

THE NEW SELF

What is the difference between TNS and TNC? The difference is not nearly as big as we would like to imagine. Can *The New Church* become “new” if its members do not become “new”? Where would they put it? Is there some way to separate the process of *The New Church* becoming new, from the process of each of *us* becoming new? If as individuals we are not becoming new, then *The New Church* is a sad joke, and we will end up hoping it is a joke nobody will ever tell.

I am very hopeful that it will become impossible for any of us to be part of *The New Church* without discovering that we are becoming new ourselves. “Behold, I am making all things new.” Or in Paul’s language for this morning: “You have been raised with Christ. You have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God.” Or again: “You received Christ Jesus the Lord, so walk in him. You have been buried with him in baptism, but also raised with him through faith in the powerful working of God.” Well, Paul stuck some significant explanatory comments in there along with these thunderbolts. But you have Bibles – and in *The New Church*, we are all using them more and more, isn’t that right?

“What is Jesus going to do with you?” All of us are asking that question, now that we are getting more eager and more serious about giving Jesus the leadership role in our lives. Turning life and will over to Him is both the scariest and the most joyful/hopeful thing we ever do. We do not know what Jesus is going to do with us next. That is the adventure – that is the excitement. Only, we have learned that we cannot force it, rush it, or demand or preview it. We stay alert. We wait for it with patience. Sometimes we are halfway into the next venture before we realize what The Designer is doing and what is going on. Is it ever possible for us to get relaxed enough and trusting enough that we do not fight each next new step? Well, not yet for me, but I keep hoping.

Somebody said to me recently, “I have been a Christian for thirty years. Don’t you think it’s a bit insulting to suggest that I still need to become new?” “No,” I said, “I think it is insulting for you to imagine that Jesus is so dull He cannot imagine any more changes to make in your life.” Of course, I had to apologize. She had been taught a different mindset, a different language. You get “born anew” so you don’t *need* any more newness. She didn’t mean she had nothing left to learn. She meant

she had already been through the change. She had been converted. Jesus was already the Lord and Savior of her life. I certainly want to honor and appreciate that.

But the truth is, her language doesn't work for me any better than mine works for her. Jesus has to work a change inside me every time He has a new task for me. I don't mean to, but I always resist at first. I can never see the new task clearly enough to obey until after the Spirit gives me a new perspective. On top of that, I usually have to turn away from some things I thought were pretty important in order to take on the new task. I put that so poorly, it sounds like most of the drama is external. That is never the way it is in my life. All the big stuff is internal first. By the time the internal wars have been fought, the external just sort of follows along in the path that has been blazed for it. Of course, there are details to be organized and dealt with. But after the fear and rebellion are over, that's just part of the game to be played.

We have only been directly involved with *The New Church* since early May. But I like to think that if you are part of *The New Church*, you know some things – you assume some things. They are foundational to our fellowship, and without them we are not and cannot be *The New Church*.

For instance: You know about God's personal love for you. You may know this from a number of sources, but when it is challenged the most – that is, when you have the most reasons or temptations to doubt it – you go to the big "Reconciliation": You go to the Cross and Resurrection. You go to Jesus. Only, you always close the loop! It never stops at Jesus. That is a betrayal of what Jesus was showing and revealing to us. It *never* stops at Jesus. It comes back to *our* reconciliation – our conviction that God loves us personally. Any time, in any circumstance, where we are not trusting God's love for us, we cannot be His people, His church. Faith means trust in what Jesus revealed to us. And if we lose sight of this, the fear (or the depression, the loneliness, the pride, the greed, or whatever) is already coming back on us. If we do not consciously trust God's love for us, we literally cannot see straight, and we cannot function as followers. The demons start dancing again, and our plans and choices quickly get sidetracked into all sorts of strange places. Of course, they are no longer reflecting the goals or values we actually believe in. But usually this will not come clear for a while, not until the panic subsides and we return to our prayers, and to the realization that God does actually love us.

It is not always clear and central in Christian communities, but in *The New Church* we must stay very clear about this. We dare not attempt any part of the Christian Way, no matter how small, without first readjusting and realigning our consciousness to this central theme of God's personal love for us. That is, if we go out to "love our neighbor" without first remembering our relationship with God, the relationship with our neighbor will get corrupted. If we attempt to work at our vocatio without first remembering our relationship with God, the goal and direction of the vocatio will get corrupted. There is no part of life, physical or spiritual, which is immune to our inner fear, our shame, our needs, our loneliness, our pride. Such things must be healed, and the light and love must be renewed continually. In my case, the minimum is every morning. Why am I so dense that I have to remember and renew my relationship with God every day? I live in a broken world. I am constantly bombarded with messages and experiences that refute or deny the presence and love of God. Maybe that is not true for you. Maybe you have it easy here. But I do not believe that. I think some of you keep trying to shut off the alarm bells. We sometimes shut off the alarm so we can go back to sleep. Only, spiritual sleep (called "sloth," in our tradition) is known to be deadly.

You would think that we would all be delighted and overjoyed at the prospect of saying "hello" to God every morning, and to be reminded that Abba still loves us. How is it possible that we sometimes think of it as a discipline or a duty? A broken world indeed. And "someone" is trying to pull the wool over our eyes. We were recently having a nice discussion about the dual (or duel) dimensions of our experience – the physical and the spiritual. All of us were acknowledging our awareness of both dimensions. But do you find it interesting that Satan, though clearly a spiritual being, is our Adversary? Yet Satan works pretty hard to convince us that he does not exist, and that the physical realm is the only reality. We will be looking at Paul's awareness of such things in our next class, under the heading of "The Principalities and Powers."

So in *The New Church*, we know that God loves us personally. But I hope and presume that we also know we have an Adversary. Meaning, you have noticed that some sentient influence (I call it Satan, but it's only a word) is always attempting to separate us from our confidence in God's love – always trying to drive a wedge between us and God. Since Jesus is the primary source of our reconciliation – our trusting relationship with God – the Adversary is always trying to drive a wedge

between us and Jesus. Of course! All of Satan's other ploys depend upon this. How far can Satan get with temptations of greed or lust, for instance, if our fears and needs are fully aware of God's love? None of us would take our temptations very seriously if we remembered God's love and the reality of his Kingdom here and coming. We wouldn't even grit our teeth, screw up our courage, and say "no" to Satan's ruses. We would simply laugh: "Man, you are pathetic! You offer me a one-night stand, when the Spirit wants for me a lifetime of love with a mate who really cares about me? Ridiculous!"

But we are not always this mature or farseeing. So Satan and his temptations and his lies are now listed among our expectations. The Adversary will always be watching for a new opportunity to throw us off track. In *The New Church*, we do not believe in the physical fires of a future Hell. But we do believe in the metaphorical fires of a present lostness and bondage if we lose our love-bond with Jesus. We will therefore never be surprised if we experience some new attempt to weaken or break our focus, our faith, our trust in God. It is finally clear to us that carelessness, spiritual sloth, getting dull with our prayers or neglectful of them is an open invitation to the Adversary. We might as well put a neon sign around our necks saying, "Please come and make me feel miserable and depressed and worthless again."

When we remember our Savior, Satan is no cause for serious alarm because the Spirit never sleeps and is always available when we call upon him or her. It is no cause for alarm, but it is cause for awareness. How many times did Jesus tell us to "stay awake," to "be watchful," to be alert? Few of us are still so literal that we suppose Jesus wanted us to be sleep-deprived. But the metaphors were clear and insistent: being followers is not nearly as casual and automatic as most of us wish it were, and as most Americans still believe it is.

Do you think I have wandered far away from Paul's letter to the Colossians? "*Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth.*" I have not tried to paraphrase Paul or to explain his words. I have merely tried to put what I hear from him into words of my own. Paul reminds us of pitfalls and dangers. But he is also constantly commenting about the power and joy of the new Life in Christ Jesus. It is flowing in the background of his thinking so continually that we hardly notice it. Almost like background noise, it is always there, but never seemingly the real topic. See Colossians 2:7 and 3:15-17 if you want to check it out. That's right: thankfulness – gratitude – is the main

characteristic and the true motive power of God's people. What has God done for us? How is the love of God revealed to us? And is God still present with us and for us in this very time and circumstance? Thankfulness and gratitude flow from the Apostle Paul, and from all of God's awakened children.

Over many years now, I have become more and more convinced that all other motive powers will betray God's Kingdom. That is, any other motive for being a follower of Jesus will backfire, and will betray the purposes of His Kingdom. Gratitude is the fuel the Kingdom runs on. Thankfulness is the energy appropriate to Jesus' followers. So I am hopeful that we will add this to the list of things everyone in *The New Church* knows and takes to heart.

How many other reasons and motives have we tried to run on? They are countless, since most people in our world do not even realize that gratitude is power, or that thankfulness is a motive of magnitude and enduring effort. So how does our world usually try to motivate people? For that matter, how does *the church* usually try to motivate people? No great surprise, but we frequently realize that the church has not tried very hard to extricate itself from "the world." After all, the church, as most of us know it, still lives in the American culture, and its people are enmeshed and engrossed and grew up in the American culture. So do we not all start out believing that the American Way works, and that the values and goals of the American culture are true and right?

Please remember that the ways we try to motivate people reveal our deepest and truest theology. This is an especially scary awakening for parents who find themselves converting to Christianity. In any case, I am about to say things quite obvious to all of us, but I am also reminding us of what we try to substitute for gratitude to God. What are the usual ways we try to motivate people? Fear. Shame. Pride. Success. Monetary rewards. Outside approval (popularity, your name on a plaque, employee of the month, a fancy title, a special place to park, and on and on). The world is full of charlatans because the world is full of people with false values. The two go hand in hand.

Of course, there are many more positive-sounding motivations. Love is one (as in, you will be loved if you do this). Can genuine love ever be earned or bought? But since "love" is such a highly approved value in our culture, misusing it as a motive is hardly ever questioned. Then there are the "vision" motives – that is, we imagine saving the planet, or

helping the poor, or feeding the hungry, or solving any of the endless problems of our broken world. Now, someone will doubtless accuse me of saying that feeding the hungry (for instance) is not a good idea. Feeding a hungry person *is* a good idea. But a vision of eradicating hunger also happens to be a very poor motive, if I want to be faithful to God. Do we know no difference between wanting to be generous or compassionate ourselves, and wanting to be a servant of God's?

Gratitude to God (to God in Christ Jesus, if I am tracking the reasons I trust God) is the only motive power that will not betray us or end in a backlash of one kind or another. Can I make this clear? Probably not. But if my efforts are all based on gratitude, I am not seeking any new result or personal reward as a reason for my efforts. The reason is already there: Gratitude fuels my efforts. That means I do not have expectations, a hidden agenda, or even subconscious desires for some results to come from my efforts. All the familiar booby traps of control, manipulation, and managing things for a given result are absent, if my true motive is gratitude.

If I serve a God of love and I am obedient (within human limits and possibilities), will I not be drawn into deeds and efforts that are, in truth, loving? Not because I am loving, but because I serve a God of love. But if I turn from my obedience, gratitude, and devotion for the God who truly loves and I try to claim for myself the wisdom, power, or motives of love, will I not merely retain the pretense of love and end up in the masquerade of goodness that is Satan's shell game? Never ever try to be loving. It is a recipe for disaster. If God's love indwells us, well, there's not much we can do about that. If, being obedient, we sometimes end up doing deeds of love because that's the result of following the Spirit's guidance, well and good. But never ever try to be loving. That's for people with far more pride and far more *self*-confidence than we can afford. Always, always, always we return to our primary principle: Our WAY is a way of prayer. We seek the guidance and instruction of the Holy Spirit. We cannot simply use a rule or a law or a preset goal or formula. Our loyalty is to a Living Word – a Living God. Only the Holy Spirit knows the truth which is hidden within any given moment or situation.

At this point someone will usually want to tell me that God would not create a world where faith is so subtle, hidden, and difficult. Faith must be available to everyone, including the simple who are not seminary-trained. This last part is usually said with dripping scorn and sarcasm.

Yet I quite agree. I have been to seminary, and I know how much and how often seminary life is based on prayer and obedience to the Holy Spirit. The truth is, *everyone* can follow the Holy Spirit because this relationship is based on trust, and it comes in the unseen dependence and devotion of our gratitude to God, a thing apprehended by our spiritual nature – the spirit God created and set within us. Some very simple people are wonderfully faithful and obedient in their prayers. Nobody can attach a Ph.D. to this aptitude and possibility within each of us.

But while we're on the subject, what is the alternative being offered everywhere in the world by Christian churches and institutions? Creeds: lists of rules; learning the catechism; being confirmed; letting the pope, the priests, the pastors, or the traditions guide and direct our lives and tell us what to do and what not to do. And why? Because prayer – and listening for the voice of the Spirit within – is too difficult, too freeing, and too dangerous. And besides, it would disrupt things if everybody was “doing their own thing” under the Spirit's guidance. Not only that, we know some stories about people who did some pretty bad things while they were claiming to be following the instructions of God. Actually, you know very few such stories, though of course we all know a few. For every story you can tell me about a person who was doing damage by following the voice within, I can tell you hundreds of stories about people who have done and are doing severe damage by following the instructions of human authorities and institutional rules.

“I serve because I hope to get something out of it.” That is the way of the world. But what if I serve because of what has already happened to me – because of what has already been given to me? That is the Way of the Kingdom. Energy that comes from gratitude never gets discouraged, never runs out, never stops to count the cost or consider the price tag. So, as always, we watch Jesus: The energy that comes from gratitude cannot be bribed, corrupted, bought off, frightened into submission. Jesus was uncanny, incorruptible, uncontrollable – though every authority and threat and competing power on earth was trying to reach Him and stop Him. But Jesus was so grateful to God, He wanted nothing from this world – except, of course, to introduce it to God. Therefore, Jesus was obedient to God beyond all earthly understanding.

Jesus' power was the power of gratitude. In our emotional need and fuzziness, we want to conclude that Jesus' power was the power of love. This is why I balk and complain about creeds which claim that Jesus is God. *God's power* is the power of love. And only God can handle such

a motive power. If we begin to think that we are loving, we get very proud of it, very quickly. Then we quickly become conceited, controlling, and exceedingly defensive if anyone questions our love.

Jesus was the grateful, obedient Son, and therefore we see signs of love at work in His life. After all, He was the quintessential servant of the God of love. But Jesus was grateful and *therefore* obedient. It is the only appropriate response of the creature toward the Creator. And therefore Jesus was quite beyond the pressures and corruptions that betray most creatures into idolatry.

Well, who needs all this theory? What we need is to remember that gratitude is our only appropriate motive. If we discover ourselves trying to operate or to choose or do anything for any other reason or purpose, we must learn to stop instantly and go quiet and calm ... until we can rediscover the roots and the source of our true gratitude to God. That and that alone is an energy source which will not betray the Kingdom we long to serve.