read His Word and learn to find enjoyment from gradually learning more and more about Him and His ways.

When things are going well, we may take the Lord's wisdom for granted and forget how new and important it is. But when we question or doubt, or are tempted toward some evil, then we are able—if we will be honest with ourselves—to see that the Lord really does give us new and beautiful answers to guide us. The experience of doubt and temptation is no fun, but it can help us to appreciate just how much we need the wisdom newly revealed by the Lord.

It is not that the Word tells us every little thing we should do outright. That would not leave us free, and we wouldn't like it at all. The Lord does not want to treat us like babies. He wants us to follow Him by using our heads to decide what we should do. So we should study the Word, not because it will tell us exactly what we should do tomorrow, but because it will give us an overall picture of the Lord and His kingdom. When we have questions about how to act, we will find that if we look to the Lord the answers will become clear to us. They may not come immediately, but the answers will soon be there and, if we are honest with ourselves, we will know very well what the Lord wants us to do.

It is true that sometimes we have to think a lot for the answers and wait. But if we read the Word and are patient, then in time the Lord will give us light to see what we should do. Our ideas won't be infallible, and we will make mistakes. No one except the Lord is perfect; everyone else is bound to be wrong some of the time. But if we honestly try to follow the Lord's Word, a mistake will not be serious in His eyes, and He will lead us to see how to correct it.

The New Church is new because the Heavenly Doctrine shows us not how to make our bodies happy, but how to make our spirits happy—and the spirit is the real person, the real us. We *have* bodies, but we *are* spirits; we are feelings and thoughts, loves, ideas and delights. The Heavenly Doctrine shows very clearly that it is not just *what* we do that counts (though that is important); *why* we do things is what really matters. The Heavenly Doctrine opens up a new way to understand the real us; it explains how we can be brought to God and be made happy forever. Deep down, doesn't everyone want that? So read the Word, learn these answers, try to begin to live them, and then you will see what is truly new.