

Receiving the Lord's Invitation

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“A certain man gave a great supper and invited many” (Luke 14:16).

What does it mean to belong to a church? A person who is an active member of a church might do a number of things for that church. One person might attend services regularly, be a member of the Board, sit on a committee or two, and volunteer in several ways throughout the year. Another person might feel called to help out with the Sunday morning programs, serve as a greeter, volunteer in the school, and take the sacrament of the Holy Supper when it is offered. Still another person, in addition to attending worship services, might lead a work party, organize a fundraiser, and pitch in when called upon.

Truly, these are useful activities, gratefully received by any church organization. Committed members who give of their time and talents are what make a church work. Yet are these the activities that define church membership? What does it mean to be a member of the New Church? In answer to that question, many of us would intuitively go deeper. We would think about what the Church stands for, and contemplate membership in terms of the spiritual life it promotes. A passage from the Heavenly Doctrine for the New Church says basically this. It states,

The term ‘Church’ is not used because it is the place where the Word is and teachings drawn from it, or because it is where the Lord is known and the sacraments are celebrated. Rather it is the Church because people live in accordance with the Word or with teachings drawn from the Word, and seek to make those teachings their rule of life (Arcana Coelestia 5130).

To the extent that the church calls people, or the people of the church call each other, to put those teachings of the Word into their lives, to make the changes that need to be made, to interact with other people in the ways the Lord describes—to that extent they are true members of the church. At heart, a church is a place where people receive help for their spiritual lives.

A place of invitation. Today we’re going to look at one dimension of church membership—one quality of spiritual life which characterizes a true member. The church is a place of invitation, and a true member is someone who *receives that invitation*. A church is a place where people can come to hear the Lord inviting them to heaven, to feel called—invited—by Him to live the kind of life that leads to genuine happiness and blessing. It’s where we hear the Lord beckoning to us to make the teachings of the Word our rules for life.

The Parable of the Great Supper. With this concept of invitation in mind, we turn to the parable of the great supper. The Lord attended a dinner party at the house of one of the rulers of the Pharisees, apparently uninvited. As He looked around at these religious leaders and noted their attitude of superiority, He used this opportunity to teach an important message about His church. He told of a man who prepared a great supper and invited many guests. When everything was ready this man sent his servant out to call the guests, but instead of welcoming that invitation, they all made excuses (see Luke 14:15-24).

Think of the analogy of the church to that “great supper.” The church is the context in which the

Lord can invite us to dine with Him—to experience the joys of life in His presence. The Lord has prepared His church with a wonderful array of offerings—as a place of worship, instruction and support (see *Apocalypse Explained* 548:5). His invitation is extended to all people—not only to those who already know of the church and are “members” of it, but also to the poor, the maimed, the lame, and the blind, and then even further to anyone else who can be found. Can we not see the universal invitation of the Lord, to come and experience all that His church has to offer—all that He offers by means of His church?

Excuses, or unreceptive states. The main thrust of the parable, however, is that the invited guests refused to come! Continuing with the analogy, it’s not difficult to see that the Lord is teaching that some people don’t want what the church offers; they don’t want the spiritual nourishment which would give direction to their spiritual lives. There are attitudes in us, and in people in general, which are not receptive to this wonderful invitation. The fact is, sometimes we don’t see the need for spiritual food, for renewal at the Lord’s table, and some people are turned off by the teachings of the New Church for one reason or another. These non-receptive attitudes are involved in the excuses made by the invited guests.

“I have bought a piece of ground...” The first guest said: “I have bought a piece of ground, and I must go and see it. I ask you to have me excused” (Luke 14:18). A piece of ground stands for some part in us which receives truth, just as the ground receives seeds (*Arcana Coelestia* 6135:1). But in this case, the ground is receptive of a false idea, since the excuse leads away from the church. “Seeing” this piece of ground is a symbol for understand this false principle. Just as a person would walk the property-line of a place they had bought, noting the aesthetic features of the land and its various characteristics, so a person who is intrigued by some idea will contemplate it, and note its strengths and weaknesses (see *Apocalypse Explained* 260). So, in spiritual terms, this excuse is “I have bought into some falsity, and I am working it over in my mind.”

Now, nobody would actually say such a thing, but the concept behind this excuse is very real. Any one of us can be attracted to an idea or trend that is in conflict to what the Lord teaches in His Word. A person might feel intrigued by the idea that spiritual life and salvation turns on one heartfelt confession of faith, rather than a lifetime of dedication to a set of spiritual principles. This may be a conscious thought, or a general attitude. But, if a person has this concept in mind, will he be paying much attention to teachings which stress the importance of spiritual growth, the dangers of procrastination, or the spiritual damage done by indulging too much in the pleasures of this world? Is he going to hear the Lord’s invitation to a happier, more pleasant life where people treat each other in charitable ways? No, rather this false idea leads away from the truth. The same could be said of dishonesty, of dirty jokes, of condescension or the idea that we’re better than others. All these things are a challenge to church beliefs, or to the teachings of the Word. This is what is involved in the first excuse: “I have bought a piece of ground, and I must go and see it.”

“I have bought five yoke of oxen...” The second excuse is worse: “I have bought five yoke of oxen, and I am going to test them” (Luke 14:19). The Heavenly Doctrine tells us that “‘Oxen’ in the Word symbolize natural affections, and ‘five yoke of oxen’ stand for all those affections or desires that lead away from heaven” or the church (*Apocalypse Explained* 548:5). This includes any kind of selfishness or worldly ambition that excludes religious principles. It’s a step beyond

contemplating an idea which contradicts what the Word teaches, because now the *affections* are involved. Now the person wants to act on the false principle when the opportunity arises. Returning to the concept of instantaneous salvation and the spiritual procrastination it engenders, a person might feel an impulse to do what he knows to be wrong, yet justify it or reason with himself, saying, "I'll take care of that later. I want this right now." People in this state don't want to hear what the Word teaches because it goes against what they are *feeling*. They are antagonistic to the Lord's invitation to a better way of acting. Instead of the affection for the truth moving them, a hellish affection temporarily takes control. Buying five yoke of oxen and testing them represents the affections we struggle with most of our lives—hellish urges to act in ways that are contrary to the Lord's ways.

"*I have married a wife...*" But when we come to the third excuse, there is no desire to change at all. "I have married a wife, and therefore I cannot come." On the face of it, this sounds like a good excuse. But "married a wife" here means having a confirmed evil affection (see *Arcana Coelestia* 7022, 4823:2). A "wife" in the Word can represent heavenly affections or, in the opposite sense, hellish ones. All people have evil tendencies from heredity. When they "marry" them, they are no longer simply tendencies, but rather hellish *loves* which have become a part of them. Again revisiting the concept of spiritual procrastination, a person could reach the point where he will never change, because he has confirmed a way of life that does not include spiritual effort, and he is unwilling to be convinced otherwise. This attitude is an established habit in this person's life, and one that he has no intention of changing. This third excuse is the least receptive to the Lord's invitation. In fact, it despises the truths of the Lord's Word which contradict this pattern of behavior and counts them as nothing.

Receptive states. When the servant heard these excuses, he reported them to his master. The parable continues with the words, "Then the master of the house, being angry, said to his servant, 'Go out quickly into the streets and lanes of the city, and bring in here the poor and the maimed and the lame and the blind'" (Luke 14:21). The "master" obviously represents the Lord, but rather than anger, the Heavenly Doctrine tells us to consider the Lord's great displeasure, and His sadness at such attitudes (see *Arcana Coelestia* 9167:2; *Apocalypse Explained* 693). The Lord grieves when people turn their backs on Him. Yet He still loves these people and works for their salvation.

This mercy of the Lord becomes clear in the instructions of the master. He sent his servant out into the streets and lanes to bring needy people to his great supper. Searching in the streets and lanes of the city has two meanings. First, the Lord searches for all people who are receptive to His teachings to become members of His church (see *Apocalypse Explained* 223:22). He prepares them to receive the message of the New Church in ways that we can never know. Second, He searches for states which are receptive to Him in the people who are already in His church. For there are other parts to us, besides the ones that make excuses in our spiritual lives. There are also receptive parts that respond to the His teachings and welcome the invitation to the life He offers. So the master of the house sent his servant out into the streets and lanes of the city. This represents a search for some genuine truth, or some goodness which springs from a desire to do what is right (*Arcana Coelestia* 2336:4).

These parts in us which recognize the need for the Lord's truth and yearn for the spiritual

nourishment of His great supper, are further symbolized by the people who were invited: the poor, the maimed, the lame and the blind. The “poor” represent people who are in few truths, but wish to be instructed (*Arcana Coelestia* 9253). The “lame” and “maimed” stand for those who try to do what is right, but lack the specific guidance they need to make wise choices (*Arcana Coelestia* 4302:4). And the “blind” represent those who are in ignorance (*Arcana Coelestia* 2383). The common denominator of all these states in us is the need and desire for the Lord’s nourishment. We want something better. We welcome the invitation to a deeply satisfying way of life—one that leads to genuine friendships in this world, and to patterns of behavior that will bring us to live one day among the angels of heaven.

But the invitation does not stop there. After the servant brought in all these needy people, he reported to the master that there was still room left at the feast. So the master urged him to go out into the hedges and highways beyond the city, and to compel anyone he could find to come in—“that my house may be filled” (Luke 14:23). What a beautiful picture this is of the love the Lord has, which reaches out to all people. And we can emulate this love to some degree by doing what we can to share His invitation with as many people as we can.

Conclusion. The main objective of this extended invitation was to fill the master’s house. So the Lord welcomes anyone into His Church who displays the least bit of interest. In the same way, He uses any little kernel of curiosity, every bit of concern we have for what is right, to lead us more fully into the Church.

It is this same sense of invitation that the Lord inspired in the disciples at the very end of His life on earth. He said to them, “Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you” (Matthew 28:19-20).

The Lord’s house will be filled. He searches for receptive attitudes in receptive people, just as the master searched for guests to attend his supper. Anyone is welcome, except those who don’t want to come. Those guests who made excuses represent people who look elsewhere for nourishment. Unfortunately, this only leaves them in trouble—hungry and cast out.

As members of the Lord’s church, we need to see if our attitudes and actions are similar to those guests who made excuses. We also need to foster the characteristics which are represented by the poor, the maimed, the lame, and the blind—states of readiness and humility, and of eagerness for the Lord’s help. We need to feel called by others (disciples) to become disciples ourselves. We need to hear the Lord saying to us, by means of His church, “Come, for all things are now ready” and to respond to His invitation.

Amen.

Readings: Luke 14:12-24; Matthew 28:16-20; *Arcana Coelestia* 6637:2