

AN INVITATION TO THE HOLY SUPPER

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Why the Lord Calls Us to the Holy Supper

Behold, I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears My voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and dine with him, and he with Me (Revelation 3:20).

Dining with others expresses our friendship and closeness with them. We do it to share love and thoughts. We call this relationship between people “conjunction.” Conjunction is what the Lord longs for, waits for, works for. This is why He started the Holy Supper: it springs from His intense desire to be conjoined with us. He told the disciples at the last supper, “With fervent desire I have desired to eat this Passover with you...” He longs to give what He has to give and to feel our free response. So the basic meaning of the Holy Supper is to express the Lord’s love for us and our love in return.

A Sacrament of Repentance

On a number of occasions in the Heavenly Doctrine for the New Church the Holy Supper is called a “sacrament of repentance.” Indeed, from the very beginning the Christian Church has seen this link between the Holy Supper and repentance. Unfortunately, “repentance” tends to make us think of self-flagellation, suffering and guilt. Repentance should not mean that to us. The Heavenly Doctrine defines repentance as:

- 1) examining our life (both behavior and motive);
- 2) seeing some specific evil;
- 3) acknowledging and confessing it (taking responsibility);
- 4) praying to the Lord for help and power to stop;
- 5) actually stopping the evil and beginning a new life.

The Heavenly Doctrine does speak of “making oneself guilty” of an evil and “condemning oneself” on account of it (in step 3). But it teaches us clearly that we cannot be freed from evil if we really believe that it is our own: we must believe that it is from hell, not from ourselves. What they mean by “making oneself guilty” and “condemning oneself” is that we are to acknowledge that we have had a role in accepting evils from hell; something in us has welcomed them. Taking responsibility for our problems is the first step to resisting the old feelings and inviting new ones.

The point is that we simply can’t find communion with the Lord unless we repent. How much good can we receive from Him, and how sensitive can we be to it, if we regularly find enjoyment in some evil? How much, and how clearly, can we receive truth from Him if we habitually let ourselves think selfishly, and therefore falsely? The love and wisdom that He promises us cannot be ours unless we are willing to repent.

The repentance that we do before the Holy Supper need not always be an intense sort. The Heavenly Doctrine recommends that we do that kind once or twice a year. Most of the time what is required is the kind of repentance that Christians do daily: noticing when we’re thinking ill and when we’re thinking well, resisting the bad thoughts, affirming the good, asking the Lord for power in this work.

Some Common Barriers to Taking Holy Supper

Am I ready for it? Am I committed enough? These are good questions. It is an important act of worship and needs to be done in a considered way. On the other hand, these questions can become false barriers. There's something in us that will never feel ready, old enough, committed enough. At some point we must act, trusting in the Lord's mercy and power to change us and help us grow.

One simple way to assess whether we're ready is to look at our life and ask, "Do I make efforts to do what is right? Do I, at least some of the time, resist doing and thinking things that are evil? Do I recognize my need for the Lord's help?" If so, chances are we're committed enough to benefit from the Holy Supper.

Am I worthy enough? Again, this is a good question. There are indeed times when we are not worthy enough. Think of it this way. Are there times when it's inappropriate to seek or express friendship with another? If we have been knowingly negative toward a fellow employee, for example—working against that person, saying and doing unworthy things behind his/her back—can we instantly turn around and say that we wish to be right with him and to love him? We could do this sincerely only if we had reflected ahead of time on what we had been doing, had resolved to change our life, and perhaps had even made some attempts in that direction.

The same holds true in our relationship with the Lord. How can we sincerely approach Him and be joined with Him as a friend if we have been living in an unworthy way? Our approach must be sincere. And the test of our sincerity is our actual efforts to turn from evil.

Yet it's vital to realize that it's never a question of whether or not the Lord wants to "dine with us." He always does. And He never regards us as too unworthy for Him. Unworthiness is not a barrier on the Lord's part, but on ours. The problem is, when we have been unworthy and haven't made any effort to change, we can't benefit much from the Holy Supper. Our minds and hearts can't be softened and opened and touched by the Lord. We won't let them be.

"I tried it and it didn't seem to help." The Holy Supper is called "the holiest act of worship." We're told that it has enormous power. And yet somehow it's hard to believe these superlatives. We may not sense "fireworks" when we take it or be aware of any boost to our life. We can't expect instant miracles. For the most part the Lord changes us gradually. Progress means more to us when we participate in the process, and there is little sense of participation in "lightning bolt" experiences.

What's more, we are poor judges of the power in the Holy Supper, especially at the outset of our spiritual life. We become sensitized to that power, and receptive of it, with time and growth. We begin the "new birth" as spiritual infants—what we see and grasp is so vague and general! The Holy Supper can indeed be a very powerful experience at times. But we shouldn't make our experience (or lack of it) the indicator of its value or power. We need to be in it for the "long haul." We must commit ourselves to it and give it time.

The Power of the Holy Supper

First of all, we must realize that every action holds incredible power, at least potentially. Unless we see this, we cannot appreciate the "mysterious" power of the Holy Supper.

The power of an act comes from the mind. When there is mind and heart in it, an action becomes highly significant. Actions go further than mere thoughts and feelings. For example, a woman can

reflect, “I ought to do this.” But to act on this thought, greater energy is required. Her mind must choose and gather knowledge and tools. (It can’t act without these.) Mental energy is involved in these steps. Finally, in acting she must move her body and move something in the world around her. This extension from thought to action can happen in an instant, but there is so much involved!

The deeper reason that actions are more powerful and formative than mere thoughts and feelings is that they link us more fully with the spiritual world. For example: when I think a prayer, I come into spiritual contact with certain spirits. If I were to let that prayer descend into my facial expressions, into words, into my hands, into my neck and knee joints, that same prayer would draw stronger response from spirits and would be more strongly felt by me.

Now obviously it’s really the stronger feelings on my part that cause me to let my thought (prayer) show itself in my gestures. Nevertheless, sometimes our gestures seem to come before feelings. In fact, *sometimes we must make gestures come first!* Our feelings are often subconscious, but when we force ourselves to adopt appropriate behavior, then our hidden feelings can descend to our awareness. And even when we are already aware of an inner feeling, acting on it can heighten that feeling. Actions have special power to do this.

For example, a man can think, “I appreciate this woman,” but his thought takes on greater power for him when he expresses it in words or in a letter, or by bringing her flowers. (It takes on greater power for her too.) Again, we commonly feel more sorry after saying we’re sorry. We feel more thankful after saying “Thank you.” We feel a new sense of warmth for guests, and a greater desire to serve them, after we have actually shaken their hands and welcomed them.

So there can be incredible power in our actions: power to stir inner states of mind, to focus and heighten them. This power is the result of the bonds that are formed with communities of spirits and angels when we knowingly act.

The Correspondences of the Bread and the Wine

We’ve been talking about the relationship between our mind (thoughts/feelings) and our body’s actions. In the New Church we call this relationship one of “correspondence.” What we’ve been saying is that there’s power in a correspondential act. But there is another aspect to the “correspondence” involved in the Holy Supper. Not only do actions correspond to what’s in our minds, but things do too. Every object in creation exists because it springs from and corresponds to something spiritual.

“**Bread**” has been a metaphor for all food for countless ages. It has been brought before God and eaten in a worship setting for as long. People have seen it as a symbol of what the Lord gives us: personal life, His sustaining presence, food and clothing, protection, peace, happiness, love. You might think that it has meaning merely by human tradition. But the real reason is that it corresponds to the Lord’s love, the source of all His gifts to us. Bread exists because the Lord’s love exists. Bread nourishes and delights our bodies because the Lord’s love does that for our hearts. Bread is the embodiment on the physical plane of Divine love and its goodness.

The essential ingredient in bread is grain flour. Grains like wheat and barley (the chief ones in Bible times) have their own natural characteristics that are reflections of their spiritual origins. These grains are actually seen in the spiritual world. Wheat, like bread made from it, corresponds to the Lord’s love and goodness, received deeply by a person, bringing heavenly nourishment and delight.

The Lord commanded the Israelites to use unleavened bread in their offerings and also during holy feasts like the Passover. Leavening (yeast) is symbolic of impurities in our minds and hearts. When these are present, we take credit for the good the Lord does through us; we regard our own benefit in what He gives us; we make much of ourselves and little of Him in the good that comes our way. The puffed-up bread (in this context anyway) seems to stand for good that human beings have tampered with; the unleavened bread stands for good from the Lord, accepted and appreciated as He gives it.

Like bread and its physical ingredients, **wine** and its ingredients correspond to something in the Lord. Wine is an expression on the physical plane of a certain kind of truth, and of certain functions that truth has in our spiritual development. Wine's correspondence and meaning rest not just in its properties, but in the biological/physiological processes by which it is made.

Wine is made from grapes. Grapes, as fruits, are symbolic of the Lord's love. The juice that comes from the grape (mostly water) corresponds to His truth, for truth flows from love. (Truth is love brought to view, expressed, given tools to work.) But grape juice that is not fermented stands for the Lord's truth received on the natural level—full of appearances and misconceptions, clouded by our natural desires and false hopes. After fermentation it stands for that truth received spiritually.

Fermentation happens when the yeast organisms (present everywhere) grow in the juice, feeding on the sugars there. As they work, the liquid is thinned, alcohol and carbon-dioxide (fizz) are produced. Eventually the yeast is killed by the alcohol. It sinks to the bottom along with any other sediment, and the clarified wine is siphoned off the top.

Fermentation corresponds to the process of temptation. We are able to grasp truth spiritually only through enduring temptations. The yeast (or leaven as above) stands for our impure desires and false ways of seeing things. These falsities grow in us, stealing our delight in what is good, sapping our energy for doing good, and clouding our sight of truth. Fermentation symbolizes the conflict between the truth and falsity, between good and evil in us. Through our efforts to let the Lord rule in us, a gradual purification takes place and our thinking becomes clearer. That's when we see the falsity in our thinking, and it is separated from the truth. This new truth is the clarified wine.

When we eat bread and drink wine, the meaning inherent in those elements links us with the Lord, their source. It also links us with angels, because they are in the same spiritual realities. This spiritual connection has power to the extent that we are receptive and "conscious," acting with spiritual intentionality, as we do in the Holy Supper.

To sum up

The main purpose of the Holy Supper is to help link us with the Lord. That is why He instituted it. In bringing ourselves *actually* before Him and accepting the bread and wine, we enact something that brings a response from the angels with us. All the elements involved contribute to this! To the extent that we have practiced repentance we are able to share in this response of the angels and are strengthened by it. Our bond with heaven and with the Lord becomes stronger! Is it any wonder that our Lord said: "*Do this* in remembrance of Me"?

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