

Baptism by Fire

Our states of Reformation and Regeneration and the things we can do

A Sermon by Rev. Ryan Sandstrom

Mitchellville, MD 1/22/12

"Wash yourselves, make yourselves clean; Put away the evil of your doings from before My eyes. Cease to do evil, Learn to do good..." (Isaiah 1: 16,17)

As children, we grew up learning certain rules: no kicking, no hitting, no yelling, no talking back. These rules were for our own sake. Yet, as with any child, we still got in trouble; we sat in time out, had to clean the bathroom, give an apology, why? because we broke the rules. The rules never changed, and each time we got in trouble the consequence served as a reminder of the need to obey the rules. So the need to restate the rules came time and time again and parents ended up having to repeat themselves. The bottom line is that instruction can never be given just once, even if it is the same instruction.

The tendency to forget things, especially important things, is something most of us have to deal with still. It is normal to retain in our memories only some of the things we hear and see, but there are times when we still make mistakes because we forgot something quite significant. So our friends, associates, and spouses feel the need to repeat themselves to us again and again. Rarely can we hear something just once and change our ways right away. We are human so we need reminders often; it's how we move forward. So again, instruction is something we can never receive just once.

The giving of the Ten Commandments on Mt. Sinai was a spectacular event. There was thunder and lightning, the people down below trembled in fear and they waited to hear what God would tell them. Yet there could be no way that this event would finish and everyone would transform and change their ways. Even with such a climactic scene, the Commandments were certainly not something that could be said just once. They are repeated time and time again throughout the entire Word. And we learn from the Heavenly Doctrine that "since love to God and love towards the neighbor are the whole of the Word; and since the first tablet of the Ten Commandments contains in summary form the whole of love to God, and the second tablet contains the whole of love towards the neighbor, it follows that they contain the whole of doctrine and life" (TCR 287). What else does the entire Word teach other than all things of doctrine and life? The Word overall stresses a simple rule: do the commandments and the Lord can be with us. Yet we will need reminders of this rule.

This constant reminding and remembering the essentials of religion and life play a big part in our reformation and regeneration. On this earth we are constantly striving to do the right thing; we learn the truths from the Word and try to live according to them. Yet as long as we are on this earth, we will always have to deal with our natural loves of self and the world, which will get in the way of our path to regeneration from time to time. It is true that every now and then we experience moments or states of regeneration when we get a sense of internal peace; we are conjoined to the Lord, we can feel heaven. But it really isn't until we pass on to the spiritual world where we will remain in this blessed state without ever feeling the torments of temptation again. This is when we are fully "regenerated." But again, in order to reach this peaceful state of regeneration, we must pass through a state of reformation first, for we read that "he who has not entered into the first state [of reformation] while in the world, cannot after death be introduced

into the second, thus cannot be regenerated" (TCR 571). It's like being outside and having to walk through the front door of the house first in order to enter through the living room door, or it's like food entering through the mouth first before it can enter the body's vitals. So what is reformation? It is a state of turning ourselves away from the love of self and the world so that we can begin to come closer to the Lord. This is why John the Baptist's role was extremely important both then and now. He was important because people came to him first before they came to the Lord. They needed baptism by water before they could be baptized by fire. And so we need to be reformed first before we can be regenerated. Reformation is something we do on a continual basis.

In the reading on John the Baptist water and fire are two main elements used to describe the two different states we pass through in our spiritual lives. One state would introduce, or make way rather, for the other state. Water illustrates going through the state of reformation. Water cleans and purifies, and so helps remove unwanted filth and dirt. Reformation then is a period where we work on the steps of repentance and see to it by means of truth that the improper things in us are removed. Water also makes a path, like carving a stream through the land. Reformation is also when the truth we know makes a way for us to start following. Water possesses many other functions that help us see the relation of truth during our reformation. But we shouldn't settle with truth alone, or reformation alone. The Heavenly Doctrine does teach that the waters that John used to baptize with signified introductory truths. These truths are knowledges from the Word respecting the Lord (AE 475:20). The whole purpose of these introductory truths is they help us get somewhere, we couldn't just sit still with them. We move forward from them.

Generally speaking we all know that truths are extremely important and vital. The things we read in the Sacred Scripture are truths, and with the Heavenly Doctrine we get even more truths. We have more than enough truths. It feels good to know the truth. We get answers. We gain understanding on things like heaven, eternal life, the Lord's glorification and, living a life according to the commandments. Knowing these truths introduces us to heavenly life since they all direct or inspire us to live the teachings in life. But as we read from the Heavenly Doctrine, we start out living according to the truth for selfish reasons, that is, we outwardly do the right thing while internally we seek personal recognition and gain. Nevertheless in reformation we take a step towards being regenerated by taking in truth into our lives, more specifically into our understanding, but the loves of self and the world can still dominate in us, more specifically in our will. We also learn that as long as the understanding dominates, we are in a state of reformation because we are in a mode of learning truth and not so much of willing truth. (DP 83)

The real goal is to will the truth, it is how we can become regenerate. This is why John the Baptist is so important, because through his baptism and his teachings, he prepared the way for the Lord to enter into their lives as well as our lives. And so he said "One who is mightier than I is coming... He will baptize you with Holy Spirit and fire" (Luke 3:16).

To be baptized by fire and Holy Spirit simply means to be regenerated by the Lord by means of His Divine goods and truths from the Word (AE 475:20). There is an obvious resemblance of love with fire as the Heavenly Doctrine clearly explains:

Fire possesses two properties: that of burning and that of shining. Its burning radiates heat, its shining light. In the same way love has two properties: the one to which the burning of fire corresponds is something which acts intimately upon a person's will; the other, to which the shining corresponds, is something which acts intimately upon a person's understanding. This is the source of human love and intelligence. (TCR 39)

Through baptism by fire we receive the most essential ingredient to our salvation, and that is love. Without love, we cannot be human. This is the same as saying without the Lord, we cannot be human. It is the love from the Lord that fills us up and makes us human.

As with reformation, regeneration is something that happens to us continually. It's the same with the house analogy; everyday we go in the front door and from there into the other rooms of the house. Likewise with food, which is something we need everyday and take in the same way each time. So, everyday we learn truths that introduce us and guide us to heaven. And as long as we are learning truths and trying to live by them, we can never stop being filled with the Lord's love, because in order to be filled, we have to have something within us by which we can be filled. Each truth in us acts like a container or vessel that can be filled with the Lord's Divine truths and love. So the more truths we learn, the more we can be filled with the Lord's truth and love. It is said be filled by truth meaning the living truth, the Holy Spirit. It's the type of truth that flows through the introductory truths and inspires a life according to the teachings with love. This way does the Lord bring us to a state of regeneration, where our will dominates and influences our understanding. So we will the truths and they are brought forth to life, and from this we learn new truth like fruit bearing new seed.

As we all can reflect, a big part of reformation involves repentance. And since reformation is about turning ourselves, as if from ourselves, to the Lord we must resist and put away the evils of our lives in order to do so. This is why the first thing of charity, that is of religion and life, is to shun evils as sins against the Lord. Again, this is why John the Baptist was so important because his baptism was the baptism of repentance, which initiates the state of reformation where we begin to think about heaven and the Lord. But as with the rules we had growing up, teachings such as repentance are never mentioned just once. It is something stressed

throughout the entire Word, since, as always, we need to be reminded time and time again. And what are the things we need to repent of? They are listed for us in the Ten Commandments, which are also stressed throughout the entire Word because we need those reminders. So it is clear: if we want to be regenerated and reform ourselves we must by all means stop doing evil. Only when we pass on to the spiritual world will we be able to really stay away from evils as sins. And so we should never make the mistake of thinking that we are completely safe from evils in this world, which again is why repentance and reformation need to be so continuous in our lives as they are in the Word.

As long as we are turning away from evil and looking to the Lord through reformation, the Lord can then place love and goodness in our will, making us more conjoined to Him. With the Lord's conjunction we receive properties of love that belong to Him. So His Own can become our own. Loving the Lord is doing His Commandments, which is continuously not willing evil upon our neighbor. By doing this, the Lord supplies the opposite. So from not willing evil, we become forgiving, caring, sympathizing as well as compassionate, selfless and welcoming. We can attain the goal of willing truths which all point to loving the Lord and loving the neighbor without restrictions or bounds or exceptions in the sense that the Lord's love for all of us is unchanging and equal as should be our love. This can be possible as long as we resist the tendencies towards evil, for the Lord said in Isaiah 1, "Though your sins are like scarlet, They shall be as white as snow; Though they are red like crimson, They shall be as wool. If you are willing and obedient, You shall eat the good of the land."

Amen

Lessons:

Isaiah 1:16-19; TCR 331; Matt 3: 1-13; TCR 571; cf. Matt. 23:25-28; AE 981

TCR 571

There are two states that man must enter upon and pass through, when from being natural he is becoming spiritual. The first state is called Reformation, and the second Regeneration. In the first man looks from his natural to his spiritual state and longs for that state; in the second state he becomes spiritual-natural. The first state is formed by means of truths, which must be truths of faith, and through these he looks to charity; the second state is formed by means of the goods of charity, and by these he enters into the truths of faith. Or what is the same, the first is a state of thought from the understanding, and the second a state of love from the will. When this latter state begins and is progressing, a change takes place in the mind; the mind undergoes a reversal, the love of the will then flowing into the understanding, acting upon it and leading it to think in accord and agreement with its love; and in consequence so far as the good of love comes to act the first part and the truths of faith the second, man is spiritual and is a new creature; and he then acts from charity and speaks from faith; he feels the good of charity and perceives the truth of faith; and he is then in the Lord, and in peace, and thus regenerate. The man who while in the world has entered upon the first state, after death can be introduced into the second; but he who has not entered into the first state while in the world, cannot after death be introduced into the second, thus cannot be regenerated.

TCR 331 [4] A person ought to purify himself of evils, and not wait for the Lord to do this for him directly, as can be seen by comparison with a servant coming in with his face and clothes filthy with soot and dung and going up to his master and saying: 'Please wash me, Sir.' Would not his master say to him: 'What do you mean, you fool? Here are water, soap and a towel. Haven't you got hands and the ability to use them? Wash yourself.' So the Lord God will say: 'The means of purification I have given you, and your will and ability also are given by me; so use these gifts and talents of mine as if they were yours, and you will be purified,' and so on. The Lord teaches us that the external man is to be cleansed, but by means of the internal: