

The Charge to Peter

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Now when Jesus looked at him He said, "You are Simon the son of Jonah. You shall be called Cephas (which is translated Stone)" (John 1:42).

"And I also say to you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build My church..." (Matthew 16:18).

Simon Peter was one of the first disciples the Lord called. More is written of him in the Gospels than about any other of the twelve. He was their leader, the most outspoken of these men. Peter is presented as a figure of great contrasts. On one memorable occasion when the Lord questioned His disciples about what people thought of Him, it was Peter who declared Him to be "the Christ, the Son of the living God" (Matthew 16:16). The Lord blessed Peter for this confession of his faith. The foundation stone of Christianity is this acknowledgment of the Lord's Divine nature. So Peter was rightly named a stone or rock because his confession is the rock upon which the Lord could build His church.

Yet, soon after, when Peter rebuked the Lord for talking of His death, the Lord called him "Satan" and said, "You are an offense to Me." "Get behind Me, Satan! ...[Y]ou are not mindful of the things of God, but the things of men" (Matthew 16:23). Peter's faith had wavered.

In what is perhaps the best known incident about him recorded in the Gospels, Peter denied the Lord three times the very night he said, "I am ready to go with You, both to prison and to death" (Luke 22:33). There is no denying human weakness.

But it was a different Peter who dove into the sea to swim ashore to see the Lord when He appeared later, after the resurrection. This was when the Lord asked Peter three times, "Do you love Me?" It was almost as if the Lord wished to give Peter a chance to answer for each of the denials he had made that night of the betrayal.

"Simon, son of Jonah," the Lord said (for He rarely called him Peter), "Do you love Me more than these?"

"Yes, Lord," Peter answered, "You know that I love You."

Then the Lord added this beautiful and inspiring charge—"Feed My lambs" (John 21:15).

He said to him a second time, "Simon, son of Jonah, do you love Me?" Peter said, "Yes, Lord; You know that I love You." Then the Lord charged Peter: "Tend My sheep" (John 21:16).

He said to him the third time, "Simon, son of Jonah, do you love Me?"

When Peter answered a third time, grieved because he perceived his weakness in the Lord's words, he said: "Lord, You know all things; You know that I love You."

The Lord said, "Feed My sheep." With these words He placed a great responsibility upon Peter. He placed the work of the church on the one who had denied Him three times.

So there are two primary things about Peter that we think of: first, the great contrasts in his discipleship; and second, the important commission the Lord gave him.

Many reading the Gospels wonder about the personality of Peter: his vacillation, his final conversion to an unwavering purpose to serve His Lord, the great mission which the Lord entrusted to him, and his faithful leadership in the early beginnings of Christianity. Perhaps some see Peter as a model for themselves, hoping they too can put away the denials of Christ in their own life to become instead a rock of faith and an instrument for the spreading of His Gospel. The Lord has called us all to feed His lambs and sheep. Don't we all, in our best moments, thrill to the challenge and opportunities He has given us to spread His teachings, to feed the lambs within our own flock, to seek out and feed the sheep who will "hear His voice"?

These are worthy reactions to the Gospel accounts about Peter. We should strive to become true disciples of the Lord and teach our children about these good people and their mission. But we should also remember that there is much more contained in the Word than the literal account. The good qualities of all people are from the Lord alone. It is clear from Peter's lapses of faith that true strength is from the Lord. It was the acknowledgment of the Lord's Divinity that became the foundation of the church, not the man Peter. So long as he held that true conviction and acknowledgment, he could serve the Lord in building the church.

This is why the Lord also spoke to Peter by the Sea of Galilee, asking, "Do you love Me?" Without that love joined to his work, Peter could not have been a true shepherd of the sheep.

Peter represents a quality. All the natural things mentioned in the Word, including the people that are described, picture spiritual realities. This is what makes the Word a Divine and holy writ. There is a spiritual sense contained within everything that is there. And this sense has now been revealed by the Lord for the New Church. When we know this, the account of Peter takes on new depth of meaning. New insights are revealed into the nature of our own life and what the Lord expects of us, His disciples.

Peter represents faith. But faith can be of two kinds: true or dead. It can be a faith alive with inner love from the Lord: as the Heavenly Doctrine for the New Church says, "faith from charity." It can also be a hollow or dead shell of intellectual reasoning or patterned belief. This is described in the Heavenly Doctrine as "faith separated from charity" (*Apocalypse Explained* 820).

The reason the Word shows Peter to be a man of contrasts is to demonstrate the contrast between the two kinds of faith represented by him. Peter was capable of doing exalted things—of reaching the heights—but he was also capable of utter failure and of giving offense. Peter could express the essential truth of the church: recognizing the Divine nature of His Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. But he could, in another state, weakly deny that he was even one of the Lord's followers. How could Peter turn back from such deep acknowledgment? This is the nature of faith that is not living from within.

On the night of His betrayal, as the disciples gathered with the Lord for the Last Supper, the Lord predicted Peter's denial. "Simon, Simon!" He said, "Indeed, Satan has asked for you, that he may sift you as wheat. But I have prayed for you, that your faith should not fail; and when you have returned to Me, strengthen your brethren" (Luke 22:31-32). And later, as Peter stood with the Lord on the shore, following the great catch of fish, the Lord gave him the charge to feed and tend the sheep.

Is this not the characteristic of faith? It may fail when it stands apart from the Lord's love, but when it is revived, it teaches and strengthens the church. Faith without charity is weak, and it is represented by Peter's denials. A true faith, which can lead and instruct the church, is represented by the Lord's commission to Peter.

To be living and valuable, faith must stand with love. This is shown in the dialogue by the sea. The Lord asked not twice but three times, "Do you love Me?" Unless faith has within it love of the Lord and is enlivened by charity, it cannot serve or instruct the church. The truth must spring from the good of love.

We notice too how often the Lord called Peter by the name "Simon" and also "Simon, son of Jonah." The name Simon comes from the Hebrew word meaning to hearken and obey. This idea of hearing and hearkening to the Lord is an important one in relation to faith. The love of the Lord which makes faith living and true is possible only as we hear and obey the Lord. The Heavenly Doctrine teaches that "faith becomes faith in a person when he obeys and does the commandments; before this is done, the knowledge of such things as a person has drawn from the Word, from the doctrine of the church and from preaching, appears as faith, but this is not faith until the person does these things; until then it is merely a matter of thought from the memory, in which there is nothing of the will..." (*Apocalypse Explained* 443:3).

The name Jonah also carries a related sense. It means a dove, and a dove, we are told, signifies the "good of charity." Simon, son of Jonah, then, means one born from the good of charity, a way of life conceived by the good of charity and carried out in obedience to Divine law.

"Simon, son of Jonah, do you love Me?" How do we love the Lord? The Heavenly Doctrine teaches that to love the Lord is "not to love Him in respect to person but to live according to His commandments" (*Apocalypse Explained* 433:2). "[T]herefore...so far as they [the commandments] are loved, that is, so far as people live according to them from love, so far the Lord is loved" (*Arcana Coelestia* 10578). The Lord taught that "He who has My commandments and keeps them, it is he who loves Me" (John 14:21). This is the secret of obtaining true and enduring faith.

The Lord's threefold question and charge is significant. The Heavenly Doctrine teaches that it is a prophecy of the rise and then the decline of the church. There is a progression from the infancy of faith when there is the good of innocence. The Lord taught about this state when He said to Peter, "Feed My lambs." Later, the lambs become the sheep, and their faith is from the good of charity. Peter was grieved when the Lord asked a third time, "Do you love Me?" The word for love here is not the same as before. It is a lesser kind of love and thus signifies a lesser faith that is in good from truth (see *Arcana Coelestia* 3934:5, 4169:3; *Apocalypse Explained* 820:6).

The signification of this third question is the end of the church when charity is lost. So the Lord added, "When you are old, you will stretch out your hands, and another will gird you and carry you where you do not wish" (John 21:19). There must be a continual renewal of faith; otherwise, the church will grow old and perish.

What is said about Peter applies to each of us as well. We are all disciples of the Lord, so He might well ask each one of us, "Do you love Me?" Have we strengthened our faith by hearing what the Lord teaches and by practicing it? If not, our spiritual life will "grow old," harden into merely traditional patterns, and finally die.

The Lord's charge, too, is to each one of us: "Feed My lambs," "Tend My sheep," "Feed My sheep." The circle of life is completed in this charge. Not only must our faith be from love, it must also look to use. The feeding and tending that Peter was told to do signify the uses that are to be done by those who have faith. Love to the Lord exists in use, and we are told that the conjunction of the Lord with a person is in use (see *Divine Wisdom* xi:3).

True faith seeks expression in the life of charity and there, in action, finds permanence and stability. When faith is merely an idea, without consequent action, it is like the boast of Peter when he said, "I am ready to go with You, both to prison and to death" (Luke 22:33). In fact, this faith failed him in the test. On the other hand, a faith which brings forth fruit in the works of charity is thereby confirmed, made strong, and endures.

Our faith can be strengthened if we resolve to feed the lambs and the sheep. In a very special sense, the lambs to feed are those infants and children the Lord has placed under our care. The education of our children in spiritual things is a responsibility, placed upon us by the Lord at their birth and confirmed and espoused by us at the time of baptism. It is a use that begins in the home, but extends into the broader realm of the schools. At no time may we abdicate our responsibility for this nurturing. Indeed, many of the widespread problems of society today may be traced back to a failure of faith in the home, a situation where the lambs were not fed.

In a broader sense, the lambs are all states of innocence in ourselves and in others. It is up to us to nourish these states. An example is a tender attitude of worship, a simple affection for spiritual things. We may feed and strengthen this state by forming good habits, by infilling good affections with appropriate instruction. Or, another example, a desire to serve unselfishly can be encouraged with action.

Then the Lord commanded, "Tend My sheep." Our mature states need ordering, sorting out, being put into spiritual perspective. Each person has a flock of sheep in his personal pasture. How are they led? Do they know the Shepherd's voice and follow at His call? The Lord works through means to accomplish His ends and purposes. Does He not require us to apply our own knowledge of the truth to bring about order in our lives? As we strive to ward off dangerous and destructive influences from hell, to balance our lives, to bring back the straying sheep of our pasture, we fulfill the Lord's charge to tend His sheep.

And we must also feed His sheep. A specific application of this command is to evangelize those outside the church. The Lord once said, "Other sheep I have which are not of this fold; them also I must bring, and they will hear My voice; and there will be one flock and one shepherd" (John 10:16). Every person of faith has a part in feeding these "other sheep." Nor should we neglect to find pasture for ourselves. To sustain our faith it is necessary that we return regularly to the Lord in His Word for new truth. The natural man hungers daily for the nourishment to sustain his life. But what appetite does our spiritual man have?

Instruction and spiritual nourishment is not only an intellectual process. Many learn best by doing. What is done with the hands from the heart brings a sense of deep satisfaction, particularly when done for others.

The Lord's charge to Peter at the beginning of the Christian Church is also a commission to every person who has a faith in the Lord. If we are to abide in that faith and strengthen it, we must exercise it in the works of charity.

Then, when it comes time for the Lord to ask of us, “Do you love Me?”, we will truly be able to answer, “Yes, Lord, You know that I love You.”

Amen.

Lessons: Matthew 16:13-23; John 21:10-19; *Apocalypse Explained* 820:2