

## **The Essentials of the New Church**

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### **“And I will give power to My two witnesses” (Revelation 11:3)**

What are the things you hold as ‘essential’ to your life and existence? What are those parts of life that are so important and vital that you can’t imagine “yourself” being “you” unless they were present defining parts of your life? Think of them as a sort of ‘spiritual DNA’, such that they are reflected in every aspect of your life.

There are a lot of possible answers and each with its own merits: health, spouse, family, friends, community. Job, ability to be useful, faith, church, freedom of choice, rationality, ability to love. Each of these categories enables a person to be more human in a variety of ways, and so it is easy to see the value of each.

But what about the church? What is the ‘spiritual DNA’ of the New Church? What are the qualities that define the very essence of the New Church and from which comes its true identity? Qualities that comprise the religion’s ‘spiritual DNA’ - that are present in every act so that it reflects a life of New Christian faith?

The book “The Apocalypse Revealed” (a book that describes in detail the birth of the New Church) teaches that there are two such essential characteristics that are at the core of the Lord’s new and budding presence on earth. While there are volumes of teachings describing the theology and its applications in various parts of life, it is very helpful to see it all boiled down to just two united concepts, because they stand as organizational pillars bringing stability, power and eternal life to the organization.

These two characteristics are: first: “that the Lord is God of heaven and earth, whose humanity is Divine.” And second: that those “are conjoined to him by a life according with the Ten Commandments” (AR 490).

These two concepts are figuratively spoken of in the story we read this morning from the book of Revelation as “the two witnesses.” They are called the two witnesses because they are the key descriptors that bear witness to what it means to be “New Church.”

It is worth noting that we (either taken as individuals or collectively as a community) can make tremendous efforts at being a church, at understanding the theology, at working getting to heaven, but if either of these essentials is missing, we will struggle.

If we ignore the first witness, by a lack of focus on the Lord as the Divine Human, all mighty God, then we will ultimately turn to something else as a false god. That god might be ego, it might be material possessions, it might be longing for power or position over others. One negative aspect of the presence of these false gods is that they always generate a sense of emptiness and fear that simply are not present when the Lord is there to fill the void.

If we ignore the second witness, the ten commandments, then we fail to structure our lives to be spiritually useful and to receive heavenly life. Again, without that structure, we remain spiritually hungry and lacking in true spiritually motivated definition, form and direction.

It is also important to realize that both are required. If one witness is missing in life, the other is rendered impotent and inert. Turning to the Divine Human as the all-powerful God of

everything that happens in heaven and earth, and the resulting effort to live according to the commandments are so tightly connected that they are like the soul within the body.

The importance of focusing on both 'witnesses' and their impact in life is dealt with in the Gospels with the story of the Rich Young Ruler. The young man asked: "**Good teacher, what good thing should I do that I might inherit eternal life?**" The first part of the Lord's answer sounds perfectly reasonable for the reply was completely in the context of the whole narrative of the Scriptures. The Lord said: "**Keep the Commandments.**" Over and over again the Word calls for compliance with the Ten Commandments because they provide the framework for a spiritual life. One might say they are the most basic definition for how a person should act if they are going to be human in the Lord's eyes.

But we see the story deepening when the ruler continues by saying that he has kept all the commandments from his youth. The Lord then responds with a more challenging answer: "**Sell all you have, give to the poor and then you will have treasure in heaven.**" This answer isn't really a reference to a person's net worth. It is a reference to the other essential witness for the church. The Lord was challenging the place of our 'proprium,' the feeling that we 'own' our lives, thoughts, insights, feelings and even material possessions. He is reminding us of how easily our ego can replace the Lord and His presence in our lives. Stunningly, the Lord is asking the young man to let go of the conviction that his proprial sense of self-life is **anything real**, in favor of recognizing that everything in our lives is from the Lord and is to be used to serve Him and others.

The Lord is teaching us that one of the keys to spiritual life is to recognize that the feeling that our life is our own, while helping us think and feel like human beings, is also nothing more than an appearance that does not truly reflect the deeper truth of our absolute dependence on the Lord for life. This dichotomy of feeling our self-life while recognizing that everything is from the Lord is a key distinction recognized in heaven. We are taught that the wiser angels living in the more interior 'celestial' heaven, have not only a stronger experience of life being their own, while at the same time they experience greater recognition that that all life actually is from the Lord Himself.

Going back to the story, The Lord is essentially using His interaction with the rich young ruler to remind us that we can be ensnared by impure, selfish motives while outwardly exhibiting a shell of doctrinal truths taught by the commandments. And that while we might be living 'according to the letter of the law,' we fall to the temptation of using that law to create a smokescreen hiding motives that block out heavenly life, spiritual happiness and salvation.

This is a warning for the New church! The warning deepens with the story when we read that the rich young ruler leaves in anguish because not able to comply with the Lord's request to sell his possessions.

When he left, the disciples then ask: "**who then can be saved?**" The Lord answered with two points. First, "**it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God.**" Again, not a specific reference to wealth, but a statement about how powerful the pull is from proprium to believe that we are the origin and owners of everything in our lives. And second, saying "**With people this is impossible, but with God all things are possible.**" The Lord was teaching that if He is not acknowledged to be at the heart of our every effort at faith, that faith is going to be weak, self-serving and ultimately misleading.

The Lord puts it another way in the gospel of John by saying: **“Abide in Me and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit of itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you unless you abide in Me.** (John 15:4) It could be said that a lifetime challenge offered by the faith of the New Church is work toward humbly acknowledging that we are completely dependent on the Lord in every aspect on our lives.

Now let’s return to the Two Witnesses in Revelation because they represent the underlying truths addressed in the story of the Rich Young Ruler. If you remember, one is acknowledging that the Lord is the God of Heaven and Earth and that His Human is Divine; while the other is keeping the commandments.

The point is that it the Lord wants us to think them as “Witnesses” in our lives. They are the driving forces of true faith. When properly positioned, these simple concepts direct attention to and “TESTIFY” or Communicate the message that the Lord is the center and cause of our thoughts, actions, and motivations.

By using the word ‘witness,’ the Lord is asking for an approach to life that communicates the spiritual truth that starts with the words: **“With people this is impossible, but with God all things are possible.”** This is a simple way of stating our total reliance on the Lord for everything in life, using that reliance to configure a life reflective of the Lord’s order is what makes the New Church a church. If we look elsewhere for power and inspiration, if we take credit for our own actions and successes, if we configure our religion, our principles, our doctrine on anything other than a desire to share the Lord’s eternal love through His truths provided by His Word, in short, we have nothing.

The purpose of a church is to offer our lives as a testimony allowing others to see the Lord shining with His love through the life according to His truths. This is taught in the book the Apocalypse Explained: we read that **“for works to be done by the Lord, and not by the person, two things are necessary: first, the Lord's Divine must be acknowledged, also that He is the God of heaven and earth even as to the Human, and that every good that is good is from Him; and secondly, that the person must live according to the commandments of the Decalogue by abstaining from those evils that are there forbidden (AE 934)”**

The Lord is clear about this to underline the teaching that we, of ourselves can do nothing that is good. The Lord is asking for our full and complete cooperation. This is true for our abilities, our skills, our insights, our wisdom, our uses, our joys, our faith, our paths... everything without exception, and this even includes our religious beliefs.

When we pursue doctrine and the understanding of the Word, we should be careful that that doctrine ‘testifies’ of the nature of an all loving Divinely Human, and All Powerful God. And so we are taught that: for the Rich Ruler **“To sell all that he had” signifies that a person should relinquish the things of their religion, which are traditions... and also should relinquish the things that are one’s own [proprium], which were loving self and the world more than God, and thus leading himself; and “to follow the Lord” signifies to acknowledge Him only and to be led by Him (AE 934).**

Why does the Lord ask for such surrender? It is clear that this surrender of even one’s own predefined notions of faith are clearly required as a part of the process of entering into true faith. This is stated simply and clearly in Matthew: **“He who finds his life will lose it, and he who loses his life for My sake will find it.”** (Matt. 10:36).

When we are willing to formulate our goals, our plans and our strategies for life such that they bear witness of the Lord as the One God of heaven and earth and configure that life on the template of the Ten Commandments, then as a result we become human in the Lord's eyes. Such surrendering unexpectedly opens our minds to inspiration and enlightenment in ways that we couldn't possibly create on our own. And with that freedom, we can truly testify, and tell the story that the Lord has come to save, to raise people up and to give them eternal life.

-Amen.

Lessons: Matthew 19:16-30, Revelation 11:1-12, *True Christianity* 369