

# 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.<sup>1</sup> As a result there have been five different churches throughout human history.<sup>2</sup>

## 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<sup>3</sup>:

- 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.<sup>4</sup>

## 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.

