

## What Unites Us and What Separates Us

by the Rev. Eric H. Carswell

July 7, 2020

[The Samaritans] did not receive [Jesus], because His face was set for the journey to Jerusalem. And when His disciples James and John saw this, they said, "Lord, do You want us to command fire to come down from heaven and consume them, just as Elijah did?" *Luke 9:53-54*

What are the qualities that contribute to a spiritually healthy group of people, such as a congregation, a business team, or a group of volunteers working on a project? Many of us have experienced that sometimes even working with one or two other people can be a challenge. The response of James and John to Jesus not being received sheds light on one aspect of what makes working together with others hard.

These two disciples were outraged when a village of Samaritans rejected the messengers who had been sent ahead to prepare a place for Jesus to spend the night. They had the conviction and maybe even cockiness that can sometimes accompany people who see themselves in the right. By this time Jesus had a large following. Shortly after this event Jesus chose seventy disciples beyond the twelve apostles and sent them out in pairs into every city and place where He was about to go (Luke 10:1). Since Jesus was becoming so well-known and obviously had such power, the disciples were ready to condemn those who didn't receive Him as they thought was appropriate. They were ready to call down fire from heaven to destroy those who didn't humbly accept Him. James and John cite Elijah calling down fire from heaven. This was fire that consumed two companies of fifty soldiers and their captain. The captains' impudent commands to Elijah led him to twice say, "If I am a man of God, then let fire come down from heaven and consume you and your fifty men" (2 Kings 1:10). And twice fire did come down from heaven and consumed the captain and his fifty soldiers

The teachings for the New Church state that the village of the Samaritans does indeed represent a state of opposition to good and truth. They represented the false ideas or doctrine of those who reject the Lord (*Apocalypse Explained* 223). This state of mind occurs many times in life. Picture a six-year-old with a firmly set face insisting that it was right that he hit his playmate because of what he had done. Now, of course, a six-year-old doesn't from himself chose to reject the Lord the way an adult can, but that state of determined ill-will justified by a set of ideas is what is represented by the village of Samaritans not receiving the Lord. Another example would be a person who has lapsed into apathetic inactivity in an important area of life, like work, marriage, or parenting, because he or she has concluded that no matter what is done it won't make much difference. Still another example would be someone who continues to inappropriately rescue another adult from the consequences of his or her bad habits supposedly to "help" that adult, when the fundamental motivation is that the rescuer can't stand to see the other person experience the pain of those consequences. In each of these cases what is genuinely good or what is the Lord's potential presence is being rejected and this rejection is being supported by a false view of what is right or genuinely helpful.

While we cannot know the reality of what is in a person's heart, we can be aware of expressions, tones of voice, words, and actions in others that don't seem to accord with what the Lord has taught us. There is a part of our mind that categorizes or pigeonholes these expressions, tones of

voice, words, and actions in others. It tends to sort them into groups, perhaps into things that are genuinely evil or bad, somewhat bad, somewhat good and genuinely good. It tends to divide up the world into those who are “good” and those who aren’t.

Obviously in this story from Luke James and John have decided that the people of the Samaritan village were bad, sufficiently so that their destruction by fire from heaven was justified. It is interesting that it is these two disciples who made this decision. James and John represent charity or a wise kindness and all of the ways this kindness would express itself (See *Arcana Caelestia* 2135:2). Why are they the ones who condemn the Samaritan village? A reality about the way our minds work is that on our path to spiritual life, we begin by doing and saying good things and take credit for these good things because we picture that the good comes from us ourselves (See *Arcana Caelestia* 29, 3956:1). Because we believe the good comes from us and we take credit for it, we inclined to have contempt for those who we don’t see measuring up (See *Arcana Caelestia* 3956:1). With this contempt it isn’t hard for us to also be condemning of others. This state of mind is described in the following teaching from the New Church.

[The doctrine of many churches teaches] that we cannot earn credit by the good we do because the good we do is not ours but the Lord’s. They know that the issue of credit directs attention to the person and accordingly joins forces with self-love and with thoughts of superiority, and therefore with contempt for others. (*Arcana Caelestia* 3956:1)

When we reflect on this story, James and John would have been equally condemned by their own judgment. They too were rejecting the Lord or what is good and justifying it with false ideas. Their idea that people who did not immediately accept the Lord were worthy of harsh punishment is a false one. It is the order of creation that evil brings unhappy consequences, but angels never seek to bring these consequences into being from any desire for harm. Good people in this world do indeed have a hand in consequences, as in the example of the judge who passes sentence on a convicted criminal, but the intention should always be to either help the individual see that past behavior is harmful or to protect the good of the greater community. In either case the good person is focused on promoting and preserving what is good. It has love or the spirit of charity within it. This spirit was not what the disciples had in their hearts when they asked the Lord if they should call fire down from heaven on the village. Their words brought about a very strong response from the Lord:

He turned and rebuked them, and said, "You do not know what manner of spirit you are of. For the Son of Man did not come to destroy men's lives but to save them." (*Luke* 9:55-56)

The part of our mind that tends to divide up our experience into different categories has wonderful strengths and a terrible weakness. That part of our mind is what we refer to as our understanding. It can work like a surgeon’s scalpel dissecting our experience into identifiable and labeled parts. This cutting up of experience is necessary.

A human being . . . is unable to have the idea of one without first of all having the idea of several. For that which is a single whole with a person is formed from several parts, or what amounts to the same, things existing simultaneously come into being consecutively. (*Arcana Caelestia* 3035)

We don't understand things without first recognizing their parts. But cutting up and labeling our experience also has some destructive consequences just as dissection in a biology lab cuts up the very features that are essential for life. Left to itself, our understanding tends to divide up people into smaller and smaller categories. When each of us looks at ourselves from this intellectual point of view, we sometimes can feel like there is no one really like us. We can feel all alone in a world of others who are so different from us. When we look at others, we can divide them up into categories that sometimes have us feel that the group that is people like us are very small compared to the vast numbers of those who are different. For example, if we compare the members of our church organization to the population of the world, we can feel terribly isolated and potentially overwhelmed. Even within this congregation, the intellectual scalpel of our understanding can so divide us up into different segments or groups that it makes the idea of unified action seem futile.

This dividing up of reality occurs especially when we focus on the most external quality of the things we see.

. . . For those people who are confined to what is external devoid of anything internal do not look on the internal aspect of the Church in any other way. They give the name falsity to that which is true, and the name truth to that which is false. They do so for the reason that being confined to what is external does not enable anyone to see whether a thing is false or true; only what is internal makes this possible. Internal sight is a necessary ability which can make judgments about things seen by external sight. To make such judgments internal sight must be fully in the light of heaven. But it is not in the light of heaven unless the person has faith in the Lord and this faith leads him to read the Word. (*Arcana Caelestia* 4903)

The thinking part of our mind separated from good or love is what divides. Love is what joins together. True love has the following qualities:

It is the essence of Love to love others outside of one self, to desire to be one with them, and to render them blessed from oneself. (*True Christian Religion* 43)

Love and its accompanying desire for accomplishing what is useful are what joins together all the angels of heaven into a one. As stated in the final lesson: "If all, no matter how many—are governed by charity or mutual love, they have but one end in view, namely the common good, the Lord's kingdom, and the Lord Himself" (*Arcana Caelestia* 1285).

Another passage speaks of the spiritual laws that produce this unity.

Heaven consists of myriads of angelic communities, and yet the Lord leads them as one angel, or as one human being. The reason of this is that among all there is mutual love from the love of the Lord. When this love is among all, and in all, then all can be disposed into a heavenly form, which is such that many are a one, and the more in number they are, the more strongly they are a one. (*Arcana Caelestia* 9613)

In order to have this unity we need to have the Lord's love growing within our hearts. We need to see below the surface of apparently different externals that would have us separate ourselves

from others, condemning them or ourselves. When a group of people are discussing something we may think some of the comments and observations have more value than others. Some we may just disagree with. What if that person was silenced, would the group be better off? The Lord encourages us to recognize that a variety of people working together is a more perfect whole. A chorus of voices can help us better see what is good and useful. I strongly see this to be true of this congregation.

James and John thought that the Samaritan village should be consumed by fire from heaven. This is not the spirit that the Lord wants to foster within our hearts, minds, and lives. He would lead us to see the ways in which we are all His children. He would lead us to see the ways in which by working together with the different backgrounds, strengths, and motivations that exist within each of us, we all can be blessed and from our unified action we can help bring the Lord's kingdom more fully this world. AMEN.

Lessons: Luke 9:51-56, Genesis 11:1-4, *Arcana Caelestia* 1285

#### **Genesis 11:1-4**

<sup>1</sup> Now the whole earth had one language and one speech. <sup>2</sup> And it came to pass, as they journeyed from the east, that they found a plain in the land of Shinar, and they dwelt there. <sup>3</sup> Then they said to one another, "Come, let us make bricks and bake *them* thoroughly." They had brick for stone, and they had asphalt for mortar. <sup>4</sup> And they said, "Come, let us build ourselves a city, and a tower whose top *is* in the heavens; let us make a name for ourselves, lest we be scattered abroad over the face of the whole earth."

#### **Luke 9:51-56**

<sup>51</sup> Now it came to pass, when the time had come for Him to be received up, that He steadfastly set His face to go to Jerusalem, <sup>52</sup> and sent messengers before His face. And as they went, they entered a village of the Samaritans, to prepare for Him. <sup>53</sup> But they did not receive Him, because His face was *set* for the journey to Jerusalem. <sup>54</sup> And when His disciples James and John saw *this*, they said, "Lord, do You want us to command fire to come down from heaven and consume them, just as Elijah did?" <sup>55</sup> But He turned and rebuked them, and said, "You do not know what manner of spirit you are of. <sup>56</sup> For the Son of Man did not come to destroy men's lives but to save *them*." And they went to another village.

#### ***Arcana Caelestia* 1285**

Heaven consists of countless communities. They all vary, and yet are one, for all are led as one by the Lord. Such was the situation with the first Ancient Church that although there were so many forms of internal and external worship, at the general level as many as there were nations, at the specific level as many as there were families making up nations, and at the particular level as many as there were people in the Church, they all nevertheless had "one lip" and "their word was one"; that is, they all shared one doctrine in general and in particular. Doctrine is one when all possess mutual love, or charity. Mutual love or charity causes things, though varied, to be one, for it makes one out of varied things. If all, no matter how many—are governed by charity or mutual love, they have but one end in view, namely the common good, the Lord's kingdom, and the Lord Himself.