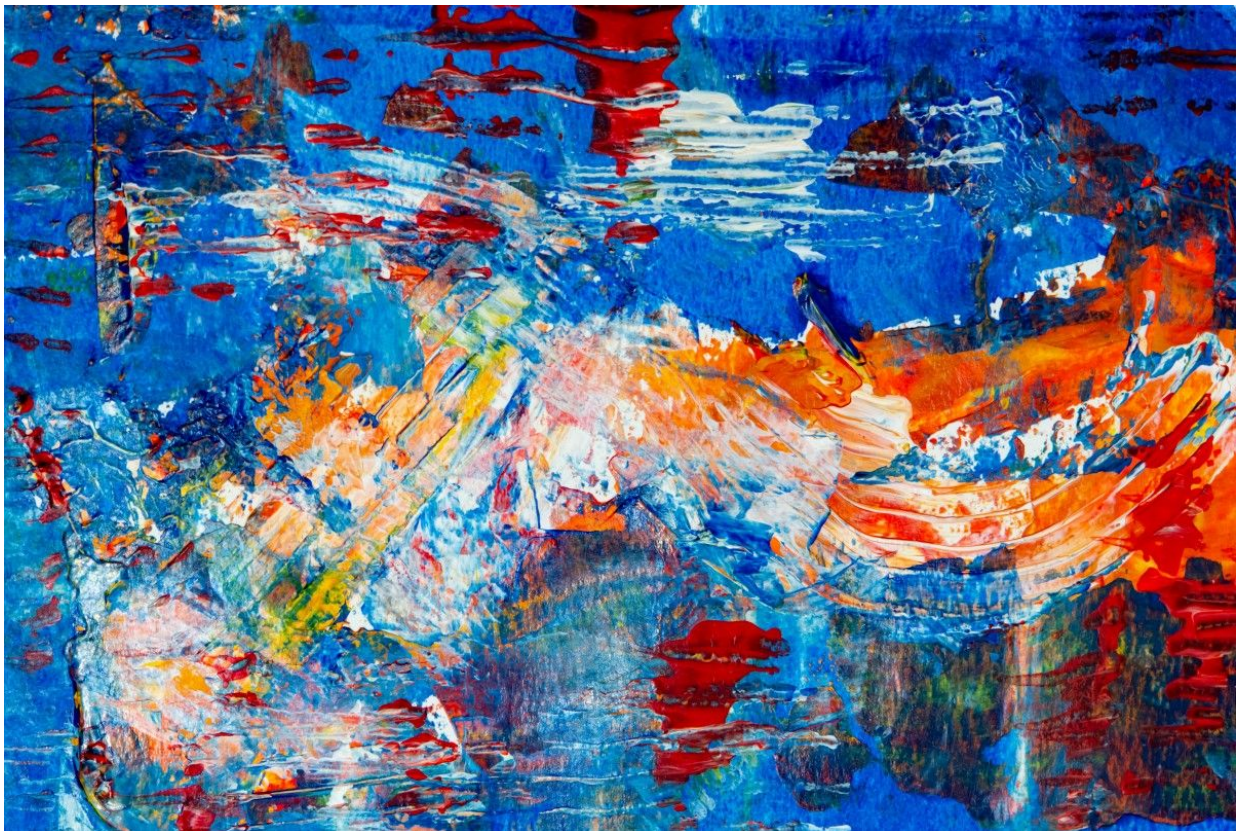




“The Meaning of Baptism”
Rev. Hugh Odhner

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Then Jesus called a little child to Him, set him in the midst of them, and said, "Assuredly, I say to you, unless you are converted and become as little children, you will by no means enter the kingdom of heaven."¹ -Matthew 18:2-3

Most people who hear this story, realize, almost instinctively, that the Lord was not speaking literally that we must become like little children, but that he was speaking figuratively, illustrating that we must become like that state which little children possess in abundance, that is, a state of innocence. Those who have innocence, as do all little children, enter into the kingdom of heaven. The Lord was emphasizing a quality which we must come to possess in order to receive a heavenly life.

When we reflect on this quality of innocence that little children have, we may observe that little children can be very open to believing that things around them are living and also that they are very open to receiving instruction.

Here are a few delightful passages from the *Arcana Coelestia* in which we may see the states of innocence of little children:

When young children (in heaven) ... are in ... an angelic sphere, they cannot possibly be troubled by (bad) spirits, even when they are in the midst of them. Sometimes also the young children who are in the next life are sent by the Lord to young children on earth, though the young child on earth is utterly unaware of it. With the young children on earth they are absolutely delighted.

What is more, while the young children are being perfected even the sky around them accords with the state of their perfection. In particular clouds manifest themselves to them which seem to contain the shapes of young children at

¹ *New Revised Standard Version Bible*, copyright © 1989 National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America. Used by permission. All rights reserved worldwide.

play, but too small to be seen individually.... From these shapes they gain the heavenly idea that every single thing around them is alive and shares in the Lord's life, which idea gives them a feeling of happiness in their inmost being.

By a method of communication that is familiar in the next life, I have been shown the nature of young children's ideas when they see any objects. Their ideas were such that every single thing was living, so that each idea comprising their thought had life within it. I also perceived that the ideas present in young children on earth when playing games were almost the same²

-Emanuel Swedenborg, *Arcana Coelestia* §2295, 2297-2298

A lesson here for adults, especially for parents of young children: when children say they have invisible friends, or that they are talking with Angels – well, they very well may be.

Baptism signifies regeneration and purification from evils. This is accomplished by means of the truths we learn from the Lord's Word to the degree that we live according to those truths. Those who are in a state of innocence are open to receiving instruction, especially instruction concerning the Lord and truths about heaven and heavenly life. For this reason the parents and guardians of the young children who are being baptized make a solemn promise before the Lord to teach and lead their children according to the teachings of the Word. This is according to the practice described in True Christian Religion 685, where we read:

It should be very well known to every Christian that "baptism" includes being purified from evils and regenerated. When a baby is being baptized, the priest draws a cross, as a reminder of the Lord, with one finger on the baby's forehead and

² Swedenborg, Emanuel. *Arcana Coelestia*. Translated by John Faulkner, Potts and John Clowes. West Chester: Swedenborg Foundation, 1998.

chest, and then turns to the godparents and asks, “Does this child renounce the Devil and all his works? Does this child accept the faith?” The godparents reply on behalf of the child, “Yes indeed.” Renouncing the Devil (meaning evils that come from hell) and having faith in the Lord are the elements that carry us through the process of being regenerated.³

-Emanuel Swedenborg, *True Christianity* §685:2

Now when the Lord was in the world He also chose to be baptized. Why He did this is explained in the *Arcana Coelestia* §10 and §239, where we read:

A few words shall be added to say why the Lord, when He was in the world, also wished to be baptized, when yet by baptizing is signified the regeneration of a person by the Lord. It was because the baptizing of the Lord Himself signified the glorification of His Human; for in the Word that which signifies the regeneration of a person signifies also the glorification of the Human in the Lord, because a person's regeneration is an image of the glorification of the Lord.

Therefore when the Lord allowed John to baptize Him, He said: Thus it is fitting for us to fulfill all the righteousness of God (Matt. 3:15).⁴

Our regeneration is an image of the Lord's Glorification. The Lord by being baptized was setting an example for us both physically and spiritually. Physically we are also meant to practice baptism and be baptized. But more importantly, we are to practice what is meant by baptism. We are to learn the truths of faith from the Lord's Word, and then we must live according to them. Only in this way can we be regenerated or born again.

³ Swedenborg, Emanuel. *True Christianity*. Translated by Jonathan S. Rose. West Chester, PA: Swedenborg Foundation, 2006.

⁴ Swedenborg, Emanuel. *Arcana Coelestia*

Now when we are being regenerated, it is as if we are coming full circle back to an innocence like we had when we were infants, when we may have been first baptized. We start out with the innocence of infancy which is open to instruction by parents and teachers and also open to the influences of angelic spirits. As we mature and come out of that innocence of infancy, and gradually into adulthood, as we learn more and more truths from the Lord's Word and put them into practice in our lives, we gradually come back into a state of innocence in which we have a deep yet simple trust in the Lord and in the teachings of His Word. In place of the parents and guardians of our childhood, we now look to the Lord as our spiritual Father, and the nurturing influence of *His* Church as our spiritual mother. And what is wonderful, we come again into the presence and influence of the angels who are seeking to be with us and longing to share their love and heavenly joy with us.

This was why the Lord spoke of our need to become like little children. We must again become open to receiving instruction about heavenly truths and receiving heavenly love and joy, while we are still living in this world.

Amen.

-Prayer-

*Your mercy, O LORD, is in the heavens; Your faithfulness reaches to the clouds.
Your righteousness is like the great mountains; How precious is Your mercy, O God!
Let us put our trust under the shadow of Your wings. Amen.*

-Psalm 36:5-7