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New Church Day Talk by Revd Jack Dunion

A talk given during a Zoom service of worship by the Revd Jack Dunion, our Spiritual Leader, on New Church Day, Sunday 21st June 2020.



**I saw the Holy City the New Jerusalem, coming
down out of heaven from God.**

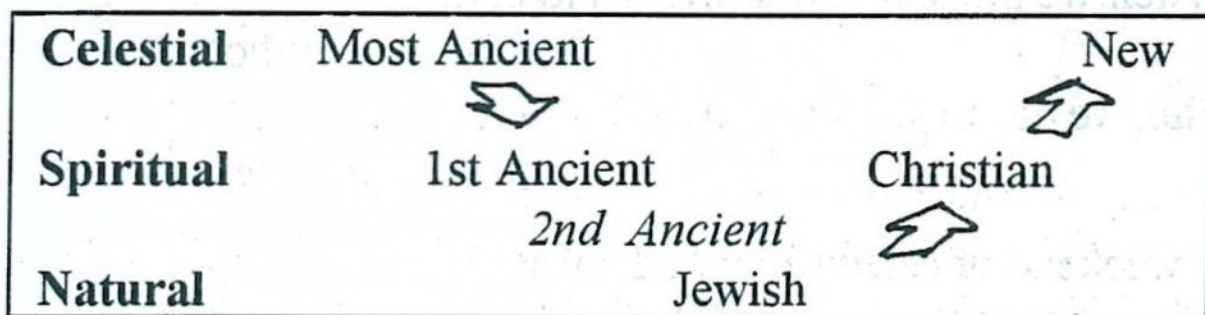
Rev. 21:2

One of the most common questions people ask me as a minister is, What is the name of your church? While I am delivering the response 'New Jerusalem

Church' I am often preparing for the next question, which will almost certainly be, What's the difference between your church and other churches? Even today I struggle in answering that question, because there is no **'one size fits all'** answer, to give. Each response must be adapted to the individual enquiring. However, Emanuel Swedenborg tells us that by the New Jerusalem Church is meant a fifth and final church to be established on the earth.

But what exactly is the New Jerusalem Church?

Well, let's start from the beginning. We are told that throughout history four churches have existed on earth, or four ages reflecting the relationship between God and His created beings. Swedenborg referred to these four ages as the Most Ancient Church, the Ancient Church, the Israelite (or Representative) Church, and the Christian Church.



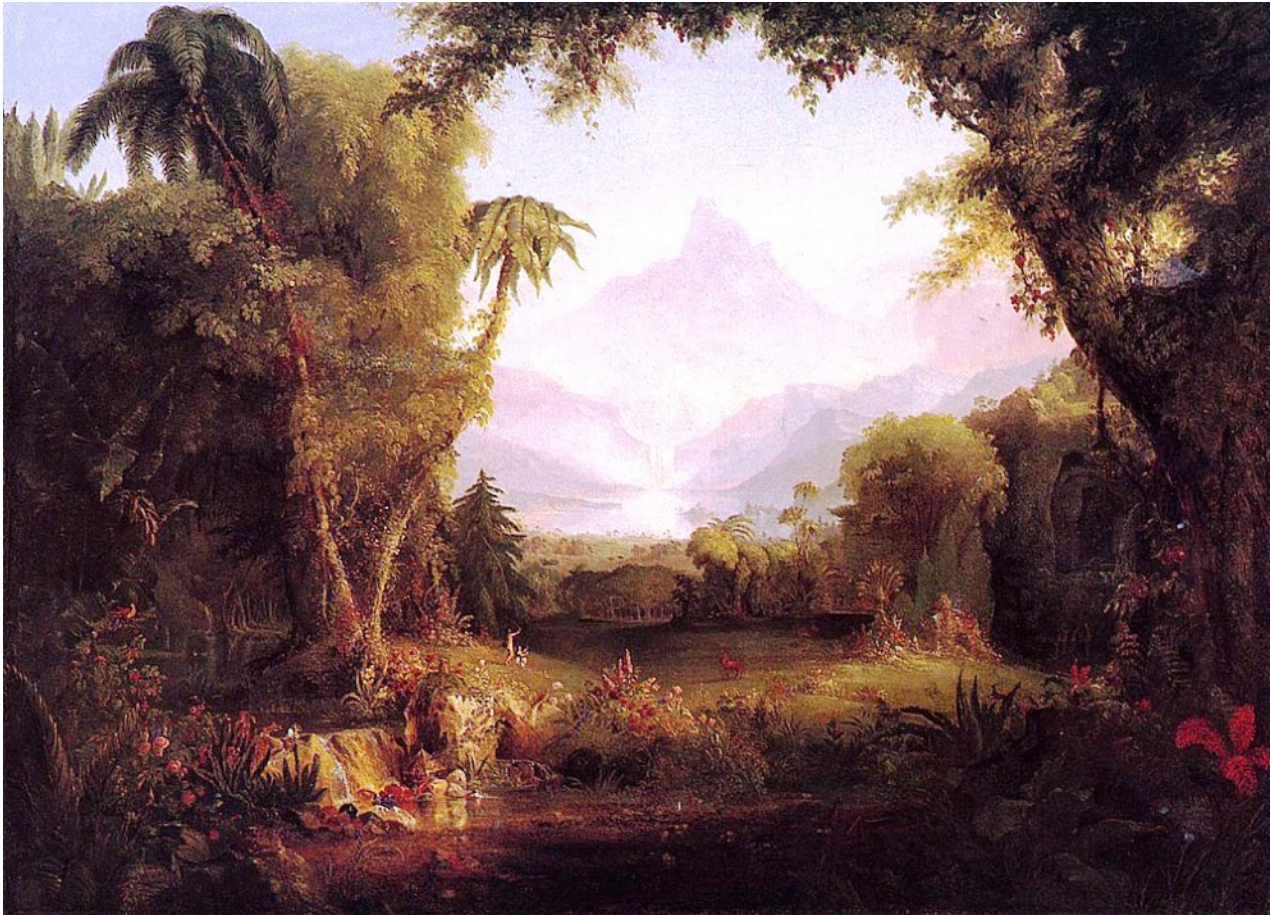
But he goes on to say that after the rise and fall of these four churches, there will be a fifth church on earth which will never come to an end. This is what is meant by the new Jerusalem coming down out of heaven from God.

One thing that cannot be denied is that every human society in history has worshipped a deity. No other species on earth has done this, because no other species has the ability to reason and make choices. Even today, most reasonable people will conclude that there is an intelligent designer behind creation. As for our ancient ancestors, it is very clear from archaeological discoveries that God and the afterlife were an absolute priority. What then made them so certain about the afterlife that they would give it such priority status? Swedenborg tells us it was because our early ancestors communicated directly with angels and spirits. They loved the Lord above everything else, and so their interiors were open all the way to the Lord. Their love of the Lord caused them to inwardly perceive what was true. These people are represented in the early chapters of Genesis by Adam.

In the Word Adam stands for the people of the Most Ancient Church, and we can know what went wrong in the Most Ancient Church from the spiritual sense of the Word.

We heard in our reading from Genesis 3:1-6 how Adam was placed in a beautiful garden. God told the man not to eat from the tree in the middle of the garden, *or you will die*. By

the garden is meant the human mind and by the trees in the garden are meant all the perceptions within the mind. Being pure in heart with pure perceptions the people meant by Adam are said to have lived in a beautiful garden. The one tree in the garden however that they were not to eat from represents the perception or appearance that life is from themselves.



This appearance still exists with us today, as it always has. As we read in our New Church faith this morning,

Good actions are to be done as if by ourselves, but it must be acknowledged they are from the Lord working in us and through us

This appearance that life is from ourselves must always be present in the garden, because we must always be able to feel as if life is from ourselves. But we are also warned not to take such an appearance to be the reality.

So, Adam (or the people of the Most Ancient Church) was told not to eat of that tree or he would die. Eating something in the spiritual sense means making it our own. It's the same with eating physical food. The physical food we eat goes towards the make-up of our physical bodies, and so we say, We are what we eat.

Spiritually, eating is acting from what we believe to be true. So, when it comes to our spiritual life we are what we eat spiritually. Being told not to eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil means not acting from the appearance or the false belief that life is from ourselves. But as we know, Adam ate the fruit, and so this false belief entered the human will and the people of the Most Ancient Church began to swallow the appearance of self-life as the reality. And so the decline of the Most Ancient Church began, the so-called fall of man.

After the Most Ancient Church came to an end, a new church, the Ancient Church, was raised up by the Lord. These people now perceived God through the correspondences of natural things with spiritual ones. People now saw God and heavenly truths reflected back from the world around them. But in the course of time people began to lose the knowledge of what natural things corresponded to, and that church too declined and eventually came to an end. So the Lord provided a third church, called the Israelite (or representative) Church. This church helped preserve a spiritual connection through the actual practices which represented spiritual realities. This is why they were commanded to observe very strict practices through their animal sacrifices and burnt offerings which preserved the connection between spiritual and natural things. The Lord at that time was also able to open the spiritual eyes of some who became known as the prophets. The prophets had spiritual visions which conveyed instructions and they warned of the consequences if these things were ignored.

But the Israelite church helped to preserve the link between the spiritual and natural worlds through representative practices. They no longer knew what exactly was being represented by these. Had they fallen away from these things the connection between spiritual and natural things would have been severed.

If that which is spiritual and from the Lord, who is life itself, isn't able to flow into natural things, there can be no life, and the human race would have perished! So the Lord Himself came into the world, called His apostles and raised up the fourth church on earth, which was the Christian Church; and the Christian Church, as with the three churches prior, also declined and has all but come to an end today.

But through the Christian Church the Lord has laid the foundations for something far more glorious, which is to be the fifth and final church on earth, which is meant by the New Jerusalem coming down out of heaven from God.

We are told in the Writings of that this whole process is like the growth of a human being, which must pass through the stages of life like an individual. That is to say, from infancy to youth, from this to manhood, and finally to old age; and then, when he dies, he will rise again.



The Lord lived a life on earth and founded the Christian church to prepare the human race to receive this New Church. He Himself is working among and through the whole human race, gradually freeing our world from the grip of falsity. It may not appear so to us, but it is definitely so. At this day we all know something is happening; we are all aware of unprecedented changes happening in all areas of life. All the old institutions have broken down, all the barriers that keep us apart are being systematically dismantled. Information is no longer kept hidden; everything, for good or ill, is being made known.

This is no accident; it is the result of the Lord's New Church coming down. We

are being prepared for the reception of this New Church. The principles of the New Church have permeated the whole of society and the human race in general is becoming more open and receptive of spiritual ideas, and abler to share these with one another. The New Jerusalem is not dropping out of the physical sky, it is descending from heaven into and through human beings. This is all truly part of what John's vision means in the book of Revelation when he said,

I saw the Holy City the New Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God

Additional references for this talk

Not knowing about the internal sense of the Word, it would be easy for people to take the words 'the Holy City coming down out of heaven' Rev. 21:2, to mean that a city will descend out of the physical sky. Sincere readers of the Word may feel guilty, because although they want to believe it, they know in their hearts that this flies in the face of reason.

Those people then might feel relieved to read in TCR 107 that

... by Jerusalem no city coming down out of the sky is meant, but a church that is to descend from the Lord out of the angelic heaven

So does this refer to our own church called the Church of the New Jerusalem?

Perhaps it will help to have a brief look at the history of our church. It started with a Northumberland gentleman named *Robert Hindmarsh*. Hindmarsh, born in 1759, was the son of a Wesleyan preacher. Aged just 14, he rejected Methodism and began an apprenticeship as a printer in London, later opening his own print shop in Clerkenwell Close.

At the age of 23, Hindmarsh read Swedenborg's book **Heaven and Hell** and he was instantly converted. In 1783 he formed a Swedenborgian study group consisting of just five people. The following year they formed the Theosophical Society for translating, printing, and distributing Swedenborg's writings.

There was an early attempt by Hindmarsh to establish a place of worship, a church. This plan was opposed by a John Clowes, who argued that Swedenborg's teachings should be integrated into the existing Church of England. Nevertheless, on 27th January 1788, a 100 years after Swedenborg's birth, a chapel was established at Great Eastcheap and the Church of the New Jerusalem was born. We can see then that Swedenborg himself never founded our church organisation. Robert Hindmarsh founded the organisation based on Swedenborg's writings. So to find out what Swedenborg meant by a New Church, we need to go back to the writings themselves.

The word church comes from the Greek word 'ecclesia', which means those assembled for a particular purpose or *those called out, for a particular purpose*. And so those who gathered for worship became known as an ecclesia, translated as the church. But it seems that the early Greeks used the word 'ecclesia' to describe people even if they were not assembled together! Those individuals were also referred to as 'the ecclesia' when they were at work, at home, or around the community. They did gather to share in worship together, but that was not how they acquired ecclesia status; so one person could be an ecclesia the same as many people together could be. I believe this is the context in which Swedenborg uses the word 'church' ie a place in which, or a person in whom, the Divine is known and received.

One person then can be a church just as many people assembled together can. Thus a 'new church' is where the Divine is known and received anew. So why is a new church needed?



Everywhere we look in the world around us we see cycles. The sun rises in the morning, progresses through the day into evening, sets at night and rises anew in the morning. Springtime advances into summer, then to autumn and finally to winter; and then a new spring arrives. All life progresses from infancy through childhood into adulthood, old age, and death, only to rise to a new life. Take time away and what we are left with are cycles.

Swedenborg tells us there have been four previous churches on earth and each one has progressed through this same cyclical pattern. When a Divine revelation is first received by the church the cycle is in its infancy or springtime. This begins with new revelation from the Divine. The church or ecclesia then, seeing the true nature of Divine Love, acts from that Divine Love and aspires to be called out from the world, to be unselfish, to give without looking to get back. It is willing to forgive people and make self-sacrifices for the sake of God and His people. It doesn't desire to control anyone or possess worldly power, it simply desires to do the Lord's will. This is what a new church in its infancy is like.

This first period of a church is described by the story of Adam and Eve in the garden of Eden; it is a state of innocence. But gradually the church is drawn towards the appearance of self-life, causing worldly power and material gain to appear more important than spiritual things. This is what is meant by Adam and Eve eating the fruit from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. The church begins swallowing the appearance of self-life, relying more on what comes in from the world through the senses. The snake which convinces Adam and Eve to swallow this notion, crawls close to the earth, and so represents sensual and worldly desires.

As the church becomes more influenced by earthly concerns it begins to desire more power for itself and perhaps even begins using religion to control people. Perhaps it begins creating laws and traditions which are too difficult for ordinary people to conform to, creating a holier-than-thought illusion. But because true wisdom shines forth only from the Divine Love, then wisdom in the church is no longer wisdom and true knowledge of the divine nature love is lost.

Now since the Divine Love is the very essence and life of the church, in its absence the church comes to its end. Like plucking a flower and hence cutting it off from its source of nutrients, the church dies. It may remain in externals, but if it has no love it then has no life. At this point a new church is raised up by the Lord, which takes place by means of a new revelation. This church shows anew what the Divine Love is. It's only when people live out the new revelation in their lives that a new church is formed in them. A new church shows people what the Lord is like by example. Swedenborg tells us that each of the four churches on earth, including the Christian Church, moved through this cycle -

From an understanding of the Divine to no longer knowing what Divine Love is.

It's not just Swedenborg saying the Christian Church was to come to an end, the Lord Himself said it, in Matt.24:14,

And this gospel of the kingdom will be preached in the whole world as a testimony to all nations, and then the end will come.

The end of the church, that is. And in AC 1850 we are told,

The destruction of this church is foretold by the Lord in the Gospels, and by John in Revelation; and this destruction is what is called the Last Judgment. Not that heaven and earth are now to perish, but that in some quarter of the globe a new church will be raised up, the present one remaining in its external worship

So we are clearly told that at the end of the Christian Church, it will continue in its external form; perhaps as it is doing today, while a new church is being set up. So where is the New Church then if we can't see it? Well remember we read from the Book of Revelation,

I saw the Holy City the New Jerusalem coming down from God out of heaven

Heaven is not up in the sky, heaven is within each one of us.

The new church is at this very day descending from the new heaven established by the Lord when He was on earth. It will continue to descend, relentlessly; and it could be all around us without us being aware of it. We read in TCR,

Just so far as this new heaven, which constitutes the internal of the church with man, increases, does the New Jerusalem, that is, the New Church, descend from it.

Everyone who lives a good life, when they have passed over they enter the new heaven, which the Lord formed when He was in the world. And as this new heaven grows, the light which is descending from it increases and a new church is formed, a new ecclesia. This consists of all sincere people who genuinely love good and truth for good and truth's sake.

Those who sincerely love the Lord in spirit and in life, no matter where they might be physically, are in the New Church. I firmly believe that collectively these sincere people are channels for a spiritual light which is descending from the New Heaven - not into a building but into the hearts and minds of people who read the Word. This is happening discreetly, and it won't make the news. But you will notice that human beings are gradually becoming more interested in spiritual things and more free to think about and speak about these things. Ultimately the only place left for our natural sciences to go will be within.



The New Church will not necessarily need to be organised in a worldly sense, because, first and foremost, the church is in each individual. It is good for those individuals to gather and worship together, to support each other in strengthening their faith through prayer, song, and fellowship. But first and foremost it consists in each individual of the church who is rejecting all things which are not consistent with the Divine Love. It is to the extent we do this that

the holy city the new Jerusalem will descend from God into our own hearts and minds.

By the holy city is meant a set of doctrinal heavenly principles which descend into the centre of our being, influencing all the things we do or say. It is an administrative heavenly centre descending within us, allowing heavenly light from the Lord to flow in and through us, guiding our living.

So those who put their trust in the Lord are wise indeed; they are in harmony with the new heaven and, when earthly things are removed, they will find themselves immediately in this new heaven. Here, they will experience a life of joy and peace descending from the Lord, far beyond anything that could ever come in through our senses from this world.

Images:

- 1. Swedenborg collage courtesy website of Jesus Najera*
- 2. Ages of the churches according to Swedenborg*
- 3. The Garden of Eden by Thomas Cole 1828*
- 4. The Baptism of Jesus by William Brassey-Hole*
- 5. Alpha and Omega in the garden at Bryn Athyn Cathedral*
- 6. Jesus Christ by James Tissot*