

“Making Decisions when Ideas are in Conflict”
by the Rev. Eric Carswell
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Then if anyone says to you, “Look, here is the Christ!” or “There!” do not believe it. For false Christs and false prophets will arise and show signs and wonders, so as to deceive, if possible, even the elect. Matthew 24:23-24

We live a world that can regularly remind us that people disagree about so many fundamental things. One person makes a point on an issue and another absolutely disagrees with that person. The challenge for us is that what we believe to be reliable information can be the basis of important decision-making. Feeling confident in one’s decisions can be hard when there are so many conflicting ideas calling for us to believe them.

A similar challenge faced some of the earliest Christians. The Lord warned His disciples to not be led astray by people who would claim to speak in His name. Such people may claim they are leading to what is right and good but in reality could be leading away from the Lord and away from a genuine understanding of what is true. They could be leading away from a life of love to the neighbor, charity or a wise kindness.

We might think that knowing the difference between true ideas and false ones should be clear and easy. We could think, “If it is ideas that the Lord has taught us, they must be true.” But we are encouraged to recognize that there are ideas taken from Divine revelation that have the Lord within them and ones that don’t. So we are taught:

Truths do not have the Lord within them which are taken from the Word, in particular from the sense of the letter there, and interpreted in favor of personal dominion and personal gain. In themselves these are truths because they come from the Word yet they are not truths because they are interpreted wrongly and thereby perverted. (*Arcana Caelestia* 8868)

The words of our text speaking about false Christs and false prophets are exactly these kind of perversions of things from the Word (see also *Apocalypse Explained* 624:5). In the teachings for the New Church we are told that the “signs and wonders” that these leaders use come from their proving and persuading in ways that their words will “strike dumb and fill with amazement, which will cause strong persuasion” (*Apocalypse Explained* 706). They use “shallow, misleading appearances, which the unsophisticated allow to dupe them” (*Arcana Caelestia* 3900:3). How can we know what is true and good when we recognize ideas that are in conflict with each other?

The passage previously quoted goes on to describe what genuine truth requires.

Truths which come from the Lord never cease to be truths from the Lord in their inward form. But truths which do not come from the Lord appear to be truths only in their outward form, not in their inward form - for inwardly they are either empty, false, or evil. To be the truth, truth must have life within it; for truth devoid of life is not the truth of faith with a person, and life comes from no other source than good, that is, from the Lord by way of good. If therefore the Lord is not within truth it is truth devoid of life, and so is not truth. And if there is falsity or evil within it the actual truth with a person is falsity or evil. For what exists inwardly constitutes its essential nature. (*Arcana Caelestia* 8868:2)

There have been sadly obvious examples of religious leaders throughout history who led their followers astray. Many of us have heard the phrase “drinking the Kool-Aid” as metaphor for people who have, without due consideration, accepted an idea that will be harmful to themselves and others. Religious leader and others can try to convince people they know the truth and that if we would just follow them and their ideas, good things will happen.

Why could human beings be so led astray? If a person once becomes part of a system that controls thinking, controls a view of the world, represses questions, and demands unquestioning obedience – it is hard to see clearly. The teachings for the New Church assert: “When people are under the influence of false ideas and evil loves they no longer know what truth is or what good is; indeed they believe that falsity is truth, and that evil is good, and vice versa.” (*Arcana Caelestia* 3488:8)

One of the somewhat attractive qualities of strong leadership of a certain type is that inspires a person to give responsibility to that leader. Sometimes this means just a tendency to rely on that leader and sometimes it becomes a dogmatic demand that the leader be trusted.

We’re told that in the life after death the quality of truth coming out of anyone’s mouth reflects the nature of the inner form of that truth.

In the next life when people speak there others perceive plainly what lies concealed in the words they utter, such as whether inwardly it is closed or open, and also what kind of affection there is within it. If there is an affection for good it is inwardly soft, if there is an affection for evil it is inwardly hard; and so on. With the angels of heaven the whole content of what they say is open all the way to the Lord. This is not only clearly perceived to be so but is audible from the softness of their speech, indeed from the particular nature of its softness. From this too what lies concealed inwardly in truths is known, whether it is the Lord or not. Truths which have the Lord within them are truths that have life, but truths which do not have the Lord within them are truths that have no life. Those which have life are truths of faith grounded in love to the Lord and charity towards the neighbor. Those which have no life are not truths, because inwardly they have self-love and love of the world in them. In this way spirits or angels in the next life can be told apart, for each individual's possession of truth is determined by the life he leads, that is, by that which reigns universally in him. (*Arcana Caelestia* 8868:3)

Unfortunately, in this world it may not be as easy to see the affections within another’s words. How can we avoid being led astray? What signs have people missed that should have warned them before they were, at least for a time, unable to see clearly? One of the key teachings of the New Church is that each of us need to act in freedom according to our own best understanding of what is true and good. While we are encouraged to learn from the church as an organization we are also encouraged to turn to the Lord ourselves. Note how in the memorable experience read as the second lesson the guidance the angels gave to those who were facing conflicting religious authorities was that they were to “Read the Word and believe in the Lord.” When some complained about not understanding they were told “You did not turn to the Lord, who is the Word and you had already convinced yourselves of falsities” (*True Christian Religion* 621)

As some of you know in the early history of this church organization there was a strong and beloved leader who had provided years of valued leadership, but in his older age the people of the church had

to separate from him because he seemed to have become jealous of other's success and dictatorial in his communication. Yes, he had done many good things but he ceased to be a wise leader.

Someone can know many New Church ideas and still tend to lead in unhealthy directions. The Lord calls us to have a wise marriage of mercy and compassion never separated from the value of order and judgment. People can selectively focus on the doctrines about mercy and compassion such that they minimize conflicts and try to have everything be a matter of sweetness and light. Perhaps you could picture a church that tried to minimize any doctrinal differences between them and other churches in the name of mutual cooperation and fellowship. To the extent that key concepts of the New Church get omitted or so under referenced truly disorderly things can be tolerated and people can be harmed.

On the other hand people can so emphasize order and judgment that they become rigid and intolerant of those who may genuinely see things differently. Particularly if this is combined with a tendency to insist on correct behavior in others it can be a form of love of dominion. Notice how in the following passage there seems to be what could be called a good motive behind the dominion.

The church consisting [of those who by means of the holy things of the church strive to gain dominion over the whole world, and this by dominion over the souls of people] is very different in the beginning from what it becomes in process of time. In the beginning they are as it were in zeal for the Lord, for the Word, for love and faith, and especially for the salvation of people. But in that zeal the fire of domineering lies hidden; and in process of time as dominion increases this breaks forth; and so far as it comes into act the holy things of the church become the means, and dominion itself the end. (*Apocalypse Explained* 1029:1)

From a state of mind that feels like a zeal for the Lord, for His Word, for love and faith and especially for the salvation of others this can slip into a very dangerous form of dominion. Following the need to separate from a bishop who had become dictatorial the next bishop emphasized the idea of being “firm in internals and yielding in externals.” Bishops have been recognized for “protecting the freedom of the church.”

Another area of New Church thought that calls for a balance of ideas relates to how much we rely on the Lord to be guiding us and how much we're consciously making choices ourselves. Go too far one direction and we can become irresponsible expecting the Lord to make everything right no matter what we do. Go too far in the other direction then we take too much responsibility on ourselves and deny the Lord's proper role. Yes, we want to pay attention to the welfare of all the uses the Lord has placed before us and we also can remember “Unless the LORD builds the house, they labor in vain who build it; Unless the LORD guards the city, the watchman stays awake in vain (Psalm 127:1).

Each of us will face the temptation warned against in Matthew about the dangers of “false christs and false prophets” False christs represent false beliefs about salvation, the Lord, and the life of religion and false prophets are the people who teach these ideas. May we keep the two great commandments - loving the Lord and neighbor as a dominate focus in what we care about, what we think, and what we do. We too can be caught in self-reinforcing belief patterns, following our own mental false christs and false prophets. The Lord knocks at the door of our mind daily asking us to have wisely open minds and humble hearts. We can pray to love others as the Lord has loved us and we can have the prayer to serve others, with patience, strength, wisdom and love. If we are willing to do these things we can be sure that the Lord will guide us to become ever wiser in how we see ourselves and others and how we try to serve Him. May we turn to the Lord daily with sure knowledge that He will protect and guide us. He

will help recognize among conflicting ideas what we should believe and what decisions we should make. AMEN

Lessons: Matthew 24:3-28, *True Christian Religion* 621:1-3

Matthew 24:3-28

Now as He sat on the Mount of Olives, the disciples came to Him privately, saying, "Tell us, when will these things be? And what *will be* the sign of Your coming, and of the end of the age?" And Jesus answered and said to them: "Take heed that no one deceives you. For many will come in My name, saying, 'I am the Christ,' and will deceive many. . . . Then many false prophets will rise up and deceive many. And because lawlessness will abound, the love of many will grow cold. . . . For then there will be great tribulation, such as has not been since the beginning of the world until this time, no, nor ever shall be. And unless those days were shortened, no flesh would be saved; but for the elect's sake those days will be shortened. Then if anyone says to you, 'Look, here *is* the Christ!' or 'There!' do not believe *it*. For false christs and false prophets will rise and show great signs and wonders to deceive, if possible, even the elect. See, I have told you beforehand. Therefore if they say to you, 'Look, He is in the desert!' do not go out; *or* 'Look, *He is* in the inner rooms!' do not believe *it*. For as the lightning comes from the east and flashes to the west, so also will the coming of the Son of Man be. For wherever the carcass is, there the eagles will be gathered together.

***True Christian Religion* 621:1-3**

On one occasion I saw a group of spirits who were all on their knees praying to God to send them angels so that they could speak with the angels face to face and open up to them the thoughts that were in their hearts.

When they got up from praying they saw three angels in fine linen standing nearby. The angels said, "The Lord Jesus Christ heard your prayers and sent us to you. Open up to us the thoughts that are in your hearts."

"Our priests have told us," they replied, "that in matters of theology the intellect is no help. Faith is what is needed. And an intellectual kind of faith is not well suited in these matters, they say, because it originates from, and smacks of, self rather than God.

"We are English. We have heard many things from our own holy ministers and we believe them; but when we speak with others who also call themselves Protestants, and with others who call themselves Roman Catholics, and with Protestant Dissenters, they all seem well informed and yet on many points they disagree with each other. Nevertheless they all say, 'Believe us!' And some say, 'We are ministers of God—we know these things!'

"What we ourselves know is that the divine truths that are called the truths of faith—the truths of the church—do not come from one's native soil or by heredity; they come out of heaven from God. They show the way to heaven. Along with good actions that come from charity or a wise kindness, these truths become part of our lives. They lead us to eternal life. [Because we had heard differing views of what is true,] we therefore became anxious and prayed to God on our knees."

"Read the Word and believe in the Lord," the angels said, "and you will see the truths that are to be part of your faith and your life. The Word is the only common source from which all who are in the Christian world draw their teachings."

Two members of the group said, "We have read it but we didn't understand it."

"You did not turn to the Lord, who is the Word," the angels replied, "and you had already convinced yourselves of falsities."