

THE TWO WITNESSES
A Sermon by Rev. Coleman S. Glenn
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Bryn Athyn Cathedral

“And I will give to My two witnesses, and they shall prophesy a thousand two hundred sixty days, arrayed in sackcloth. These are the two olive trees, and the two lampstands, which are standing before the God of the earth.” Revelation 11:3-4

This Thursday, on the 19th of June, we will celebrate the birthday of the New Church. We read in *True Christian Religion* that 255 years ago, on the 19th of June in 1770, “the Lord called together His twelve disciples who followed Him in the world; and the next day He sent them all forth throughout the whole spiritual world to preach the Gospel that the Lord God Jesus Christ reigns, whose kingdom shall be for ages and ages; and that blessed are those that come to the marriage supper of the Lamb” (*True Christian Religion* n. 791).

What does it mean to celebrate the birth of the New Church? The New Church is not a denomination or an earthly organization. Rather, it is a spiritual reality that is breaking forth into the natural world. The teachings of the New Church, revealed by the Lord through Emanuel Swedenborg, are detailed and comprehensive. And yet in some sense, they are quite simple. The core teachings can be boiled down to two essentials. These two essentials are described in the internal sense of Revelation 11, John’s vision of two witnesses.

We read in our lesson from *Apocalypse Revealed* that the two witnesses symbolize those “who confess and acknowledge from the heart that the Lord is God of heaven and earth, whose humanity is Divine, and who are conjoined with Him by a life in accordance with the Ten Commandments” (AR 490). These two teachings – first, that Jesus is God, and second, that we are conjoined with Him by following the Ten Commandments – are the two essentials of the New Church. We bear witness to them when we believe them in our hearts and confess them in our lives.

These two essentials echo the two great commandments that the Lord gave while He was in the world: to love the Lord our God with all our heart, with all our soul, and with all our mind; and to love our neighbor as ourselves. Revelation 11:3 says of the two witnesses that they are “the two olive trees and the two lampstands which are standing before the God of the earth”. Throughout the Word, olives and olive oil are symbols of love, and so two olive trees represent love to the Lord and love to the neighbor; and lampstands, a picture of spiritual enlightenment,

represent the intelligence and faith that spring from these two loves. In our reading from the Old Testament, the prophet Zechariah was given a beautiful vision of the way these two loves inspire wisdom, with two olive trees continually feeding their oil into a lampstand.

The two essentials of the New Church do not merely restate the Two Great Commandments— they deepen and clarify them. The first great commandment calls us to love the Lord our God. The first essential of the New Church clarifies who that God is – that He is the Lord Jesus Christ, who is God even in His humanity. To know the person Jesus is to know God. To be joined to Him, we need to turn to the second Great Commandment and the second essential of the New Church. The second Great Commandment is to love our neighbor as ourselves and the second essential of the New Church is a life according to the Ten Commandments. Love to the neighbor is not merely a feeling of goodwill toward others – it is a decision to flee from harmful actions because they go against the Lord’s commandments, and more deeply, because they go against His will that people do good to each other.

Now these two essentials may not strike us as particularly controversial. Is there any Christian who doesn’t consider Jesus to be Divine? Is there any Christian who opposes a life that conforms to the Ten Commandments? But in John’s vision, the prophecy of these two witnesses leads to intense conflict. It is said of them that if anyone will hurt them, fire will go forth out of their mouth and devour their enemies; that those who hurt them must be killed; that they have the power to stop the rain falling from heaven, to turn waters into blood, to smite the earth with plagues. And it is said that despite these immense powers of the witnesses, a beast arose from the abyss, made war with them, and killed them, and that their bodies were cast on the streets of the city, where the people of the earth would rejoice over them. What is happening here? Is anyone really so opposed to these two essentials as to want to murder those who preach them?

Apocalypse Revealed explains that the enemies of these two witnesses refer in particular to the learned and scholarly in the Protestant world who defended the doctrine of salvation by faith alone apart from works. At the outset, it’s important to note that some Protestants will speak of faith alone but believe that faith must entail faithfulness to the Lord’s commandments. And *Apocalypse Revealed* suggests that even in Swedenborg’s time, the common people may not have seen much to argue with in these two essentials. But the learned certainly would have. According to the official dogma of most Protestant theologies of the time – and even today – Jesus had two natures, a human nature and a Divine nature, with the two natures being

completely separate to eternity. It is only the eternal Son who is God, not Jesus as to His humanity. In His humanity, according to these doctrines, Jesus is linked to all humans who profess belief in His sacrificial death – so that when a believer prays to God the Father in Jesus’ name, God the Father sees His sinless Son in place of the sinful believer, and so hears his prayers and forgives, regardless of how much sin might exist in the believer’s life. God’s favor relies on the person’s affiliation with the Son, not with that person’s way of living – it is not dependent on the person’s good works.

Now even at that time, Protestant scholars would not have argued against the Ten Commandments as a valuable guide to ethics, and many would even have suggested that true faith in Christ should lead spontaneously to a life more and more in keeping with the Ten Commandments. But they strongly opposed at any suggestion that a person must intentionally keep the Ten Commandments in order to be saved. They argued that to do this would be to try to earn heaven, rather than receiving it as a gift – to display a lack of faith that God the Father would grant you salvation because of your affiliation with His Son, and instead to try to earn that favor yourself.

Even now, many Protestants are constantly on the lookout for any hint of legalism, any hint of “works righteousness,” and will use these criteria as the measuring stick for whether a person is truly Christian or not. We may or may not have much direct interaction with theologies of this kind, but it is important to know that they still have a significant influence in the Christian world around us, and we will face opposition if we loudly proclaim that Jesus’ human nature is also Divine and that we cannot be saved without following the commandments.

But it is even more important that we realize the *spiritual* influence of those who would attack the two witnesses. We live in a culture that has historically been shaped by the doctrine of salvation by faith alone, and we are still affected by the influence of evil spirits who hate the idea of worshipping Jesus as the one God and being joined to Him by a life according to the Ten Commandments. Those spirits will use whatever methods they can to convince us to abandon these essentials. Revelation 11:7 says, “And when they shall have finished their testimony, the beast who comes up out of the abyss shall make war with them, and overcome them, and kill them.” According to *Apocalypse Revealed*, the beast from the abyss represents people in the “internals of the doctrine of faith alone” who “will oppose them, and assault these two essentials of the new church, and will reject them, and, as far as lies in their power, will cause others to

reject them” (AR 500). These are particularly people and spirits with a thorough knowledge of Scripture, who use intricate and complex arguments to make persuasive claims against the essentials of the New Church.

We’ve already looked at some of the more technical theological arguments we may hear. But if we take this beast from the abyss to more broadly represent any complex reasoning, based on truths subtly twisted, we might be able to identify more everyday voices that try to sway us from our allegiance to the Lord and our efforts to follow the Ten Commandments. These are *almost* true ideas that can nevertheless lead us astray. For example, it is a truth that people of any faith can be saved – but evil spirits can twist this to convince us that we can make up our own idea of God and follow that, rather than needing to follow the Lord Jesus Christ. It is a truth from the Word that the Lord primarily cares about our intentions, what we are like on the inside rather than the outside. But evil spirits can twist this to convince us that if we generally feel positive feelings toward others, we do not need to identify any *specific* commandments we might be breaking. This lacks the theological sophistication of arguments for salvation by faith alone apart from works, but the result is the same: we might nod toward the value of living a good life, but when it comes time to actually change our lives, we can excuse ourselves – we don’t have the time, we’re mostly on the right track, if we haven’t changed by now it’s not likely that we’ll change in the future, and so on.

Those thoughts do come, and they are hard to resist, partly because of their resemblance to truth, but also because they let us off the hook. Revelation 11:10 says that after the witnesses are killed, “they who dwell upon the earth shall rejoice over them and shall make merry, and shall send gifts to one another; because these two prophets tormented those who dwell upon the earth.” When we can tell ourselves that God is whoever we want God to be; when we can shake off the pesky idea that we must be identifying and shunning specific evils in our lives; there is a sense of relief and rejoicing.

Against such strong intellectual and emotional appeals of the idea of salvation by faith apart from deeds, how can anyone stand? *Apocalypse Revealed* describes how even Swedenborg experienced the spiritual power of the enemies of the testimony he had been called to share. He writes:

I was once seized suddenly with a disease almost deadly. My whole head was weighed down. A pestilential smoke ascended from that Jerusalem which is called "Sodom and Egypt." I was half dead with the severe pain. I expected the end. Thus I lay in my bed

three days and a half. My spirit became such, and from it my body. And then I heard voices about me, saying, "Lo, he who preached repentance for the remission of sins, and the Man Christ alone, lies dead in the streets of our city." And they asked some of the clergy whether he was worthy of burial. They said, "No; let him lie to be looked at." And they passed to and fro, and mocked. All this befell me, of a truth, when I was explaining this chapter of Revelation. (AR 531)

We need to know the power of what we are up against, and that there are times when we will become overwhelmed by it.

But this is not the end of the story for the witnesses. We read, "And after three days and a half, the spirit of life from God entered into them, and they stood upon their feet" (Revelation 11:11). *Apocalypse Revealed* gives the internal sense: "This symbolically means that at the end of the prior church, as the New Church commences and grows, these two essential elements of the New Church are made living by the Lord in people who accept them. ...The spirit of life from God symbolizes spiritual life, and standing on their feet symbolizes natural life in harmony with spiritual life, and thus one made living by the Lord" (AR 510). How does this renewal to life occur? The Lord's spirit in the Word is associated with His truth. And so part of having our spirits renewed is to return to the Lord's Word for truth, to see from the doctrines of the New Church how the entirety of Scripture calls us to worship the Lord as the one God and to live according to His commandments. And then, we allow ourselves to be put on our feet – that is, we put it into practice. We walk in it.

It's here – when we take the truth and live it – that we allow that Lord to flow in and disperse the falsities that had laid us low. Because when we take practical actions – when we identify even a small sin, something we can actively choose to stop doing because it is a sin against the Lord, and pray to Him for help in overcoming it, and gradually, gradually find ways to stop, and suddenly one day find that we are free of its hold on us – when we do that, all the complicated arguments against it fall to pieces. We have lived the truth of the saving power of the Lord's commandments. We have come to know the power of the Lord Jesus Christ to change our hearts. The truth is confirmed not just on paper, not just in our heads, but from our hearts all the way out to our hands and feet.

At the end of the eleventh chapter of Revelation – after the vision of the two witnesses, after John has seen those two witnesses taken up into heaven, after he has witnessed a glorification of the Lord in heaven – John is given another vision: "And the temple of God was opened in heaven; and there was seen in His temple the ark of His covenant." Throughout His

ministry on earth, Jesus declared Himself to be the true temple; and the ark of the covenant held the two tables of the Ten Commandments. So, we read of the internal sense of this passage: “This symbolizes the New Heaven, in which the Lord is worshiped in His Divine humanity, and where people live in accordance with the Ten Commandments, which constitute the two essentials of the New Church that are the means of conjunction” (*Apocalypse Revealed* 529). It is a beautiful picture, and a beautiful reminder of the need how the two essentials work as one. Worship – even worship of the Lord Jesus Christ – is not truly worship if it is not connected to a life according to His commandments. And following the Ten Commandments simply as sound moral teachings does not connect us to God. But when we put the two together – when we live by the Ten Commandments not just as a set of rules, but as the means by which we may experience genuinely love for our neighbor, which is the Lord’s own love within us, the Lord’s *life* within us – then we experience heaven. This is what we pray for when we pray for the Lord’s kingdom to come. This is the essence of the New Church.

Amen.

Lessons: Zechariah 4:1-3, 11-14; Revelation 11:3-12; *Apocalypse Revealed* 490

Apocalypse Revealed 490: "And I will give power to my two witnesses" (11:3) symbolizes those people who confess and acknowledge from the heart that the Lord is God of heaven and earth, whose humanity is Divine, and who are conjoined with Him by a life in accordance with the Ten Commandments.

These are the people meant here by the two witnesses because these two characteristics are the two essentials of the New Church.

Regarding the first essential, that the Lord is God of heaven and earth, whose humanity is Divine - ..this is a testimony, and therefore those people are witnesses who confess and acknowledge this from the heart.

The testimony is called the testimony of Jesus because the Lord attests to it on the authority of His Word, thus on the authority of Himself.

Now because the Lord Himself is the witness, therefore witnesses also mean people who bear the same testimony on behalf of the Lord

Regarding the second essential of the New Church, namely conjunction with the Lord by a life in accordance with the Ten Commandments - that this is a testimony is apparent from the fact that the Ten Commandments are called a testimony, as in the following: “You shall put into the ark the Testimony which I will give you.” (Exodus 25:16).

We will say something here regarding conjunction with the Lord by a life in accordance with the Ten Commandments:

There are two tables on which these commandments were written, one for the Lord and one for mankind. The contents of the first table declare that several gods are not to be worshiped, but only one. The contents of the second table declare that evils are not to be done. When one God is

worshiped and people do not do evils, conjunction takes place. For in the measure that a person desists from evils, that is, in the measure that he repents, he is in the same measure accepted by God and does good from God.

But who, now, is the one God? A trinal or triune God is not one God when the trine or trinity exists in three persons. But a God who has a trine or trinity in one person is one God, and that God is the Lord. Weave your ideas as you may, you still will not extricate from the tangle the existence of one God unless He is also one in person.

The fact of this is something the whole Word teaches, both the Old Prophetic Word and the New Apostolic Word, as may be clearly seen from The Doctrine of the New Jerusalem Regarding the Lord.