



The return of Christ: not an escape, but completion!

How do we understand salvation? The Chief Apostle not only talked about this question in the Pentecost service, but already addressed the matter earlier on in the District Apostle Meeting. What is salvation all about? This was the question in the first part of the annual interview 2021.

Chief Apostle Schneider, in your remarks in the District Apostle Meeting concerning the understanding of salvation in the New Apostolic Church you mentioned that, in your view, regular divine service attendance is an essential part of this. What exactly do you mean by that?

I see it as my responsibility to solemnly remind all New Apostolic believers that regular participation in divine service is an essential component of our preparation for the return of Jesus. To deliberately and regularly refrain from attending divine services—when we are allowed to come to church—can be detrimental to our salvation.

What exactly is meant by the term salvation?

The term salvation incorporates some very different aspects. This is attested by the rich and varied vocabulary the Bible uses in reference to it. Both the Old and New Testaments speak of it in terms of liberation, deliverance, preservation, forgiveness, victory, and even redemption. These different facets of salvation are also evident in the way in which Christians—including those in our own Church—have understood salvation. Depending on the time and place in which they lived, they emphasised that aspect of salvation that best suited their expectations. The same phenomenon

is also evident today: depending on their situation, our brothers and sisters primarily see salvation as deliverance from suffering, a means to escape a threat, or an opportunity to see a loved one again.

Is that incorrect?

No, naturally not, but these aspects are only part of the whole. We need a clear overall picture, and must not lose sight of what is essential, namely the will and activity of Jesus Christ, our Saviour and Redeemer. God is our salvation!

What does that mean in concrete terms?

Let's look at our belief in the return of Christ, for example. In our Church, there were times when the return of the Lord was predominantly seen as an act of deliverance and preservation:

- the Lord is coming again in order to deliver us from suffering.
- He will preserve and protect us from the great tribulation, that time of affliction in which evil will reach its zenith on this earth.
- those who partake in the first resurrection will not have to appear before God at the Last Judgement.

In order to be accepted by Christ at His return, the believers were admonished to receive the sacraments and remain faithful to the apostolate. And this knowledge is still valid today.

But?

It is nevertheless recommendable to put this into the broader context of the gospel as a whole. After all, focusing on deliverance and preservation as the only aspects of salvation harbours certain risks:

- believers might be tempted to shut themselves off from the outside world. They might then feel that the most important thing is to remain faithful so that they can be preserved from suffering and escape the catastrophe that has been foretold. The fate of their fellow human beings thus fades into the background.
- missionary efforts might no longer be motivated solely by love for our neighbour, but rather by the desire to escape earthly sufferings as quickly as possible: "The Lord will come when the last soul is sealed."
- the sacraments might well be misunderstood as ends unto themselves—as if receiving them already guaranteed salvation.
- life on earth might be portrayed negatively—in which case, the earth would come to be regarded as nothing more than a place of suffering from which one must escape as quickly as possible.

What should be the focal point instead?

When Jesus Christ spoke about salvation, He often used the term “eternal life”. He thereby promised believing human beings fellowship with God in His kingdom. The New Testament uses the image of the bride and bridegroom, or speaks of the marriage feast in heaven, in order to describe this fellowship. There in the kingdom of God, the redeemed will live forever in perfect harmony with God. They will worship and praise Him into all eternity and continually discover new aspects of the glory of God.

That sounds quite romantic—a new life in harmony!

That is what Holy Scripture says. Besides, there is no occasion for romanticism because the Lord also set conditions which we must fulfil in order to have access to eternal life: we must believe in Jesus Christ, be born again out of water and the Spirit, and receive the body and blood of Christ. These prerequisites are necessary, but not sufficient.

While receiving the sacraments gives us the opportunity to enter into eternal fellowship with God, it does not guarantee us ultimate access. We must prepare ourselves intensively for the return of Jesus. This preparation consists of allowing God to sanctify us. If we allow the Holy Spirit to work within us, He will cleanse us, give us the strength to resist sin, and teach us to renounce that which separates us from God.

Thus New Apostolic Christians do not wait for the return of the Lord only to escape from this earth. Nor do they necessarily see their earthly existence as a vale of tears which they are condemned to walk. What they want is to live with God eternally. Their life on earth is a time of grace that God grants them in order that they may prepare themselves for eternal fellowship with Him in both joy and suffering. For them, the first resurrection is not an escape—it is completion!

What does that have to do with our relationship with other human beings?

The New Testament says very clearly that divine life is inextricably linked with love for our neighbour. Jesus attaches just as much importance to the love we bear our neighbour as to the love we have for God. He prays for the oneness of His church. He urges the disciples to love and serve one another. In Romans 12: 4–5 Apostle Paul makes reference to the image of the body of Christ, whose members are closely connected to Christ and show solidarity with one another.

Therefore, preparing ourselves to live in eternal fellowship with God also means preparing ourselves to live in fellowship with others. On their own, human beings are incapable of living in harmony with one another. They must first become a new creation in Christ, filled with the love of God and guided by the Holy Spirit. And it is today that we must learn to live in this fellowship with one another! We cannot prepare ourselves for eternal life on our own. This only makes sense within the community of those who are striving for eternal fellowship with God.

So the divine service does indeed play an important role.

Yes! By participating in the divine services, believers first of all strengthen their personal relationship with God. They make the effort to detach themselves physically and mentally from their daily lives in order to encounter God. The sermon

inspired by the Holy Spirit strengthens their faith in the imminent return of Jesus Christ. When praying the Lord's Prayer, they express their desire to be in fellowship with God: "Your kingdom come. Your will be done." The absolution frees them from the burden of their sins. Partaking worthily in Holy Communion strengthens their hope and nourishes the divine life they have received in the rebirth.

Participating in the divine services also prepares the believers to live in the community of the saints in the kingdom of God. By coming to the divine service, believers demonstrate the importance they attach to their relationship with God: they now desire to gather for their encounter with God together with others whom they have not sought out. Their desire to praise and worship God, their need to commune with God and be near Him, is so strong that they find themselves coming together with people with whom they would otherwise never have associated.

Beyond that, their encounter with their brothers and sisters gives them the opportunity to take an interest in others, to share in their joys and sorrows. And since no one is perfect, congregational life enables the believers to learn to forgive one another, reconcile with one another, and learn to overcome their differences.

When believers come into the congregation, they hear that God is speaking the same message to all present. God thus makes use of the same message in order to strengthen the believers, all of whom find themselves in completely different situations. This simple observation gives the believer an idea of the power and effectiveness of the preaching of the gospel. By praying the words aloud together: "Forgive us our debts", the believers publicly profess that they are all—without exception—in need of grace.

And this idea of community and fellowship also has implications for how we deal with the celebration of the sacraments in online divine services.

Receiving the sacrament of Holy Communion is an essential component of our preparation for the return of the Lord. The salvation-bringing effect of the sacrament does not come into being by merely receiving the consecrated wafer, but through the celebration of Holy Communion as a whole. Holy Communion is also an express meal of fellowship, namely the fellowship of Christ with the believers, but also the fellowship of the believers with one another. Holy Communion produces all of these effects when the believer receives the duly consecrated wafer from the hands of an Apostle, or a minister commissioned by him, in the presence of the congregation.

At the institution of Holy Communion, the Lord broke the bread and gave it to the Apostles. He then gave them a cup filled with wine and asked them to share it with one another. Today it is a priestly minister who dispenses the consecrated wafer to the believers. However, when we celebrate the Lord's Supper together, each one of us can see that the Lord welcomes everyone else in the same manner, shows them the same love, and gives them exactly the same thing He gives us. This experience is a wonderful preparation for the marriage feast of the Lamb.

During the pandemic we had to find new ways to allow the believers to hear the sermon and receive the absolution. It is undeniable that virtual divine services offer many advantages, but they do not have the same salvation-bringing effect as a divine service attended in person. The experience of fellowship is an essential

component of the preparation of the bride. Likewise, receiving a consecrated wafer in the absence of a priestly minister and the congregation cannot have the same salvation-bringing effect as the celebration of Holy Communion in the congregation.

For these reasons in and of themselves already, I invite all New Apostolic members to hold fast to the practice of attending the divine services in person—as soon as it becomes possible for us to do so again. Of course, I am aware that there are many for whom this will not be possible. I know many brothers and sisters who cannot attend the services in their congregation because of illness or age. They can rest assured that God will provide for them. We pray for one another!

The second important item on the agenda of the first District Apostle Meeting of this year involved discussions on the subject of ordaining women into ministry. Where does the New Apostolic Church stand in this process, what decisions have already been made, and how will the discussions proceed? We will publish the answers to these questions in the coming week.

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