

## WHAT? THE CHRISTIAN CHURCH HAS ENDED?

BY REV. KENNETH J. ALDEN

Our title captures one of those enduring questions that confronts every generation that embraces the New Church and accepts the theological writings of Emanuel Swedenborg as a revelation of Heavenly Doctrine from the Lord. Intellectually we can recognize that the Lord foretold the end of the Christian Church, notably in Matthew 24, Luke 17, and Revelation 15-21. But what often challenges us is the fact that there are so many active Christian congregations around us, doing good work and spreading the Gospel around the world. It hardly seems credible that such a church may be called “ended.” Does it imply that all these people are without a living religion—that they have no truth to guide their lives? After all, most of us know many practicing Christians whom we respect and love for their belief in the Lord and their life according to His commandments. How does this experience fit with the teaching of the Heavenly Doctrine?

Our experience confirms the teaching of the Heavenly Doctrine in two ways. First, there is the negative possibility that some of the goodness we see is tainted by hypocrisy. With his spiritual eyes opened by the Lord, Swedenborg witnessed many cases of people who had seemed on earth to be the best of Christians but who were exposed after death as being interiorly self-serving and worldly. From this perspective, there is not necessarily any contradiction between the teaching that the Christian Church has ended and our experience of active churches doing laudable things. Further, the Heavenly Doctrine says of the post-Christian Church era: “As to the external appearance divided churches will exist as heretofore, their

doctrines will be taught as heretofore; and the same religions as now will exist among the Gentiles” (*Last Judgement* 73).

Although the Lord foretold such spiritual darkness at the end of the church that the spiritual “sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light” (Matthew 24:29), His purpose in His Second Coming was to give new light for a New Church. With a new revelation from the Lord, the truth shines again in that Word and is received among a new people, along with a remnant of people from the former church. So, when the New Testament was added to it, the Old Testament Word took on a new meaning and shed new light. Now the Old and New Testament take on a new meaning and shed new light when the Heavenly Doctrine opens them up to be understood spiritually. With the establishment of a New Church, new light goes out, not just to the members of that church, but to the universal church throughout the world. All who worship one God and keep the Ten Commandments constitute one church which, in the eyes of the Lord, is as one person. The church which has and rightly understands the Word is like the heart and lungs supplying life to the whole body. Whereas the Jewish Church once filled that role, it was later transferred to Christians. Now it has been transferred to the New Church which is a kind of center from which spiritual light is available to Christians, Jews, and all other people and faiths.

When we find people who genuinely believe in one God and live by the truth they know, it confirms what the Heavenly Doctrine says—light is going out through the spiritual world and reviving the church (See *Conjugal Love* 532; cf. *True Christian Religion* 182:2). In fact, the Heavenly Doctrine compares the succession of churches on earth to the stages of a person growing to maturity, and on into wisdom (See *Apocalypse Explained* 641:4). We could say that the universal church has a “change of heart” and a new way of thinking as it moves from

infancy to childhood, then to adolescence and adulthood, and now into the age of wisdom. The previous states have all ended and a new center of interest and thought has taken their place, and yet the valuable things from childhood or adolescence are still there, but receiving their light and life from the new center.

The Heavenly Doctrine teaches that all people who acknowledge one God and keep His commandments can be saved (See *Divine Providence* 253). It also teaches, “No one can hereafter come into heaven unless he be in the doctrine of the New Church as to faith and life” (*Canons* 47:7; cf. *Brief Exposition* 92; *True Christian Religion* 758). Can we not conclude that all who are heaven-bound are moving toward being in the doctrine of the New Church in faith and life? On earth people receive as much of that light and life through the New Church in the spiritual world as their religion can support. Is this not what it means, that the Christian Church has been ended and a New Church has been established by the Lord, that there is a new center where the Word is rightly understood and from which the light of the Word shines anew?



“Father, all things of mine are yours, and all of yours are mine.” What does this mean, if not that the Father's Divine belongs to the Son's Human, and the Son's Human to the Father's Divine? Consequently in Christ God is man and man is God, and thus they make one as soul and body make one....It is plain from this that the Father's Divine is the Son's soul, and the Son's Human is the Father's body. (*True Christian Religion* 122:4,5)

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