

THE USES OF DOUBT

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The other disciples therefore said to [Thomas], "We have seen the Lord." But he said to them, "Unless I see in His hands the print of the nails, and put my finger into the print of the nails, and put my hand into His side, I will not believe" (John 20:25).

What would our reaction be if we had actually watched a close friend being brutally executed, and then just a few days later, when meeting with others who also knew him, we were greeted with the news that our friend was alive and well?

"I don't believe it," we would say. "I have to see this with my own eyes!" Our natural doubt and suspicion of anything that is outside the ordinary would probably cause us to react just as Thomas did (which caused him to be forever known as "Doubting Thomas").

Thomas's expression of doubt, disturbing in its graphic quality, forcefully describes a state of deep religious doubt. Upon being suddenly faced with an idea that was beyond his ability to believe in his present state, Thomas declared that unless he was given physical proof of the Lord's resurrection, he would not believe.

Perhaps we would criticize Thomas for his outburst. Perhaps we feel that in his position, we would have been more receptive, more willing, more faithful. Perhaps we feel that doubt itself should have no part in our religious life, that it is a sign of weakness, of insufficient study or of a lack of understanding, a failure of faith. We may feel that to admit to any kind of doubt at all, let alone a doubt as powerful and fundamental as that which Thomas expressed, is a sign of spiritual ignorance and weakness. After all, the angels never have any doubts—or do they?

If we reflect on this for a moment, it can be readily seen that doubt about any new thing is universal and instinctive. We all hesitate before accepting information simply on face value, especially when it contradicts what we already believe to be true. A new idea might be accepted without hard evidence, provided the source has a history of strict accuracy and integrity, and provided some kind of evidence is forthcoming. Think about little children, and the look on their faces when you tell them something. Often their faces will mirror the feeling that they really want to believe you, but are not sure whether or not they should. At other times they might stubbornly deny what you say, no matter how carefully you explain it to them. Little children instinctively doubt everything, even when it is from parents whom they love and trust.

This is true even of little children who are growing up in heaven and are constantly in the presence of angels (whom one would presume to be trustworthy). Swedenborg wrote that when he was visiting groups of children in heaven, he was surprised to find that

The spirits with me could not refrain from inducing [the children] to talk. This desire is innate in spirits. But I noticed, each time, that the children resisted, unwilling to talk in this way. This refusal and resistance, which were

accompanied by a kind of indignation, I have often perceived; and when an opportunity to talk was given them they would say nothing except that "It is not so." I have been taught that little children are so tempted in order that they may get accustomed to resisting...falsity and evil, and also that they may learn not to think, speak, and act from another, and in consequence may learn to permit themselves to be led by no one but the Lord (Heaven and Hell 343).

Doubt, our instinctive questioning whether a thing is so or not, is not a weakness or a failure of our faith. Doubt is a faculty given to each one of us by the Lord from birth, so that we might be able to protect ourselves from what is false and freely choose to believe what agrees with what we have already learned from the Lord through the Word. Doubt, like the loves of self and the world, was given to us as a protection and also as a means of becoming spiritual—and, like the loves of self and the world, doubt can be misused and inverted and so lead the mind into confusion and error upon error (see *Arcana Coelestia* 1072:2).

When we are born, our minds are natural; that is, they focus on and use information from and about the world of nature—the things that we perceive through our five senses. However, the Lord intends that, from being natural, we are to become rational and finally spiritual. And the rational and spiritual degrees of the mind both rest upon the natural degree as a two-story building rests upon its foundation.

Doubt plays an important part in our becoming rational and then spiritual, for the rational degree of our mind is named from the word "ratio." A ratio is a mathematical expression of the comparison of two values. The rational mind is that part of the mind which is used to take two different ideas and compare them, imagine their implications, weigh their values, and finally accept one or the other (or some parts of both) as something true that can be lived. If everyone simply accepted every idea he heard without question, there would be no ratio of truths, and the rational mind could not be opened. It is doubt—the questioning, challenging part of us—that allows us to take a truth and examine it, test it, and finally confirm it and make it our own.

Doubt is a powerful tool in the Lord's hands, for by means of its judicious use the rational and spiritual degrees of the mind can be opened. However, not everyone wants to have a spiritual mind. Not everyone wants to be led by the Lord, and with people like these, doubt becomes a powerfully destructive force that infects the mind and even reaches out to try to infect others. In the Heavenly Doctrine for the New Church we are taught that

[T]hose who are not in the faith of charity desire merely to reason whether a thing be so, and to know how it is, saying that unless they can know how it is, they cannot believe it to be so. From this alone they are known at once as being in no faith, a mark of which is that they not only doubt concerning all things, but also deny in their hearts; and when they are instructed how the case is, they still cling to their disbelief and start all kinds of objections, and never acquiesce, were it to eternity. Those who thus persist in their contumacy heap errors upon errors. These, or such as these, are they who are called in the Word "drunken with wine or strong drink" (Arcana Coelestia 1072:2).

Herein lies the essential teaching regarding doubt: when a person is in good, that is, when he is trying to live according to the things that he believes to be true from the Word, he is then in the faith of charity, and *his doubts serve to confirm the truth for him*. On the other hand, when a person is not in the faith of charity, that is, when he does not wish to live according to any truths, but to live from himself and for himself alone, then he is as it were spiritually drunk, for he cannot be rational, and he proclaims his doubt and disbelief to all. He will stubbornly hold to the smallest point and never give up his view, even when presented with overwhelming factual evidence to the contrary. Instead of attacking the facts presented, he will turn on the motives and character of his opponent. Such people make every effort to negate what does not favor themselves and their own particular view of the world, and so it is said that they are in the negative principle (*Arcana Coelestia* 6479).

We have all seen examples of this negative principle and examples of its opposite, the affirmative principle. Sometimes we see them in the same person at different times. An example of the negative principle might be a student who continually challenges the teacher, picking on minute points, and who seems more interested in finding fault than in finding out. On the other hand, we have all known people who greet each new day and new situation with delight and interest. They see everything as a new opportunity to learn and grow. Their questions are designed to increase their own understanding of the subject, not to question the point. We feel delight and enthusiasm just being around such a person. Each of us is capable of having the negative or the affirmative principle become the dominant influence in our lives. We need to be able to see which one is dominant in ourselves right now, and do our best to keep becoming more and more affirmative about the Lord's truth. This is done by shunning evils as sins and living according to the Lord's commandments.

Doubt plays an important role in temptation also, for we are taught that

He who is in temptation is in doubt concerning the end in view. The end in view is the love, against which the evil spirits...fight, and thereby put the end in doubt; and the greater the love is, the more do they put it in doubt. If the end which is love were not put in doubt, and indeed in despair, there would be no temptation (*Arcana Coelestia* 1820).

Without doubt there would be no temptation, for if a person did not feel in his heart and believe in his mind that it was possible for him to fail in temptation—if there was no doubt concerning the eventual outcome—there would be no point in the temptation. If he could not lose, the person would not feel the need to fight; he would not feel the need to call upon the Lord for help. In short, temptation would be reduced from being the means by which a person puts off evil and acquires new loves to being an annoyance without spiritual benefit. Only when doubt and despair are present with a person can the Lord flow into his mind with hope, comfort, and peace, for then the individual recognizes his need for the Lord and is finally ready to put himself aside and receive the gift of new loves from Him (see *Arcana Coelestia* 5044).

Doubt has a similar function in the confirmation of truth, for the Lord has given people the faculty of doubt so that they will be selective about the things they allow to enter their minds. Everyone begins with “historical” faith. By historical faith is meant a system of thought and

belief that one gets from one's family, environment, and culture, without having actually confirmed any point for oneself from doctrine or life. It is our first form of faith, and it is borrowed from those around us. Since this faith is borrowed, it is necessary for us to build up a faith of our own for ourselves, as soon as the rational degree of the mind begins to open.

It is remarkable to note that even in heaven doubt is introduced by the Lord so that the angels will not simply accept what they hear. It is a law of heaven that whenever angels are taught something, they are soon also taught the opposite, so that they must examine both ideas, compare them to what they know from the Word and from their own experience with life, apply the laws of the spiritual world, and, finally, when they see the truth itself, they make it their own (*Arcana Coelestia* 7298:2). It is of order that all truths, even those presented to angels in heaven, are to be of life—not merely accepted by faith alone.

The Lord's own disciple Thomas doubted His resurrection, and the Lord was willing for Thomas to actually explore His wounds if that was what was needed. This story can illustrate how important doubt is in our spiritual development. If it is used properly, doubt is a powerful tool. The proper use of doubt comes from the attitude with which we use it, and from how we live. If we choose to be in evil and take delight in negative states, if we seek to destroy or deny anything that does not favor our own desires, then doubt becomes a dangerous weapon in our hands. On the other hand, if we are questioning, comparing, learning, and growing in intelligence and wisdom, and daily seeing new applications of the teachings from the Lord in His Word, then our doubt will be like that of the angels—confirming that what is from the Divine is true and that to live according to the truth is good. Then, like Thomas, we can stand before the Lord, see His Divine Humanity, and exclaim, “My Lord and my God!” (John 20:28)

Amen.

Lessons: Exodus 7:1-13; John 20:19-31; *Arcana Coelestia* 7298:2