

Being Born Again

From time to time, and somewhat surprised as I am by the question, I have been asked if I am a 'born again' Christian. I say 'somewhat surprised' because of the implications which being 'born again' carries for me. I wonder if the question is being asked of me as meaning that I understand the words to mean, or whether they are meant as describing something else. What would you say if you were asked, "Are you a 'born again' Christian? Can one say that one is 'born again'. Indeed, and before we answer, ought we not look at what is meant when the experience is referred to?

The importance of being born again was spoken of by Jesus, the subject arising during the course of His conversation with Nicodemus, described as being 'a man of the Pharisees' and 'a ruler of the Jews'. Nicodemus, it is said, "came to Jesus by night" and after little more than a few words had been spoken, Jesus said to him, "Truly, truly, I say to you, Unless one is born anew, he cannot see the kingdom of God." Confused, Nicodemus thought the Lord was speaking of natural birth, and said so. "How can a man be born when he is old" he asked. "Can he enter a second time into his mother's womb and be born?" Jesus answered, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God."

What did Jesus mean when He said, "Unless one is born anew, he cannot see the kingdom of God"?

Let us for a moment look at the context in which the words were spoken.

Nicodemus was a Pharisee and, like all of the Pharisees, he believed that the external observances of religion were sufficient to guarantee a person entrance into the kingdom of God. This was the assumption he had, and, unspoken though it was, it was this to which the Lord addressed Himself in these words. Nicodemus thought that religion was only a matter of outward things; of external worship and observances, sacrifices at the prescribed times, and all those kinds of things. But Jesus wanted him to see things otherwise. If a person is to enter the kingdom of God it is necessary that there be a remaking of him, or her, within. He must be re-fashioned as to his loves and desires and inclinations. "Unless one is born anew, he cannot see the kingdom of God". It is not, as is made clear, the natural re-making of man which is meant here, an entering a second time into his mother's womb, but his spiritual re-making and, as we've noted, re-fashioning as to the person he is within.

"He who does not receive spiritual life, that is, who is not born anew by the Lord", wrote Swedenborg, "cannot come into heaven". And, he goes on, "Man is not born of his parents into spiritual life, but into natural life and since he is such, the order of life with him is inverted. That which ought to rule serves, and that which ought to serve rules. In order that man may be saved this order must be entirely inverted. This is effected by the Lord through regeneration". (*Arcana Caelestia* 8548, 8549, 8553). To be born again is to become regenerate. It is to become that re-made person the Lord wants us to be. The re-born person is the person who has overcome his inborn tendencies to love himself and to love the world above all things, and whose primary drives have become love of the Lord and love of the neighbour. This is all the difference between natural life into which we are born of our parents, and spiritual life into which we come by the process of regeneration.

We must be careful not to under-estimate what this involves.

"Regeneration, or the implantations of the life of heaven with man" we read, "begins from his infancy, continues to the last of his life in the world, and is after it, perfected to eternity". (*Arcana Caelestia* 9334). Though there is no question that the re-making of a person can take place, yet it is only accomplished gradually and in stages. It takes time for someone to overcome the inclinations into which he or she is born. These inclinations are not, as we all know, easily resisted, and they do not relinquish their grip on us without putting up a fight. Progress can be painfully slow, even to the point of despair. Habits, attitudes, and inclinations, which we thought we had overcome and left behind often surprise us by surfacing again, and we are made to realise what a job it is which lies ahead of us.

"Regeneration, or the implantation of the life of heaven with man begins", as we saw a moment ago, "from his infancy". It has its starting point in the teaching and concepts which are instilled into the minds of children and it properly gets under way when, as an adult, a person resolves to live according to those teachings and concepts which have been taught him. To know Divine Truth and to sincerely endeavour to live and think in accordance with it is the means by which regeneration is effected. And this is what is meant by the water and the Spirit of which Jesus subsequently spoke in that conversation with Nicodemus.

Water is the Biblical symbol of Divine truth, the water of everlasting life, and "Spirit" is the Lord's love and strength on which we draw as we try to live and obey. "Unless one is born of water and of the Spirit" or, as we now know these words to mean, "Unless one knows truth and lives from the Lord according to it, "he cannot enter the kingdom of God".

"The first state of the man who is being regenerated is to learn truths and see them". (*Arcana Caelestia* 9274); that is, to see them for what they really are, to come to terms with what they are saying to us, and to realise that they are the means by which we can come into real happiness and be a means of blessing to others. "And the second state is to will and love them". (ibid). And in the effort to will and love them it cannot but be that there will be temptations, and many of them. There will be resistance from our lower, baser, nature. And it becomes a question as to which is going to prevail. Is it going to be the principles and ideals Jesus set forth which are going to rule us, or not? Do we hold fast to such things as the Ten Commandments or give way to our tendencies to live life selfishly and only for our own satisfaction and pleasure? What is it going to be? The conflict revolves around this and we have the great responsibility of determining what the outcome will be.

The more we look at it, the more we understand what it is saying to us, so we come to see that regeneration, or spiritual re-birth, is the one consistent theme throughout the whole of the Bible. Whether you are looking at the Book of Genesis or at the Book of Revelation this is the theme. Often it doesn't seem so at first, but in fact this is so. We make the mistake of reading the Old Testament, for example, as if it all belongs to the past. We read it as a description of events which took place thousands of years ago. We think how good some people were and how wicked others were. As we read the prophecies we have a picture in our minds of God-fearing men haranguing people as they went about their work in the cities and in the market places. What we have got to do, however, is to stop thinking of it as all to do with other people, other times, other events. Here is the Lord speaking to us about ourselves.

Take the description of the exodus from Egypt and the wanderings in the wilderness as an example. You and I are, in fact, the people of Israel needing to break free from the bondage which the world and self holds over us. And even when we have made the initial effort so to break free we shall have our times of backsliding, our times of despair, our times of rebellion, just as it is described in the Books of Exodus and Numbers. On the surface - to be sure - it all seems to be about something so very long ago. But in fact the Lord is reaching out to us through that story. It's about ourselves, and the struggles, temptations, times and disillusionment, and so on which are bound to accompany us in our effort to become reborn people.

It's worth just stopping over this point that people tell themselves that they can't change and that they cannot help being what they are. And, from time to time, we are all possibly tempted to think along these lines. But it is not true. Every evil of which we become conscious in ourselves can be resisted. Every unregenerate inclination we discover can, in the Lord's strength, be overcome, even though we have to grapple with it over a long and discouraging period of time.

As it is now defined then, as involving the whole process of regeneration, clearly it is impossible for any one to say that they are re-born, though they may have committed themselves to the process. "There is", we are taught, "no determinate time in which man has been regenerated so that he can say, I am now perfect" (*Arcana Caelestia* 894) as if the process were completed. There will always be some new facet of truth which has not previously been seen or understood, and evils and falsities within ourselves to be uncovered and expelled. Regeneration is a growing process and, really, the growing never ends.

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