

The Great Commission(s)

*A sermon by Rev. Steven P. Gunther
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In a lot of ways, the New Church is a revolutionary faith. If we were raised in this faith, we may not always realize it, but many of the things we believe and many of the things we are taught are radical and revolutionary in the broader Christian world.

Probably the boldest claim the New Church makes is that the Second Coming has already taken place.

We believe that the Lord has already come again through the revelation of truth in the theological writings of Emanuel Swedenborg. That is a bold and powerful claim. And every year, around June 19th, we come together to celebrate the New Church and boldly declare that the Second Coming has taken place.

If we believe this—if we accept that the Lord's Second Coming has happened through the teachings we have been given—then we can look at those teachings alongside the Lord's First Advent, when He came into the world as Jesus Christ, lived among humanity, and carried out His ministry. When we do, we begin to see some remarkable parallels.

This morning, I want to draw our attention to one of those parallels: how the Lord finishes His advents.

At the end of His First Coming, after His crucifixion and resurrection, the Lord gathers His disciples on a mountain near Galilee and sends them out on a mission. He says:

"Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations... teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you; and baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit."

He sends them out to spread the Word—to teach what He taught and to baptize.

Then, in the Lord's Second Coming, through the revelation of the Heavenly Doctrine, something remarkably similar happens.

The last work Swedenborg published as part of this revelation was *True Christian Religion*. That work marks the completion of this new revelation given by the Lord. And at the very end of the book, Swedenborg adds this note:

"After the completion of this work, the Lord called together His twelve disciples who followed Him in the world, and sent them throughout the whole spiritual world, preaching the Gospel, that the Lord God Jesus Christ reigns, whose kingdom shall be for ages of ages.... This took place on the nineteenth day of June, 1770."

This is why we celebrate June 19th.

At the end of both His First and Second Advents, the Lord gathers His disciples and sends them out.

In the First Advent, He sends them into the natural world to teach and baptize.

In the Second Advent, He sends them throughout the spiritual world to proclaim the good news that the Lord God Jesus Christ reigns and that His kingdom shall be forever and ever.

The structure is the same, but the message has changed.

And then, if we turn to the book of Revelation—which from beginning to end is a prophecy of the Last Judgment upon the Christian Church and the establishment of the New Church—we find one final invitation.

Revelation tells the story of how people lost sight of who the Lord truly is and what His Word really teaches, and how the truths of the New Church restore our relationship with Him, with His Word, and with one another.

And at the very end of the entire Word, we read:

"Let him who hears say, 'Come.' And let him who thirsts come. Whoever desires, let him take the water of life freely."

This is an invitation to all of us.

When we look at these three passages—the Great Commission, the commission of June 19th, and the invitation at the end of Revelation—we begin to see a picture of what the Lord is asking each of us to do.

What is the Lord's commission for us?

When people think about the Great Commission, they often hear it as a command to go out and grow the church. "Go into all nations, teach people about Jesus, and baptize them."

Baptism can start to sound like going door to door with a clipboard, trying to sign people up for a religion.

But the Lord means something much deeper.

The disciples are sent out not merely to recruit people, but to baptize them. And in the New Church, baptism has rich spiritual meaning.

First, baptism involves washing. Water represents cleansing from spiritual evils. It represents regeneration and spiritual rebirth.

But baptism is not the whole process. It comes at the beginning. Baptism is an initiation.

And because it is an initiation, baptism also represents instruction.

We can think of baptism as an intentional commitment that says:

"I want the Lord in my life. I want to learn what He teaches."

That is what baptism means spiritually.

The disciples were sent out to invite people into that journey—to invite them to let the Lord into their lives and begin learning the truths He teaches.

That is the first commission.

Then we move to the second commission.

This one takes place in the spiritual world. Again, the Lord gathers His disciples and sends them out. But this time they are not baptizing people, and they are not even teaching people to observe the commandments.

Instead, they proclaim something fundamentally different:

"The Lord God Jesus Christ reigns, and His kingdom shall be forever and ever."

Think about that statement.

I want to pause on the word *kingdom*.

Throughout the New Testament, the Lord speaks often about the kingdom of God. The kingdom of God is at hand. The kingdom of God is like a mustard seed. The kingdom of God is like a treasure hidden in a field.

When we hear the word *kingdom*, we usually think about territory—the land a king rules over, along with its people and citizens.

But the Greek word used throughout the New Testament carries a somewhat different emphasis. It is not merely the place where the king rules. It is the state of being king.

It is the kingship.

Likewise, the Latin word used in *True Christian Religion*, *regnum*, has a similar sense. It does not merely mean a kingdom as a place. It carries the idea of the Lord's reign—His kingship.

So what the disciples proclaim is this:

The Lord is King.

He reigns.

He is in charge.

And He will reign forever.

That is the message of the Second Commission.

The Lord can rule over our lives. We have been given what we need in order to follow Him.

And this brings us to the invitation at the end of Revelation:

"Let him who hears say, 'Come.'"

The *Apocalypse Revealed* tells us that this means that those who hear about the Lord's Second Coming should pray for the Lord to come.

At first, that seems strange.

Why pray for the Lord to come if we already believe He has come?

Because this is not a prayer for the Lord to enter the world again.

It is a prayer for Him to enter our lives.

It is a personal invitation that says:

"Lord, come into my mind. Come into my heart. Come into my actions. Teach me to live as You want me to live."

And that is the beautiful progression of these three passages.

The first commission says:

Be baptized.

Initiate yourself into the Lord's life.

Learn what He teaches.

Go to the Word. Go to the Heavenly Doctrine. Become familiar with what the Lord wants you to know.

Learn because you want to become the person He created you to be.

Then comes the second step.

Once we have learned from Him, once we begin to understand what kind of life He is calling us to live, once we begin to appreciate the practical teachings of the New Church—what it means to love our neighbor, what it means to become a better person—then we reach the spiritual level.

We say:

"The Lord reigns."

I do not simply want to know these teachings.

I want them to govern my life.

I want them to guide my decisions.

I want them to shape my relationships.

I want them to make me into the person the Lord intends me to be.

And then, once we have learned from Him and submitted ourselves to His guidance, we can accept the invitation of Revelation and pray:

"Lord, come into my life and transform me."

Then we may take of the water of life freely.

Because through the revelation of the internal sense of the Word and the Heavenly Doctrine, the Lord has given us answers. He has not hidden Himself from us.

There is nothing He says we may not know.

The truths we need have been made available.

We simply need to seek them.

And this brings us back to the question of growing the church.

Often we imagine the Great Commission as going door to door and signing people up for the New Church.

But that is not really the message here.

The New Church grows when we live this faith.

When we learn from the Lord, when we allow Him to reign in our lives, and when we invite Him into our hearts, something happens.

We find peace.

We find deeper happiness.

We become better friends.

We become better neighbors.

We build stronger relationships.

We grow closer to the Lord.

And people notice.

They begin to ask:

"What is different about you?"

"What gives you peace?"

"Why are you such a good friend?"

"What is it that makes your life different?"

And then we can tell them where it comes from.

This is the beautiful way the New Church grows.

In *The Last Judgment*, Swedenborg explains that after the Last Judgment, outwardly, things would remain much the same. Different religions would continue. Divisions would continue. Wars would continue.

But inwardly, something would be different.

People would have greater freedom in spiritual matters.

People would have greater freedom to choose to follow the Lord.

And so, as we remember these commissions today, may we remember their progression.

Learn from the Lord.

Allow Him to reign.

Invite Him into your life.

And then we will help spread the good news that the Lord God Jesus Christ reigns.

Because people will see what it actually means for the Lord to reign.

It is not merely a slogan.

It is not merely something we say.

It is not a bumper sticker.

It is a new way of living.

A life grounded in love to the Lord and love toward the neighbor.

And that kind of life can revolutionize us as individuals, revolutionize our community as a church, and even revolutionize the world around us.

And when people see it and desire it, then we can extend the Lord's final invitation:

"Whoever desires, let him take the water of life freely."

Amen.