

Dangers to the Church Represented in Revelation

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Revelation 11:7

The book of Revelation is special to the New Church. When understood in its internal sense it presents a vivid picture of why and how the New Church came into existence. It presents a picture of what we, who aspire to be members of that church, need to look to in what we care about, what we think and what we do. The whole book of Revelation, when properly understood, helps us to see the Lord as a loving God who is reaching out to people, calling them to Him. It helps us to see the importance of understanding what is true and good. It helps us to see the nature of evil and its influence on religious people. And it helps us to see the way the Lord's kingdom can be, in heaven and on earth.

Understanding the book of Revelation is not a matter of knowing about a single event, the Last Judgment. The spiritual dynamics of that event, which the New Church asserts has already occurred, have a direct counterpart in our daily lives. The better we understand how the Lord showed His loving care for all people through His role in the Last Judgment, the better we can see how He can care for and lead us.

In the book of Revelation there are descriptions of several horrible creatures--a beast from the bottomless pit, the seven-headed dragon, a beast from the sea, one from the land and finally a description of an evil woman riding a scarlet beast. These evil forms represent thoughts and motivations that are a particular threat to people who think of themselves as being part of the Lord's Church. Certainly there are dangerous evil motivations and false ideas that trouble the avowed non-believer or a functional non-believer--these are perhaps not as hard for the believer to recognize, but the images of evil in the book of Revelation represent a more subtle threat. They represent forces that can completely destroy the Lord's church within people's life while they think of themselves as following God in what they do and do not do.

Chapter 11 of the book of Revelation speaks of two witnesses who testify until they are killed by a beast from the bottomless pit. These two witnesses represent the essential ideas that are the foundation of the New Church. They are, firstly, that the Lord alone is God of heaven and earth, and that His Human is Divine; and secondly that people ought to live according to the principles of the Ten Commandments. These essentials are not just facts that a person stores in his memory. They need to be fundamental principles that affect how we look at our priorities and decisions, and how we see ourselves and others.

When we say the Lord's prayer, we close with the words, "For Thine is the kingdom, and the power and the glory forever" (Matt. 6:13). These words are addressed to the one God of heaven and earth. They are addressed to the Lord Jesus Christ, our heavenly Father, creator, redeemer, and savior. When we think of Him, we are called to see His infinite perfection, power, love, and wisdom as being one with His Human presence. A key part of this Humanity is our recognition that He is personally present with us, aware of the tiniest details of our life, listening to our prayers, and guiding us in things large and small. This reassuring sense of His caring and

knowing needs to make one with the idea that the Lord's greatest concern is not how life is going right now, but rather what is going to lead us to a better happier future and eventually He hopes an eternity in heaven. We separate His Divine from His Human when we make the Lord a remote and impersonal God. We can also separate His Divine from His Human when we justify evil and destructive choices with the thought that the Lord understands why I'm doing this and won't hold me accountable.

The second essential of the New Church is the idea that we are to live according to the principles of the Ten Commandments. These means more than following their most literal meaning. When we acknowledge that we are not to steal, it includes using deceit to obtain something that belongs to another. It includes not stealing a person's good reputation by gossip or slander. It includes not taking credit for the work of others and so on. On a still deeper level this commandment calls us to not take things that are rightly the Lord's and claim them as our own. When we reflect more deeply on any of these commandments we can recognize that we are prone to break them consciously or unconsciously on many levels.

The two witnesses in Revelation chapter 11 were killed by a beast said to be from the bottomless pit. This beast, the dragon and the beasts from the sea and land all represent one of the two major threats to the church. These beasts represent historically the doctrine of salvation by faith alone. The fundamental idea in this doctrine is that a person can be a true follower of God and obtain salvation and eternal life without having to obey the commandments or even give any thought to what evil thoughts and deeds he has done and may do in the future.

Over and over again people have found something to substitute for the importance of obedience to the principles the Lord has set before us. The ancient Israelites tended to focus on the ritual sacrifices made at the temple. Concerning these the Lord said in the book of Micah:

With what shall I come before the LORD, And bow myself before the High God? Shall I come before Him with burnt offerings, with calves a year old? Will the LORD be pleased with thousands of rams, ten thousand rivers of oil? Shall I give my firstborn for my transgression, the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul? He has shown you, O man, what is good; and what does the LORD require of you but to do justly, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with your God? (Micah 6:6-8)

Likewise the Lord criticized the scribes and Pharisees for scrupulously contributing a tenth of the spices they used on their food to the temple but forgetting things far more important. He said to them:

"Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you pay tithes of mint and anise and cumin and have neglected the weightier matters of the law: justice and mercy and faith. These you ought to have done, without leaving the others undone. (Matthew 23:23)

In the medieval world there grew up a belief in penance that encouraged the idea that a person could sin and then provide he or she lit enough candles, said enough prayers, went on a demanding pilgrimage or gave enough money or land to the church, the sin would be wiped clean. Partially in response to the excesses of this belief, the doctrine of salvation by faith alone came into being. Through the ideas of that doctrine people have come to believe that they can

blamelessly steal, kill, and commit adultery, providing they claimed faith that Christ died for their sins.

In all of these cases the key problem has been that people have made loving the neighbor a minor part of true religion. The dragon with seven heads represents a force that strongly seeks to destroy true religion with us as well. The evil spirits whose destructive force are represented by this dragon want more than anything to keep us from being concerned about working to serve the spiritual needs of the people around us. They want very much for us to be apathetic about reflecting on our own bad habits and how they hurt us and others. They want us to be convinced that we are just fine the way we are, because we attend the right church or have a certain set of facts in our memory. They do not want us to be firmly committed to living as good and useful, and kind, and generous a life as we are capable of living.

Revelation Chapter 13 describes this destructive force again by two beasts, one from the sea and one from the land. These two beasts represent the belief in salvation by faith alone with the laity and with the clergy. Note that the first beast seen, the one from the sea represents this belief with the laity. When the people of a church long for an escape from a compelling morality and ask for it in open and subtle ways, they invite the opportunity of a corrupt clergy who will give them what they want. Certainly innocent people can be led astray by devious leaders, but the teachings for the New Church repeatedly convey an idea of many people in the laity being led by a commonsense belief in the commandments and loving the neighbor. They are safe and actually have kept the clergy from openly stating certain ideas that enlightened common sense sees as insanity (. Rather than being too worried that some leader will persuade us that a false idea is true, the Lord calls each of us to learn the doctrine of our church and then reflect in our own minds from we know He has said as to its reliability and completeness. Does it really represent the life the Lord calls us to live?

The final image of evil that is introduced in Revelation chapter 17 with these words:

And I saw a woman sitting on a scarlet beast which was full of names of blasphemy, having seven heads and ten horns. The woman was arrayed in purple and scarlet, and adorned with gold and precious stones and pearls, having in her hand a golden cup full of abominations . . . Revelation 17:3-4

This evil woman represents the desire to control others through spiritual things. Protestant theologians, who have no idea of their relation to the dragon and previous beasts, have long asserted that this image represents Roman Catholicism. More properly it represents the single aspect of that church that sought power and control over the lives and decisions of all believers. This is a terrible evil. A key part of the true Church is the spiritual freedom of each individual to act in freedom according to his or her best understanding of what is true. Yet over and over again believers have sought to control others and make them say and act in just one proper way. Often this can be done with righteous anger, but when it takes away understanding and freedom, it is not done in the Lord's name. Needless to say, we can also fall prey to this evil. We can do so in our marriages, in raising our children, and with the people we interact with. We can be so convinced that we have the one right way that we are willing to force it on others. We are not to force our beliefs on others, but rather can appeal to their understanding and their higher motivations. When we do this we are cooperating with the Lord.

The evils of the book of Revelation are ones that can be a threat to each of us. They have and will continue to seek ways of hiding their true intent and being accepted by us as good and right. By ourselves we will not be able to see through their disguises and many permutations. But if we turn to the Lord in daily prayer, He will help us to see their attempts to influence us. He will be with us and protect us. As we act as though from ourselves to fight their influence on our lives, the Lord will be fighting within our efforts with His infinite power. If we turn to Him, victory is assured. AMEN

Lessons: Revelation 11:1-14, *Apocalypse Revealed* 500

Revelation 11:3-13

³ And I will give *power* to my two witnesses, and they will prophesy one thousand two hundred and sixty days, clothed in sackcloth." ⁴ These are the two olive trees and the two lampstands standing before the God of the earth. . . . ⁷ When they finish their testimony, the beast that ascends out of the bottomless pit will make war against them, overcome them, and kill them. ⁸

And their dead bodies *will lie* in the street of the great city which spiritually is called Sodom and Egypt, where also our Lord was crucified. ⁹ Then *those* from the peoples, tribes, tongues, and nations will see their dead bodies three-and-a-half days, and not allow their dead bodies to be put into graves. ¹⁰ And those who dwell on the earth will rejoice over them, make merry, and send gifts to one another, because these two prophets tormented those who dwell on the earth.

¹¹ Now after the three-and-a-half days the breath of life from God entered them, and they stood on their feet, and great fear fell on those who saw them. ¹² And they heard a loud voice from heaven saying to them, "Come up here." And they ascended to heaven in a cloud, and their enemies saw them. ¹³ In the same hour there was a great earthquake, and a tenth of the city fell.

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The beast that ascends out of the bottomless pit will make war against the two witnesses, overcome them, and kill them. This symbolically means that those people who are caught up in the interior tenets of the doctrine regarding faith alone will oppose the two essential elements of the New Church, attack them, and reject them, in themselves and, as far as they are able, in others. People caught up in the interior tenets of the doctrine regarding faith alone will attack and reject these two essential elements because they have established in themselves two ideas contrary to them, first, that it is not the Lord but God the Father to whom they should turn; and secondly, that a life in accordance with the Ten Commandments is not a spiritual life, but simply a moral and civic life, and they maintain this to keep anyone from believing that he is saved by works rather than by their faith alone. All those people who in schools and universities have deeply impressed these dogmas on their minds do not afterward turn away from them. There are three reasons for this, hitherto unknown. First, they have introduced themselves as to their spirit into association with people in the spiritual world like themselves, where there are many satanic spirits who find delight only in falsities, and from these spirits they cannot possibly be set free unless they reject those falsities. Nor can they do that unless they turn to God the Savior directly and begin to live a Christian life in accordance with the Ten Commandments. The second reason is their belief that they are granted instant forgiveness for their sins and thus salvation in the act of faith, and afterward in the state or progression of it through the same act continued, preserved and retained by the Holy Spirit, apart from any exercises of charity. After that, then, once people have imbibed these ideas, they regard their sins as of no account in the sight of God, and so continue in their impure lives.