

THE PARABLE OF THE LEAVEN: A SERMON ABOUT CHANGE
BY REV. JEREMY F. SIMONS

“Again He said, ‘To what shall I liken the kingdom of God? It is like leaven, which a woman took and hid in three measures of meal till it was all leavened.’” (Luke 13:21)

The parable of the leaven describes the kingdom of heaven by comparing it to the way that yeast makes bread rise, turning dough into something that can be baked into bread. The parable often makes little sense to people when they first hear it. How can the kingdom of heaven be like yeast? However, when you see what it is getting at, you may see that it is a parable about a changing world and about how the Lord acts on it. He is the one who changes the world, both the world as a whole and your personal world, and the process can be compared to the making of bread.

The whole point of religion is to change people’s hearts. One of its most joyful aspects is the assurance that people’s hearts can change, and that the Lord is guiding the world to become a better place. The result, we are told, will be bread and not something inedible.

It is reasonable to have concerns about the world’s future. There may be a coming recession; you may be worried about the results of the upcoming elections, about the effects of global warming, the shrinking of the earth’s resources, terrorism, possible global war, or any number of things. It is easy to be pessimistic about humanity’s inhumanity to man, our relentless materialism and immorality, the apparent decline of religion in the West, and forces that threaten marriage and the family in our culture.

The teachings of the New Church, however, assure you that whatever hardships may lie ahead, the long-term future of the

human race is almost certain to be a happy one. According to the Heavenly Doctrine, we are entering a new spiritual era; it has already begun. Moreover, this era will be better than all previous ones. This is what is called the New Church, which is the New Jerusalem, and you are invited to be a part of it. People's hearts will change. The negative trends and the proliferation of harmful and mistaken ideas are like the leaven that is mixed into the bread-dough. They force a process of change and transformation, and the end result will be better than what we started with.

Our topic this morning is the way that change happens. In any culture, and in any community, styles change, trends come and go, and things that are seen as interesting and valuable one year will be ignored and forgotten about the next. The changes can seem random. They are not always positive, and they often seem unrelated to anything spiritual or important. But according to the teachings of the New Church, all the movements of culture are interconnected in fascinating ways, and they all ultimately relate to the Lord's purposes as He guides the human race towards heaven. The changes are not random. They spring from constant universal laws as they interact with human free choice. Our topic this morning focuses on four ways that the Lord works to bring about the process that our text compares to the making of bread.

Our reading from *True Christian Religion* made the observation that "although the secrets revealed by the Lord at the present time surpass in excellence and importance all spiritual knowledge made public up to now, they are regarded on earth as of no value" (*True Christian Religion* 848). When the angels wondered how long this would be true, they were told, "Until time and times and half a time," a phrase from Daniel and Revelation which means "until the end of this age and the beginning of the next" (*Apocalypse Revealed* 562). In the next era, this information will be highly valued. Therefore the

question is, what governs public opinion, and how does the Lord guide it? Here are four influences of which the Writings speak: The first is described by the Lord's words in our reading from John: "My sheep hear My voice, and I know them, and they follow Me" (John 10). The Lord makes information available, and people are then free to follow or not as they choose. A second is that you are influenced by what the Writings call "universal atmospheres" from the Lord, which invisibly affect all created things (*Conjugal Love* 386). A third is that although you seem to yourself to think and feel autonomously, the truth is that you are enormously influenced by others (*Divine Providence* 308). Although people do change individually, they are always doing it within their own context, and these patterns change slowly. The fourth is that since these three influences are seldom in perfect agreement with each other, the differences need to be resolved, and the process of doing this can be compared to what happens when yeast is mixed with the dough in the making of bread (*Divine Providence* 25).

The interaction of these and other influences is one way of describing the Divine providence. The Lord guides the human race while leaving all free to think and do as they wish. Because of this guidance, public opinion changes, and one day the "secrets revealed by the Lord at the present time" will no longer be "regarded on earth as of no value."

The first principle here is that "My sheep hear My voice." The Lord has revealed the truth. Information of all kinds is available throughout the world, and it is increasing continually. People choose to learn, accept, believe, and practice whatever they wish. It just so happens that the Bible is by far the best-selling book of all time. An estimated six-billion copies have been printed (Wikipedia.com). Worldwide it is not only far and away the cumulative leader, it has also been the best-selling book every year since printing was invented—and even before then

(Christianpost.com July 4, 2007). This has happened partly because of organizations dedicated to the cause of distributing Bibles. However, they could never have been successful if people did not respond. For some reason, world opinion has cooperated in making this happen. Is it just chance, or has the Lord caused public opinion worldwide to move in this direction?

There is a remarkable self-reinforcing aspect to the process of being the sheep who hear the Lord's voice. We are told, "there is in faith, or in truths, an imperceptible blessing insinuated by the Lord, relating to eternal blessedness, which is preferred to evil delights" (*Spiritual Experiences*, minor 4611). This means that once that voice is heard and believed, it begins to change the one hearing it.

One effect that the Lord's words have on you is related to the second way that He works to change your heart. You are influenced by what the Writings call "universal atmospheres" from the Lord, which invisibly affect all created things. We read, "Everything that flows out from an object, surrounds it and envelops it, is called an atmosphere. As, for example, the atmosphere of light and heat from the sun around it; the atmosphere of life from a person around him; the atmosphere of aroma from a shrub around it; the atmosphere of attraction from a magnet around it; and so on. [2] But the universal atmospheres which we are discussing here are from the Lord around Him; and they emanate from the sun of the spiritual world, at whose center He is...The realization of His purposes by means of these atmospheres is Divine providence" (*Conjugal Love* 386).

That is, you are affected by the Lord's presence, by the atmospheres that surround Him, and the effect of this influence is so powerful that it is said that this is what the Divine providence is. "The realization of His purposes by means of these atmospheres is Divine providence." This is the origin of the universal impulses in all living things to survive, reproduce,

provide for the survival of their offspring, and similar things. On the natural level, these impulses are what move all of nature. On the spiritual level, these atmospheres are received by people to the extent that they turn to the Lord, hear His voice in the truths that are taught in the Word, and obey them. The way that people respond to these atmospheres on both the natural and spiritual levels produces the changes that we observe as trends, styles, cultural views of good and bad behavior and correct and incorrect ideas. These things are always changing, and the impetus for the changes is related to how people respond to these universal atmospheres.

A third factor here in the way that the Lord works to change your heart is that you are not as independent of others as it seems. “Almost everyone believes that we think and intend autonomously and therefore talk and act autonomously. Can we on our own believe anything else when the appearance is so convincing? Yet this is impossible. (The truth is that) the source of our thinking is not in ourselves but in others, whose source is again not in themselves” (*Divine Providence* 308).

The “others” who influence your thoughts and feelings are the people that you associate with and also your spiritual associates, the good and evil spirits who are with you interiorly. What this means is that ideas, points of view, and values tend to be shared by members of a group, making it hard for conflicting ways of seeing things to be taken seriously. Styles, manners, and concepts of right and wrong tend to be held in common within a culture because of this sharing of thoughts and feelings. Yet every individual is actually free to think whatever they like, and everyone’s exact thoughts and feelings are unique to them. The effect, nevertheless, is that it is hard to change individuals without changing the whole culture. Things that catch on quickly do so because they are in harmony with the way that people already think. Real change happens slowly. The importance of

your spiritual associations is underlined by the statement in the *Apocalypse Explained* that “the New Church on earth grows according to its increase in the world of spirits, for spirits from that world are with men” (*Apocalypse Explained* 732.3).

Three factors, then, affecting changes in humanity’s spiritual character are the revelation of new truth, the effects of the Lord’s presence, and the way that people are connected together, in both this world and the next, as to their thoughts and feelings. A fourth factor is the leaven of our text. The forces that act on what people think and feel do not necessarily agree with each other. Disagreements within a group produce processes that can be compared with what happens when leaven is put into flour. We read, “There are evils together with falsities which, when introduced into societies, act like ferments put into meal and juice of the grape. By means of these, discordant things are separated and concordant things are united, and purity and clearness are the result. They are what are meant by these words of the Lord: ‘The kingdom of heaven is like leaven, which a woman took, and hid in three measures of meal’” (*Divine Providence* 25).

The process of resolving the issues of life is compared to the fermentation process that takes place when yeast is put into flour to make bread. A similar process takes place in the making of wine. The meaning here is that even though the issues and conflicts in a person’s life are caused by false and evil things, the effect can be a very good one. They force people to repeatedly consider and struggle with their beliefs and priorities. The kingdom of heaven is formed in the person in that struggle. People individually, and societies in general, successively reject what is false and evil as they see it more and more clearly. And in the process they are purified—being made into good bread, or clear wine. Contrary ideas cause you to think and consider what the truth really is. This is the value of controversy and disagreement.

The point is that society changes and individuals change. The

changes are not random, but are governed by factors and guided by the Lord. He is able to do this in a way that moves humanity in a good direction and also leaves us in freedom.

It will not always be true that “the secrets revealed by the Lord at the present time... (will be) regarded on earth as of no value.” Swedenborg writes, concerning the sales of the *Heavenly Doctrine*, “I received letters [informing me] that not more than four copies had been sold in two months, and this was made known to the angels. They wondered indeed, but said that it should be left to the Providence of the Lord, which was such as to compel no one, though it might be done. But that it was not fitting that [any others] should read [my work] first but those who were in faith; and that this might be known from [what happened at] the coming of the Lord into the world, who was able to compel men to receive His words and Himself, but [yet] compelled no one. Still there were found those who would receive, those who were in faith, to whom also the apostles were sent” (*Spiritual Experiences* 4422).

“My sheep hear My voice, and I know them, and they follow Me. And I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; neither shall anyone snatch them out of My hand” (John 10:27).
Amen

Lessons: Luke 13:20-21, John 10:14-16, 27-28, *Spiritual Experiences* 5222, *True Christian Religion* 848



The Rev. Jeremy F. Simons was inaugurated into the priesthood in 1982 and ordained into the second or Pastoral degree in 1983. He first served as Assistant to the Pastor in Kempton Society, Pa., then as its Pastor in 1983 taking on also the role of Principal to the school there. In 1993 Jeremy accepted a call to be Assistant Pastor to the Immanuel Church, in Glenview, Ill., and the Principal of its Church School. Jeremy accepted the call in 1996 to be the Assistant Pastor to the Bryn Athyn Society, and in 2004 he became its Pastor. Jeremy lives with his wife Allyn (Edmonds) in Bryn Athyn.

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