General Church Education

Teacher Overview

The Writings for the New Church penned by Emanuel Swedenborg (1688-1772) outline five major phases of human spiritual development. Each developmental phase is called a “church.”

The Five Churches

For ages 11-13

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Teacher Overview: The Five Churches

The Lord longs to be connected with human beings, to share His love and wisdom with us, and to bless us. This is the purpose of creation. To this end, He reveals truths to us, so that we can know Him, believe in Him, and respond with love for Him. People on earth who have the truth and respond this way are called "the church."

Purpose of Creation

"The purpose of creation is a heaven from the human race." *Divine Providence* 323

"Every person is born for heaven and he who receives heaven in himself in the world is received [there]." *Heaven and Hell* 420

"The Lord did not create the universe for His own sake, but for the sake of those with whom He would be in heaven…. The Divine Love, and consequently Divine providence, has as its end a heaven consisting of people who have become or who are becoming angels." *Divine Providence* 27.2

"Every person, so long as he is living in the world, walks midway between heaven and hell and is thereby in equilibrium, and thus in freedom of choice either to look upwards to God or downwards towards hell." *True Christian Religion* 69.3

There has always been a church. The Lord has revealed truths to human beings from the beginning of humanity as people have been able and ready to receive them. The ability to receive truth has changed as the human race has grown in knowledge and has progressed—developing in a way that corresponds to the development of each human being.[1] As a result there have been five different churches throughout human history.[2]

Most Ancient Church

The people of the first church, called the "Most Ancient Church", would have seemed simple to us. They did not have written language or many of the things we associate with culture. But they were innocent and very wise. They were able to perceive the Lord in all things. The spiritual world was much more open to them. They could be led by visions of the Lord and of angels. They were content to live in the reality that their life was from the Lord, and that He gave them each moment what to think and do. This church existed before recorded history.

Ancient Church

In the process of time people lost this contentment. They wanted to have more of a sense that life was their own. This led that first church to fall. So, the Lord provided that a new church would begin. It is called the "Ancient Church." This church had truth in a written form. The Ancient Word, as it was called, was symbolic. It contained stories of people, animals, places, and events that taught about the Lord and about spiritual life. We would find them hard to understand. But because these early people thought in symbols, and understood their meaning, the Lord could lead them in this way.

1. *Apocalypse Explained* 948, 641; *True Christian Religion* 762.
2. *Arcana Coelestia* 4706, 10248.7, 10355; *True Christian Religion* 760.

In the process of time this church changed. People fell further from heavenly love and lost a clear understanding of what the symbols taught. Some people started sacrificing animals, thinking that this would please the Lord and connect them with Him. The Lord accepted this when He saw that they meant well. But it was not ideal. Eventually people turned some of the symbols, (for example, the symbols for people and animals) into idols, thinking they had power in themselves. Others used the symbols to manipulate people, which was a kind of magic.

There were three phases of the Ancient Church[3]:

- The first Ancient Church (named for 'Noah'; Genesis 5-9) which began in integrity.
- The second Ancient Church or Hebrew Church (named for 'Eber'; Genesis 10-11) marked the beginning of animal sacrifice.
- The third Ancient Church, the Israelitish Church, is often treated as a separate church.[4]

Israelitish Church

The "Israelitish Church" was a church because it had a new revelation from the Lord, the Old Testament. But the Israelitish Church was not a true church because there was very little genuine response to the Lord in understanding, love and life. Its outer form and rituals "pictured" or symbolized a church. The Old Testament records the story of a people that represents *symbolically* how we are to love, understand, and live.

Christian Church

When the Lord was born on earth, He brought a new revelation of truth. This revelation, the New Testament, showed much more directly and clearly who the Lord is and how we are to live. Consequently, the Christian Church was a new genuine church. Yet in the process of time this revelation too became falsified. People chose to see Jesus as a separate Person from the Father and Holy Spirit, rather than as a manifestation of the one God. They chose to lean on the idea that we are saved by confessing faith in the death of Jesus, rather than seeing the importance of repenting our sins. The Lord could only restore genuine truth by providing a new revelation.

New Church

When the world was ready for a clearer revelation given in rational terms, the Lord called Emanuel Swedenborg (1688-1772) and introduced him into the spiritual world. The Lord enlightened Swedenborg in the light of heaven, taught him "the doctrine of genuine truth" and gave him a knowledge of correspondences, which open the Word's spiritual meaning. He was given to restore our knowledge of life after death (known to the most ancient people on earth). This new revelation is called the Heavenly Doctrine. The New Church is named from the New Jerusalem which descends from God out of heaven at the close of the Book of Revelation. The Writings tell us that this church is the "crown of all the churches that have hitherto existed on the earth" (*True Christian Religion* 786).

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3. *Arcana Coelestia* 1285, 1327; *Divine Providence* 328.2; cf. *Arcana Coelestia* 1850.

4. The revelation to the Israelitish church was not distinctly different than the revelation in the Ancient Word. Both revelations were in symbolic/representative form. But the Ancient Word had been corrupted and scattered. The Hebrew Word restored to the world an intact revelation that had integrity. It was also given in correspondences "less remote," so that its spiritual meaning could be understood more clearly, once genuine truth was known (*Sacred Scripture* 102; *True Christian Religion* 279.2). This enabled it to serve succeeding churches.

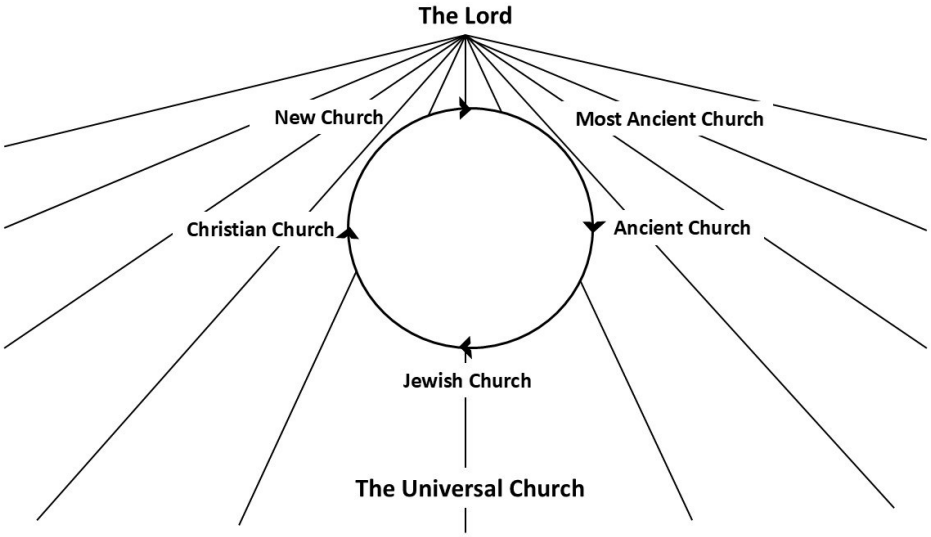
Universal and Specific Church

The Heavenly Doctrine distinguishes two types of churches which it calls universal and specific churches. The lessons in this book do not address this concept. However, the following information is provided so teachers may discuss it with their students, should they wish to do so.

> "The whole of heaven represents one human being, and the communities there represent the parts of his body, in accordance with the functions they perform. From this one may see how beautiful and delightful the representation in heaven of an empire, kingdom, or community would be if its citizens were linked to one another by charity and faith to form a body like that. Whenever possible the Lord also links communities together into that kind of body; for Divine Truth itself, which emanates from the Lord, introduces that state of order wherever that order is accepted. This is the origin of the state of order that exists in heaven. It exists on earth too, but the communities constituting it are scattered all over the earth and are made up of those who are governed by love to Him and charity towards the neighbor. But those scattered communities have been drawn together by the Lord in order that they too, like communities in heaven, may represent one human being. These communities exist not only within the Church but also outside it; and when taken all together they are called the Lord's Church, drawn together from the good scattered throughout all the earth…. This communion or Church is the Lord's kingdom on earth linked to the Lord's kingdom in heaven, and so to the Lord Himself." *Arcana Coelestia* 7396

> "The church of the Lord is spread over all the globe, and is thus universal. All those are in it who have lived in the good of charity in accordance with their religious belief. The church, where the Word is and by means of it the Lord is known, is in relation to those who are outside the church like the heart and lungs in a person." *Heaven and Hell* 328

Below is an artist's rendering which shows how the universal and specific churches have received the Lord's inflowing life throughout history.



Five Churches Overview Charts

The following charts provide a concise overview of the Writings' teachings about the Five Churches. The first chart summarizes how the Lord accommodated Himself to the changing states of the human race.

Church	Most Ancient Church	Ancient Church	Israelitish Church	Christian Church	New Church
Revelation	Direct revelation; written on the heart (Perceptive Word)	Ancient Word (Significative Word)	Old Testament (Representative Word)	New Testament (Interior Truths)	Heavenly Doctrine (More Interior Truths)
The Lord's means of communicating with the human race	Through angels; in nature, through the perception of correspondences	Studying correspondences and representations in a written Word	Angel of Jehovah; pillar of cloud and fire (Exodus 13)	Lord God Jesus Christ	Through the threefold Word (Old Testament, New Testament and Heavenly Doc-
Leading human love	Love to the Lord	Love to the neighbor	Obedience	Love to the neighbor	Love to the Lord

Nebuchadnezzar's Statue

Daniel 2

This second chart provides an overview of King Nebuchadnezzar's dream concerning a statue which was destroyed by a stone cut without hands. The Heavenly Doctrine relates this statue to the five churches. These teachings are drawn from *True Christian Religion* 760 and 762.

Nebuchadnezzar's Statue	Head	Chest & Arms	Belly & Thighs	Legs & Feet	Great Stone
Material	Gold	Silver	Bronze	Iron	Stone
Stage of humanity or of an individual	Infancy	Childhood	Adulthood	Old age	Resurrection
Time of day	Dawn	Noon	Afternoon	Night	New dawn
Season	Spring	Summer	Autumn	Winter	Eternal spring
Cardinal Direction	East	South	West	North	East
Associated Symbols in the Word	Adam	Noah to Eber	Moses & Elijah	Jesus Christ	Holy City, Bride & Woman clothed with the sun
Ages of the world (historic)	Golden age	Silver age	Copper age	Iron age	

The Gift of Conscience

Adapted from *The Human Mind and Its Regeneration* by the Rev. Grant H. Odhner

The Heavenly Doctrine describes a fundamental change that occurred in the mind (the will and understanding) between the Most Ancient Church and the Ancient Church. While the student lessons gloss over this concept it is sufficiently important that it is included as background for the teacher for a unit on the Five Churches.

The Lord's Goal

The Lord's goal is for us come to acknowledge that our life is from Him, that everything good and true is His. Our awareness and willing acknowledgment of this connects us with Him. For us to make this realization freely, we must be born in ignorance and participate in our education. We must choose or affirm—as though from our own power—the gifts that He gives us. Only then can we experience heaven.

The First People

The first people to make this choice were called the Most Ancient Church. They were led in a different way than later people because they did not inherit hereditary evil. The will they were born with could receive good affections. These affections were not part of their eternal character in infancy and childhood. They had to acquire a "new will" through choice and regeneration (*Arcana Coelestia* 9596e). But they could do this by experiencing them in the light of their growing wisdom and affirming them. They identified with what they spontaneously felt, so their minds were easily bent to good and did not identify with selfish feelings or have a false understanding that instinctually justified selfish desires.

> [T]he member of the Most Ancient Church was one in whom will and understanding formed one single mind … with him love was implanted in the will part of his mind, and so at the same time faith, which occupied the … understanding part. Their descendants therefore inherited a will and an understanding that made one. Consequently when self-love and resulting insane desires began to take possession of their will part where love to the Lord and charity towards the neighbor had been previously, not only did the will part … become utterly corrupted, but so also … did the understanding part…. They became the kind of people therefore for whom no restoration was possible.

The Development of Conscience

As people were born into hereditary evil their native will became corrupt and corrupted their understanding. To restore the ability to choose heaven, the Lord enabled us to see our loves more clearly so we could re-train ourselves to identify with the good loves. He did this by transferring the church to people who had a greater capacity to view the truth with their un-derstanding separately from their native will. This people is represented by "Noah," the pro-genitor of the Ancient Church. This enabled the good affections they received from birth (remnants) to touch them, without being twisted and overwhelmed by the lusts of their native will. They could be touched by an affection for truth, and eventually by a desire to

The Gift of Conscience (continued)

love their neighbor and the Lord. In this way they could increasingly see the evil working in their minds and resist it. The Lord could then build a "new will" through this understanding.

> The Lord made provision for humankind to be rehabilitated in the following particular manner: a person could be reformed and regenerated as regards ... the understanding, and a new will, which is conscience, could be implanted in him, by means of which the Lord might stimulate the good that stems from love or charity, and the truth of faith. In this way did the Lord's Divine mercy restore humanity. *Arcana Coelestia* 927.3

"Remants" and the New Will

The circle of life appears to start in the understanding with sensing and knowing. In reality it begins in the will with affection. From earliest infancy the Lord lets us experience heavenly affections. We feel these as our own, but they are miraculously separated from our old will so that we do not reflect on them in connection with our selfish desires. Nevertheless they are the source of our affection for truth which leads our minds outside of ourselves. The Writings call these early states of good "the beginning of the new will." Of course, this will is only given in a full way as we engage in repentance and allow the Lord to regenerate us.

> When he is a little child, a person receives good from the Lord, and this good is the good of innocence, such as little children have. This good makes the beginning of the new will in the person, and in the succeeding age it grows in accordance with his life of innocence with his companions and in accordance with his life of goodness and obedience toward his parents and masters, but still more with those who afterward let themselves be regenerated. *Arcana Coelestia* 9296.2

The New Will and Understanding are our Conscience

We often experience conscience as a voice of truth that confronts us, causing pain. "But conscience viewed in itself is not a pain, but a spiritual desire to act in accordance with whatever pertains to religion and faith" (*True Christian Religion* 666). Our common identification of conscience with the understanding, and the cold voice of truth, is consistent with the fact that the new will is said to be built up in and through the understanding. Yet, the fact is, the will for good lies within that voice of truth—not our will, to be sure, but the Lord's will working in us.

> The Lord rules the spiritual person through a conscience of what is good and true; and this conscience is formed … in the person's understanding, and is thus separated from what is of his will. And because it is wholly separated from what is of the will, it is very evident that a person never does anything good of himself; and since all the truth of faith is from the good of faith, it is evident that a human being never thinks anything true from himself, but that this is from the Lord alone. That he seems to do these things from himself is only an appearance; and because it is so, the really spiritual person acknowledges and believes it. From this it is evident that conscience given to the spiritual person by the Lord is as it were a new will, and thus that the person who has been created anew is endowed with a new will and from this with a new understanding. *Arcana Coelestia* 918