

Obedience

by the Rev. Daniel W. Heinrichs

“He who has an ear, let him hear what the spirit says to the churches” (Revelation 2:7).

Our text occurs seven times in the second and third chapters of the book of Revelation. It is the concluding exhortation of each of the messages to the seven churches. Indeed, the Lord frequently ended His instruction to the Jews by saying: “He who has ears to hear, let him hear...” (Matthew 11:15, *et alia*). The fact that this phrase and similar admonitions occur frequently throughout both the Old and the New Testaments warrants our consideration of its purpose and meaning.

In the *Arcana Coelestia* we are told that “to hear” in the Word does not mean simply the physical act of hearing, but rather the reception of that which is heard, first in the memory, next in the understanding, then in the will, and finally in the life (*Arcana Coelestia* 9311).

Two of the five senses, we are told, especially serve people in perfecting the mind: the sense of sight and the sense of hearing. These are also the primary senses involved in a person’s reformation and regeneration, for they are formed to receive those things which contribute to this end. The things which enter the mind through the sense of sight enter the understanding and enlighten it. For this reason when “seeing” is mentioned in the Word—and it is frequently mentioned—it refers to the enlightenment of the understanding. However, the things which enter through the sense of hearing enter both the understanding and the will, and for this reason when “hearing” is mentioned in the Word it refers to perception and obedience (see *Apocalypse Explained* 14).

That “seeing” refers to understanding and enlightenment, and “hearing” to perception and obedience, is evident from ordinary speech. When we want to know if something is understood we ask: “So you see what I mean?” And if it is understood the answer is given: “Yes, I see.” Also we say of a person endowed with an unusual intelligence that he or she is bright or brilliant. Or if a person is low in intelligence we say he or she is dull. “Dull,” “bright,” and “brilliant” are attributes of light, and thus of sight.

That “hearing” refers to perception and obedience is also clear from ordinary speech. When somebody has been explaining something to us which he considers important, and we get the message, we say: “I hear.” Or, when we are trying to exact obedience from a child in a certain matter, we end by saying: “Do you hear me?” And if the answer is “Yes,” we expect obedience from that child.

These expressions, we are told, flow down into human speech out of the spiritual world, where man’s spirit is, by correspondence. Furthermore, in the Grand Man of heaven, those who are in the province of the ear are in obedience from perception. This province is said to be the axis of heaven, that is, the whole of the heavens have direct relation to those who are in obedience from perception because the ruling perception of heaven is that *if a thing is true it must be done* (see *Apocalypse Explained* 14; *Apocalypse Revealed* 87).

In communication between people the function of the ear is to receive the speech of another and convey it to the mind so that we can perceive what is in the mind of the other person. Thus “to hear” is to perceive. The function of hearing is to transfer what a person is speaking from his thought, into the thought of another, and from his *thought* to his *will* and from the will into *deed*. Therefore to hear also involves obedience. The circle of communication, then, is from the will into thought, and so into speech, and from speech through the ear into another’s thought and will (see *Arcana Coelestia* 5017).

The most important of all communication is that which exists between the Lord and mankind. And the medium of this communication is the Word. The Lord’s ardent love for the eternal happiness of humankind descended into His thought and from His thought into words, which were communicated to those who were prepared by the Lord for the office of revelator, who wrote them down. For the circle of communication to be completed these words must be conveyed to the understanding of a person and from the understanding to the will, and from the will into life. When the Lord’s love is received in a person’s will, conjunction between the Lord and that person takes place. It is not enough that the Lord’s wisdom contained in the Word be communicated to our understanding; this merely produces presence but not conjunction. This is the reason the Lord has established a church and instituted worship—so that His Word may be *heard*, that there may be an appeal to the very *will itself*.

Thus in the church we have the written Word and the spoken Word. To develop our understanding we should *read* the Word and presentations on its Divine doctrine and reflect calmly and deeply on their meaning. In this way we will grow in spiritual intelligence. But if we wish to grow in wisdom also, we should *hear* the Word read and preached. In hearing there will be, or should be, an added appeal to the affection. Thus it should enter into our will and from that into our life where the will is terminated and made permanent.

In His wisdom the Lord has provided that the mind of a person may be reached through both of these senses—through “seeing” and “hearing.” The written Word is almost devoid of emotion except for the emotion which the words themselves convey. Thus the intellect is appealed to so that the mind can come to know, understand, and believe the truth which the Lord teaches, simply because it is true. The spoken Word is then added to appeal to both the intellect and the will. The *ideas* expressed by the words are received in the *understanding* but the *tone of voice* and the *inflection* affect the *will*, so that what is said may be received in the will and cause a person to do that which is heard. From this we may see that there is a use and a need for both kinds of communication, and we can see what our response to both should be.

We are taught in the Word that to hear the voice of the Lord means to obey what is proclaimed from the Word; and that they who do so become rational and spiritual, but that they who do *not* become sensual and corporeal. We read,

Those become...sensual and corporeal who have...known the things of the spiritual world and have afterward rejected them, and have imbued themselves with principles of falsity contrary to truths; and as to life, have looked solely to worldly, bodily, and earthly things, and from this have believed that life ought to be enjoyed with every pleasure, saying: “What has man more while he lives?

"When we die we die!" ...If anyone by rational arguments sets them thinking at all about eternal life, they think that they shall fare no worse than others, and immediately relapse into the state of their former life.

With such there is a closing of the passage for the light of heaven and its influx, and light of heaven in their natural becomes thick darkness, but the light of the world . . . becomes brightness, and the brightness is so much the more brilliant as the light of heaven is more darkened; hence it is that such see no otherwise than that the evils of their life are goods, and that consequently the falsities are truths. It is from this then that a person becomes sensuous and corporeal (Arcana Coelestia 6971).

In other words, if we do not obey what we hear from the Word, we degenerate. Instead of becoming rational and spiritual, we become sensual and corporeal—our minds are darkened and our will vitiated.

Compare this state with that of the angels of the celestial heaven. The wisdom of the angels of the inmost heaven consists in wishing to be led by the Lord and not by themselves, in loving what is good and delighting in what is true. Because they love nothing so much as being led by the Lord, whatever they hear from the Lord, whether through the Word or by means of preaching, they do not store in the memory but instantly obey it, that is, will it and do it (see *Heaven and Hell* 278). “In that heaven, love to the Lord is willing and doing Divine truth” (*ibid.* 271).

In the teachings which have been presented, we see sharply contrasted the final lot of those who hear only with their ears and those who really hear—with the ears, with their understanding and with their will. We should need little convincing as to which state is preferable. But we may well ask ourselves: “Where do we fit in this picture?”

To find the answer to this question we should ask ourselves more particular questions. To what extent have we allowed the truths we have heard to enter into and change our lives? What is our usual reaction to the truths we hear preached? Do they enter only as far as the external ear and then vanish beyond recall? Are we momentarily stirred but cannot remember several days later what it was that moved us? Or do we see and perceive an important truth—a truth which, if lived, can change our lives and make us better men and women? Do we *will* that truth and determine within ourselves to *obey* it?

Speaking generally, the purpose of a sermon is to draw a particular truth from the Word, to put it into perspective by showing its relationship to other truths, to examine it from several different aspects so that its nature and quality may be perceived, and to indicate the application of that truth to life. A sermon is not preached merely to uplift and soothe, nor is it intended to upset or depress the congregation, and certainly it is not to weary them. The Word is studied and its truth presented with the hope that it may be received, perceived and obeyed.

In the *Arcana Coelestia* where it treats of the reading of the covenant by Moses to the Children of Israel, we are told that to “read in the ears of the people” signifies *hearkening* and obedience.

For when anything is read, it is that it may be heard, perceived and obeyed (see *Arcana Coelestia* 9397).

In a passage from *Apocalypse Revealed* 8 we are assured that if we read the doctrine of the New Jerusalem with a desire to know that doctrine, if we *hear* the things which are taught from it, and if we live according to it, then we will be blessed. We will be, as to our spirits, in communion with the angels of heaven even while we live on earth.

What, then, should be our attitude and response to the reading of the Word and the preaching from it that we regularly hear in Sunday worship? The nature of our response is clearly indicated in the Word itself. We should say in our hearts with conviction and determination: “All that the Lord has spoken we will do and hear” (Exodus 24:7).

Amen.

Lessons: Exodus 24:1-13; Revelation 1:1-3; 2:1-11; *Apocalypse Revealed* 8