

## 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 understanding 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

### **“Remnants” 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