

## **Truly Christian Charity**

by the Rev. Kurt Horigan Asplundh

*A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another.... By this all will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another (John 13:34, 35).*

It is the teaching of all true religion that a person should love his neighbor. When the Lord was asked which of the commandments of Jewish law was the greatest He included two: to love the Lord and to love the neighbor (Matthew 22:37-40).

The Lord came on earth and affirmed these ancient truths, and He also gave a “new” commandment for Christians: to love one another. Throughout His ministry the Lord taught the message of love for others—“This is My commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you” (John 15:12)—even, “love your enemies” (Matthew 6:44). And He summarized the spirit of a Christian life in what has come to be known as the Golden Rule: “Whatever you want men to do to you, do also to them, for this is the Law and the Prophets” (Matthew 7:12).

### **Christian Charity**

Another name for this Christian love is “charity.” The apostle Paul describes this love as the greatest of all gifts from God:

*Charity suffers long and is kind; charity does not envy; charity does not parade itself, is not puffed up; does not behave rudely, does not seek its own, is not provoked, thinks no evil; does not rejoice in iniquity, but rejoices in the truth; bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things (I Corinthians 13:4-7).*

We could wish that we had this quality of charity in our hearts! We could wish that it inspired the hearts of all people. What a different world it would be if such charity prevailed, and all people loved their neighbor as much as themselves!

This is the hope of Christianity. Yet this hope has not fully been realized over the centuries. The Christian message has been spread far and wide, but the spirit of love and charity for which it calls has not always followed. Instead of love and charity, we see hatred and intolerance, dominion and selfishness. If the neighbor is loved, often it is only because he benefits us. The innocent charity of many in the world is soon turned sour and cynical when others take advantage of it. We become suspicious of the efforts of individuals and organizations seeking to “do good” in the world, because their attempts often seem misguided or tinged with self-interest.

The nature of human behavior is all too well known to us, and few are willing in such a world to “sell all that they have”—to commit their lives utterly to the service of others. And those who do are seriously prone to the subtle evil of taking merit for their works, believing that they may be great in the kingdom of heaven. Such do not really love the neighbor, but the idea of being great.

## Charity and the New Church

Is there any hope for the establishment of a spirit of true Christian charity in the world? We believe there is! The Lord has not left His people comfortless; He has come to us again, opening up for us a new understanding of the concept of charity. The Heavenly Doctrine for the New Church has reaffirmed the importance of loving the neighbor as an essential of religious life. We are taught that there are three essentials of the church: “an acknowledgment of the Divine of the Lord, an acknowledgment of the holiness of the Word, and the life that is called charity” (*Divine Providence* 259:3). True charity is “an internal affection which consists in a heartfelt desire to do the neighbor good...and this without any reward” (*Arcana Coelestia* 8033). “This love is truly human,” we are told, and is such that a person may “wish as well to the neighbor as to himself and even better...” (*Divine Providence* 275). Heaven is in this love.

The Heavenly Doctrine now unfolds the true meaning of charity and tells us how to cultivate a genuine love of the neighbor. However, the key to understanding charity is also found in the Gospels. There we read of the young ruler who came to ask the Lord how to find eternal life. “Good master,” he said, “what good thing shall I do that I may have eternal life?” The Lord replied, “Why do you call Me good? No one is good but One, that is, God. But if you want to enter into life, keep the commandments” (Matthew 19:16,17). The young man said that he had kept all the commandments from his youth and asked what he still lacked. The Lord then said: “If you want to be perfect, go, sell what you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow Me” (*ibid.*).

Many have missed the important point of this conversation. Some have literally sold their possessions to benefit the poor, and many believe that we must totally dedicate our life to good works to obtain heavenly life. But others, like the young man who went away unable to make so great a sacrifice, may feel that the Lord is asking too much. Only a few saintly people could possibly be so unselfish and loving as this.

In fact, it is not so difficult to live a Christian life or the life of charity as has been believed. The Lord has not made it difficult. He has made the attainment of spiritual life possible for all of us—not, as some believe, by His death—to make up for all our human weakness and sin—but by His life whereby He can be a living presence and force in our lives.

### The Source of All Charity

“No one is good but One, that is, God.” This is the key. All good is from the Lord, who took to Himself all power in heaven and on earth. We cannot do anything good from ourselves. Yet a common idea of charity is that we must do good to others: give them money, make room for the homeless, visit the sick. We know people who do such things, and we may think to ourselves, “What a good person.” Wrong. “No one is good but One, that is, God.” When we see an act of charity, it is good only if it is from the Lord. It is the Lord’s life operating through the person.

And this is common. The Lord is constantly operating through people to bring about what is good. The world is full of people who are instruments of this good, especially children and the innocent. But the good is not theirs. They can take no credit for it.

Think of the Lord's good as a sphere of love constantly surrounding us, much as the sun's heat is constantly bathing the earth. Where it is received, it works and produces something of good. The sun's heat warms a plant form—enlivens it—causing it to bud, blossom, and bring forth fruit. So, too, the Lord's love flows easily into children and innocent people and stirs them to feel a love for others that they willingly share. This is the source of charity—why a child feels compassion for a beggar; why a mother loves her helpless infant and gives hours to its care. We all may be stirred by an appeal for help and, almost without a thought for ourselves, turn to give it. This is the love of the neighbor, or charity, that the Lord inspires in us.

### **Non-Reception**

Why, then, isn't good universal? What has gone wrong that we fall far short of universal charity?

Two things have happened which deeply affect our quality of life. First, we have become non-receptive of good. Second, wisdom has been separated from love. In either case, charity languishes and fails.

We have become non-receptive of good because we have loved evil more than good, and darkness rather than light. What we have done is pervert the Lord's life as we receive it. We twist the love that flows in, turning it inward to ourselves instead of allowing it to go out to others. So life, instead of affecting us with a desire to serve the neighbor and act with charity, stirs selfish desires, contempt of others, and many related evils. What was pure and good from the Lord has become, in us, perverted and evil. We stifle or extinguish the true nature of the Lord's love, especially by accepting the illusion that the love or the life is really our own. As long as we think and believe in this way, we are unwilling to let the love do the Lord's work. Instead, we want it to serve us. And, as a result, charity is extinguished.

The Lord has now exposed our fallen nature. It explains why there is hatred instead of love, selfishness instead of sharing, and all the perversions of life that we know so well. But the Lord has also revealed the Divine solution to the problem. He has provided the means by which we can be changed from non-receivers to receivers of good. This is not by a sudden miraculous transformation, but by a gradual, step-by-step process.

### **The Restoration of Charity**

The first thing that leads to the restoration of the life of charity with us is to look to the Lord for the power to shun the evils that rule our mind. This is an amazing new doctrine for the New Church. The Lord does not say, "Do good to your neighbor," because He knows that if we did that in our present state of mind we would simply count it as a credit to ourselves and do it for some selfish end. Instead, He teaches, "Do not do evil to your neighbor!" Consider these teachings:

*At the present day it is believed that charity is simply doing good, and that then one does not do evil; consequently that the first thing of charity is to do good, and the second not to do evil. But it is wholly the reverse; the first thing of charity is to put away evil, and the second to do good (True Christian Religion 437).*

*The point of inquiry is, how can one love the neighbor? Whether he can do so before he shuns these evils and fights against them? ...It is obvious that he cannot come into that love until he removes these evils.... And to love the neighbor from the heart, before this, is against a person's nature. The belief prevails in the Christian world that whoever has faith loves the neighbor; but that belief is erroneous.... No one can have faith in which there is any life unless he shuns evils as sins, yea, so far as he shuns them. From all this now it is plain that the first of charity is not to do evil to the neighbor for not to do evil to the neighbor is to fight against the evils in one's self, and repent of them; and that the second of charity is to do good to the neighbor (Charity 210).*

This is the explanation of the Lord's words to the Pharisees, whom He called hypocrites: "Cleanse first the inside of the cup and of the platter" (Matthew 23:26). So also must we strive to cleanse our life, particularly by refraining from doing any evil against our neighbor. As we succeed in putting away evils, the Lord's affection of good will flow into us, and we will become an instrument of charity for Him.

### **Wise Charity**

Let us turn now to the second thing that has happened that deeply affects our charity: the separation of wisdom from love. What does this mean? When good is separated from wisdom it operates unwisely, ineffectively, sometimes detrimentally. Sometimes a well meaning person acts for some good end but causes damage through a lack of understanding about how to act.

True charity, then, must be wise, prudent, and informed. But can we really have a "heartfelt desire to do the neighbor good" and yet be cautious or restrained in the way we help him? Is it possible that we could refuse to help an indigent neighbor out of a true concern for his welfare, *prudently* withholding aid from him? This is an important element of genuine charity. It does not limit the love that prompts our mercy, but directs it to the most effective end.

The Heavenly Doctrine teaches that

*the life which has heaven in it is a life according to the truths and goods of faith.... Unless these are the rules and principles of...[a person's] life, in vain does he look for heaven, no matter how he has lived; for without these truths and goods a person is like a reed which is shaken by every wind; for he is bent by evils equally as by goods, because he has nothing of truth and good made firm within him whereby he may be kept by the angels in truths and goods (Arcana Coelestia 7197).*

The lack of principles is the weakness in much of the charity we see in the world today. For example, a child's innocent compassion for a beggar may be turned to something tragic. The aid given might allow the beggar to be confirmed in his indolence, or to indulge in a habit that could even endanger his life. "A clear distinction must be made between spiritual good and natural good," the Heavenly Doctrine teaches. We are also told that

*Spiritual good has its quality from the truths of faith.... The good which is formed through the truths of faith is a plane into which heaven can flow...and lead a person...but not so natural good; and therefore they who are in natural good can be as easily carried away by falsity as by truth...and they can be as easily led by evil as by good.... They are like feathers in the wind (Arcana Coelestia 7761).*

Thus, “it is the part of Christian prudence to search well the quality of a person’s life, and to exercise charity accordingly. The person of the internal church does this with discrimination, thus with intelligence...” (Arcana Coelestia 6407). And we are told that “The more of truth there is insinuated, the more is the life of charity perfected; wherefore, *according to the quality and quantity of truth, so is the charity with a man*” (Arcana Coelestia 2189). Love of the neighbor must be guided and made effective by wisdom. And wisdom, like love, is also from God, and its principles are revealed in His Word.

If our charitable goal is to see that the greatest good is done, many intelligent decisions must be made, even if some of them are unpopular.

### **Charity in Everything**

The new thing that has been revealed for the New Church is the dimension of spiritual values. We need to recognize the deeper values of life which the Lord has made known. This involves

*clearly discerning who and of what character are those upon whom benefits are to be conferred, and in what manner to each one...but yet with such prudence that while the external person is benefited the internal person may also be benefited at the same time. For he who does well to the external person and ill to the internal person does not practice charity; and therefore when the one is done, the other must also be looked to (Arcana Coelestia 9209:2).*

We have been given a new responsibility in seeking and perfecting our love of the neighbor. Our concern must be not only with the neighbor in the external sense, but with the spiritual neighbor as well.

Charity to the neighbor is sometimes thought to consist only in what we give to the needy and to good causes. The Heavenly Doctrine, however, teaches that true charity enters into *everything of our life* and is to be lived “perpetually.” “Genuine charity consists in acting prudently and to the end that good may come thereby” (Arcana Coelestia 8120). It is “doing good to the neighbor daily and continually...” (True Christian Religion 422).

Yet, “he who places charity in good deeds alone cannot do this perpetually,” we are told (Charity 155). How, then, are we to obey the Lord’s command to “love our neighbor as ourselves”? The answer is that charity consists in “doing right in every work, and one’s duty in every office” (Arcana Coelestia 8121). “Charity is all the work of his calling which a person does from the Lord; he does this from the Lord when he flees from evils as sins” (Divine Love and Wisdom 253). “Christian charity with everyone,” we are told, “consists in faithfully performing what

belongs to his calling, for by this, if he shuns evils as sins, he every day is doing goods” (*Doctrine of Life* 114).

Once Swedenborg heard a discussion in a place of learning in the spiritual world. Opinions were given on the nature of charity. At the conclusion of this consideration, after a number of opinions had been given, he asked permission to present his opinion as well. “It is my opinion,” Swedenborg said, “that charity is to act with judgment from a love of justice in every employment and office, but from a love derived from no other source than the Lord God the Savior” (*True Christian Religion* 459:13). Thus he summarized the doctrine of the New Church about charity.

Through this new knowledge, we may seek to live the life of charity more fully and perfectly than has ever been possible before. True charity, then, is an essential of religious life, it is not difficult because it comes from a love flowing from the Lord, and it bears within it the life and delight of heaven itself. As Isaiah said:

*If you extend your soul to the hungry and satisfy the afflicted soul, then your light shall dawn in the darkness, and your darkness shall be as the noonday. The Lord will guide you continually, and satisfy your soul in drought, and strengthen your bones; you shall be like a watered garden, and like a spring of water, whose waters do not fail. Those from among you shall build the old waste places; you shall raise up the foundations of many generations; and you shall be called the repairer of the breach, the restorer of streets to dwell in (Isaiah 58:10-12).*

Amen.

Lessons: Isaiah 58:3-12; Matthew 19:16-22; *True Christian Religion* 422 heading, 423