

What is New Church Education?

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Simply put it is spiritual education guided by New Church principles. A next-level definition describes some of the key goals: To open the eyes of children to spiritual reality, helping them to become loving, wise, and useful human beings, and they make progress on their journey toward heaven. The fact is, Divine revelation has a tremendous amount to say about this subject. Here are eight ways of describing New Church education:

1. “Bringing the Lord to Children and Children to the Lord.”

There is a famous episode from the Lord’s life recorded in three of the Gospels, where parents brought children to Him “that He might touch them.” The disciples, as you may recall, rebuked those parents, thinking, apparently, that the Lord was too important to be bothered with children. But the Lord said, “Let the little children come to Me, and do not forbid them, for of such is the kingdom of God” (Mark 10:13-14).

This quote, perhaps more than any others in the Word, has become a focal-point for the use of New Church education. It’s about bringing children to the Lord. It’s an intentional commitment on the part of parents that that the Lord influence their children’s lives. So they take their children to church, or seek resources to teach them about the Lord. The church can respond by “bringing the Lord to children” in every children’s talk, Sunday school lesson, video, or school classroom.

2. “An Extension of the Home.”

Another key quote from the Word that speaks to this use appears in the book of Deuteronomy. After calling the Israelites to pay attention to the Lord’s commandments, particularly the first and great commandment to love the Lord their God, the instruction continues, “You shall teach them diligently to your children...” (Deuteronomy 6:6-7). So much of the imagery of that text focuses on the home and what happens in it. Many a parent has correctly heard the call to teach their children the contents of the Word—the stories as well as the do’s and don’ts from the Lord’s perspective. As children get older, it might look like conversations focused on the spiritual principles that lead to wise decisions. Again, parents will often turn to their church for assistance, so that their children can launch into life with a strong sense of what the Lord teaches.

3. “Success in This World and the Next.”

Success is a word that has many connotations, some of which lend themselves to getting ahead in this world and making lots of money. It can also capture a much more noble pursuit. Nowhere is that better evident than in the commission of Joshua. He was to meditate in the Book of the Law and do according to all that is written in it. “For then,” the Lord said, “you will make your way prosperous, and then you will have good success” (Joshua 1:8).

The phrase “good success” brings into the equation the Lord’s definition of achievement. It means being a good person or successfully living according to the teachings of the Word. It includes successfully raising a family, or serving in a job that intentionally makes the world a better place,

or developing skills of truly wise friendship. It is for these reasons that some people have used the phrase, “success in this world and the next” to capture the spirit of religious education in a New Church context.

4. “Opening the Eyes to Spiritual Reality.”

In the Psalms we read, “The eyes of all look expectantly to You...” (Psalm 145:15). In the Gospel of Luke we learn of two disciples on a journey to the town of Emmaus shortly after the sad story of the crucifixion. The Lord joined them, but they did not know Him until He dined with them and broke bread. Then it says, “Their eyes were opened, and they knew Him” (Luke 24:31). So it is with the spiritual dimension of raising children. The goal is to open their spiritual eyes so that they may come to know the Lord and see the things He wants to show them.

This begs the question, “What would you most want your children to see as they grow?” Wouldn’t we want them to see people worshiping on a regular basis, praying, or opening copies of the Word and learning from them? And wouldn’t we want them to see examples of honesty or kindness or usefulness?

5. “Helping People Become Loving, Wise, and Useful Human Beings.”

There is a phrase that captures the goal of some of our New Church schools, namely to “feed the mind, touch the heart, and prepare for life.” This three-part purpose was chosen because it describes who we are as human beings (see *True Christianity* 744). We have minds that can think and learn, we have hearts that can care and love, and we have bodies that are incredibly capable of useful action. And a growing desire to become a loving, wise, and useful person is what makes us “truly human” (*Conjugal Love* 269).

The beauty of this way of thinking of education is that it accords with the coaching and guidance that most parents and teachers do on a daily basis. “Was that kind?” “What a thoughtful thing to do.” “What would be a wiser way of handling the situation?” “Can you help me?” “Hey you’re really good at...” And so on.

6. “Developing Spiritual Habits.”

We know that we learn through repeated trial and error, or through practice (see *Arcana Caelestia* 1050). It is not unreasonable, then, to see the whole process of development as a series of habit-forming activities. The amazing thing, though, is it’s not just about developing certain skills. It actually gets to the heart of character formation, and in spiritual terms, the development of a heavenly disposition. A teaching along these lines reminds us that what becomes habitual and ingrained in our character “flows spontaneously into action” (see *Arcana Caelestia* 3843).

So we might ask, “What do we most want to become habitual with children as they grow?” or “What do we want to flow spontaneously into action?” The list includes such things as apologizing and taking responsibility for their actions, considering the usefulness of what they are about to do before they do it, responding with kindness, speaking truthfully, treating others with respect, being generous with their time and energy, persevering, and many other things.

7. “The Formation of Conscience.”

A seventh way of viewing this use of spiritual education focuses on the internal motivation of each child. We know that parents, teachers and others provide useful boundaries for children as they grow. “No, you are not allowed to walk home after dark by yourself.” “You need to say sorry for what you just said.” “It would be really great if you took better care of your things.” But isn’t the goal to not have to say these kinds of things as often? We rejoice when children choose to do the right things without being asked or corrected.

The word that the Word uses for this process is conscience. Conscience is that “still small voice” in our minds where the Lord speaks to us, letting us know what is good and what is bad (see 1 Kings 19:12). It is formed “from things revealed in the Word” (*Arcana Caelestia* 371). We know that conscience is strengthened by the use of it, and weakened by the ignoring of it. We learn that people who act in accordance with conscience experience “the quiet of peace and internal blessedness,” whereas those who act against conscience “experience disturbance and pain” (*Heavenly Doctrine* 133). A wise parent or teacher might say to a child, “If you feel bad about it, it’s probably a good thing,” or “The best way to avoid a guilty conscience is to be honest,” or “Notice how good it feels to do something that really helps someone else.”

8. “Fostering Innocence.”

A final way we could define this use is as an effort to foster innocence. Once the Lord was asked, “Who is greatest in the kingdom of heaven?” In answer, He set a young child in the midst of them and said, “Assuredly, I say to you, unless you are converted and become as little children, you will by no means enter the kingdom of heaven” (Matthew 18:1,3).

It isn’t hard to see the Lord urging those people toward internal purity, the kind of purity we see in little children. We know that children generally have an openness to learning and being taught. Of course they can be stubborn and self-centered, but more often than not they know they’re not the ones in charge, and submit to the authority of the adults in their lives. This willingness to follow those in charge, or openness to guidance, is captured in a far-reaching definition of innocence given in the teachings of the New Church, namely “a willingness to be led by the Lord and not by ourselves” (*Heaven and Hell* 280).

The goal in terms of education then, whether in the home or in a church or school setting, is to support that openness and willingness to be led—to guide young people to that “nothing to hide” state more often in their lives, and to bring the Lord into the equation as often as possible.