

Sermon on Examining Our Beliefs

Lessons: Psalm 119:0-16
John 7:14-18
Arcana Coelestia 5432

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“They who are of the church, or in whom the church is, are in the affection of truth for the sake of truth, that is, they love truth because it is truth; and they examine from the Word whether the doctrinal teachings of the church in which they were born are true. Otherwise the truth possessed by everyone would be derived from another, and from his native soil.”

(New Jerusalem and Its Heavenly Doctrine 246)

All of us in the beginning receive our religion from others. We receive our religious ideas from parents, teachers, ministers, friends and from our society, culture, and nation, for a person's culture and nation does possess a general religious view or belief, and this view or belief does influence the ideas of those brought up in that culture and nation.

Still, it should be noted that all those through whom we first have religion can be divided into two classes mentioned in Divine Providence 254, that is, those who learn directly from the Word, and those who know only what they have received from others. Still, all of us in the beginning receive our first religious ideas from others. In the Word this is called a state of historical faith, for it is a faith learned through others and not from the Word directly. This state is a necessary state, indeed, we cannot avoid it, but it is not a state we ought to remain in. Thus in the New Jerusalem and Its Heavenly Doctrine 246 we read:

"They who are from the Church, or in whom the Church is ... examine from the Word whether the doctrinal teachings of the Church in which they were born are true. Otherwise the truth possessed by everyone would be from another and from his native soil." (NJHD 246)

We can see from our own experience, that the truths or doctrinal teachings we first have are indeed from others and from our country and its culture. Yet

we are not meant to remain in such a faith as this, even if that faith is true, but are instructed to examine the doctrinal teachings of our Church studying and verifying them from the Word to see if they really are true.

Arcana Coelestia 5402 says that:

"The doctrinal things of the Church and its rituals, as also the cognitions of what spiritual things represent and how, and the like, are nothing but facts until a person has seen from the Word, whether they are true, and then makes them his own.

" There are two ways of acquiring the truths of faith, one way being through religious teaching, the other through the Word. When religious teaching alone is the way by which a person acquires them, he pins his faith on those who have deduced such truths from the Word, and assures himself that they are indeed truths because others have said that they are. Thus he does not believe those truths on account of any faith of his own but on account of that possessed by others. When however he gathers those truths for himself from the Word and assures himself for that reason that they are truths, he believes them on account of their Divine origin and so on account of a faith received from the Divine. Initially everyone within the Church acquires the truths that constitute faith from religious teaching; indeed this is how he ought to acquire them because he is not as yet equipped with judgement of his own that will enable him to see those truths from the Word. At this time those truths are for him no different from factual knowledge. But once he does possess the judgement to see them on his own, and if he does not consult the Word to the end that he may see from there whether they are indeed truths, they remain with him as factual knowledge. If however he does consult the Word with an affection for and an intention to know truths, and having found them there acquires them from their own true source, he receives the truths of faith from the Divine and makes them his own." (Arcana Coelestia 5402)

As was said, in the beginning we all obtain our faith from others. But this faith is mostly just facts in the memory, and relies for its authority on the opinion of others. For example, the laity of the Church learn truths from ministers, the students learn from their instructors, and ministers also learn from other ministers. All the things which are learned may be truths with those

from whom they are received, but unless such truths are seen or verified from the Word, they are not really truths with those who have received them but merely facts and opinions which a person may imagine are truths that he believes in because he understands and agrees with them.

In all Churches, even in the New Church, there are those who will remain content to receive all of their religious beliefs from others, and they will believe that whatever a minister or religious authority says is true because they place authority in the words of that person. Further, they may not feel challenged to even verify what they are taught because personally they may like the minister and they feel comfortable in the Church they belong to. In other words, there are natural loves and affections which work to keep people from ever really thinking about verifying their Church's doctrinal teachings. Some years ago, a survey done by a New Church missionary group of those who had recently joined the New Church, revealed that one of the reasons that people left their former Church was that the former Church changed ministers. Another was the death of a family member. For some, then, thought about internal things, about doctrine, really began only when there was a change in the external, usually an undesired change. For them, this reflects what is said in Arcana Coelestia 8, that "at the present day this state seldom exists without temptation, misfortune or sorrow, by which the things of the body and the world, that is, such as are proper to man, are brought into quiescence and as it were die."

People seem most inclined to question and examine the doctrinal beliefs of their church only when the church is undergoing some sort of turmoil or disturbance -- when the church body is undergoing some sort of temptation misfortune or sorrow.

There are those who are or have been outside the New Church who feel that the doctrine or teachings of the Church that they are in is somehow wrong. They may be in a state that no longer believe simply in the authority of others or in the authority of their church. They may seek answers to their questions in the Word. Those born outside the Church who have been led to the Third Testament may find what they have been seeking, as they are then in a state to examine and judge the doctrine of their Church. For them, the Third Testament becomes the truth and authority from which they are able to examine and judge the doctrinal teachings of their Church.

So also with those born or educated in the New Church. What was said of those born outside the Church applies also to those born within. They also are meant to examine for themselves the doctrinal teachings of their Church from the Word. Those born in the Church also may tend to rest in historic faith, taking for truth whatever the minister and their church's doctrine teaches. And they may not feel very inclined to examine their faith because they are comfortable and contented in their church as it is. Is our belief in the doctrine of the Church firm because we see that it is from the Word, or does our belief rest upon some other authority or reason?

The examination of the doctrinal teachings of one's Church is not a one-time affair, but is a continual and on-going process. The person who has come into the New Church from another church has examined the doctrinal beliefs of his former church and found them lacking, but once he or she comes into the New Church the process of examination does not end.

The Church, its doctrine, and the affection of truth are all within a person. In a general, we begin by examining the doctrinal beliefs of the Church organization into which we are born. When we come from one state of the Church into another, whether it be from outside the New Church to inside it, or from the Church unconfirmed as to its doctrine to confirmed, it is a rebirth into a new state. The phrase, "the Church in which they were born," refers not only to the physical world, to the Churches in the world, but also to our spiritual world, that is, the states of the Church into which we are internally born and reborn.

A person then needs to examine the doctrinal beliefs, not only of the Church organization to which he belongs, but also the doctrinal beliefs that he personally holds as these belong to the state of the Church within him. Such examination depends upon his enlightenment, which depends upon the quality of his affection for truth. In the beginning it is not surprising that we may concentrate more on the state of the church outside of us than on the church within us. We regard more the faults in others and in their beliefs. For example, how often do we hear people say of those in the church that they are "hypocrites." But as the church develops within us, we may come to see that it is not so much the state of the church outside of us that we should be concentrating on but the state of the church within us. Thus, for example, we may start concentrating less on those hypocrites outside of us than upon that which is hypocritical within us. And so attention needs to be paid to examining the doctrinal things of the church within us, to see of what quality they are, to

put away those formed from our self-love and love of the world, and to take on and live according to those formed out of the Word. We need to keep examining and re-examining the doctrinal things of the church into which we have been born and reborn, seeking to have what is false removed, so that we may live according to what is true.

Amen.

LESSONS

Psalm 119:9-16

⁹ How can a young man keep his way pure?

By keeping *it* according to Your word.

¹⁰ With all my heart I have sought You;

Do not let me wander from Your commandments.

¹¹ Your word I have treasured in my heart,

That I may not sin against You.

¹² Blessed are You, O LORD;

Teach me Your statutes.

¹³ With my lips I have told of

All the ordinances of Your mouth.

¹⁴ I have rejoiced in the way of Your testimonies,

As much as in all riches.

¹⁵ I will meditate on Your precepts

And regard Your ways.

¹⁶ I shall delight in Your statutes;

I shall not forget Your word.

John 7:14-18

¹⁴ Now about the middle of the feast Jesus went up into the temple and taught.

¹⁵ And the Jews marveled, saying, "How does this Man know letters, having never studied?"

¹⁶ Jesus answered them and said, "My doctrine is not Mine, but His who sent Me.

¹⁷ If anyone wants to do His will, he shall know concerning the doctrine, whether it is from God or *whether* I speak on My own *authority*.

¹⁸ He who speaks from himself seeks his own glory; but He who seeks the glory of the One who sent Him is true, and no unrighteousness is in Him.

Arcana Coelestia 5432.

... when the truths of faith which are known to the Church and are called its teachings are learned at the earliest stage of life, they are taken in and consigned to the memory as facts in the same way as any other factual knowledge. And they remain there as factual knowledge until the person begins to use his own ability to look at those truths and see for himself whether they really are truths, and - having seen that they are such - to act in conformity with them. That ability to look at such truths and this willingness to act in conformity with them cause them to be factual knowledge no longer. Now they are commandments to be obeyed in life, till at length they are his life; for they then pass into the life he leads and are made his own.

[2] People who have reached adult years, and especially those who have arrived at old age, but have not used their own ability to look at the truths known to the Church, called its doctrinal teachings, to see for themselves whether these really are truths, or to form any subsequent wish to live in conformity with them, inevitably retain them in exactly the same way as they do all other factual knowledge. Those truths remain solely in their natural memory, and from there in their mouth. When they speak truths they do so not from their interior man or heart, only from their exterior man or mouth. When this is a person's state he cannot possibly believe that the truths known to the Church are truths, no matter how much it might seem to him that he does believe that they are. The reason why it seems to him that he does believe they are truths is that he trusts other people and their ideas and firmly embraces them. To embrace firmly other people's ideas, no matter whether they are truths or falsities, is very easy, for it involves no more than the use of one's intellect.

[5] People however who are moved by an affection for truth for its own sake and for their life's sake, consequently for the sake of the Lord's kingdom, do indeed have faith in the teachings of the Church. But even so they examine the Word closely with no other end in view than to see the truth itself, as a result of which they develop a faith and a conscience that are their own. If anyone tells them that they ought to keep to the teachings of the Church in which they were born, they then think that they would have been told exactly the same if they had been born within Judaism, within Socinianism, Quakerism, or Christian Gentilism, or even outside the Church, and that everywhere they would say, This is where the Church is, this is where the Church is; truths exist here and nowhere else! This being what they think they decide to examine the Word closely, praying sincerely to the Lord for enlightenment as they do so.

People like these do not upset anyone else within the Church, nor do they ever condemn others, for they recognize that the life led by everyone who is a Church is founded on the faith that is his own.

AMEN