

The Curse of the Dragon

A sermon about the siren song of sensual reasoning

by the Rev. Jeremy F. Simons, Bryn Athyn, July 29, 2018

“So the serpent spewed water out of his mouth like a flood after the woman, that he might cause her to be carried away by the flood.” Revelation 12:15

The Woman-Clothed-with-the-Sun was not trying to fight the dragon. She was only trying to escape. But the dragon came after her and tried to drown her in a river of water coming from its mouth.

This is how a lot of us may feel in the midst of the social and religious debates going on today. We aren't trying to win, just escape.

The imagery of our text describes the drama of spiritual conflict. The story is about a flood of reasoning looking to discredit and weaken the truth, and to support its opposite. According to New Church teachings the things meant by this flood influence the lives of every one of us.

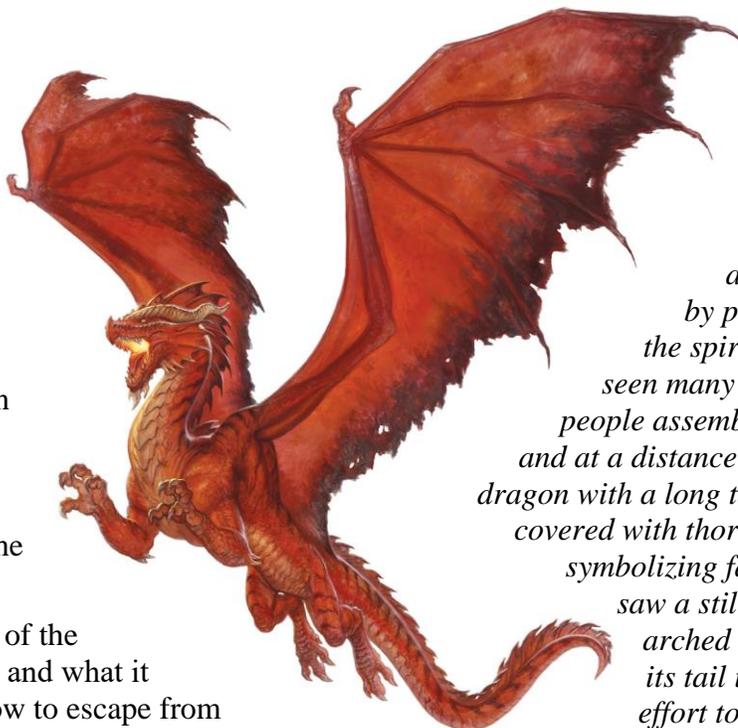
Our topic today is the meaning of the dragon's flood, how it appears, and what it does. Our topic is especially how to escape from it – what is meant by the wings given to the woman, which she uses to fly away, and also how the earth helps the woman by absorbing the flood.

The dilemma is summarized in our lesson from *The Secrets of Heaven*:

“A single evil afflicted not only the earliest church, before the Flood, but also the ancient church, after the Flood, and the Jewish church, and then the new church or the church among non-Jews that came after the Lord's arrival into the world, just as it afflicts the modern church. It is the evil of not believing the Lord or the Word but trusting oneself and one's senses.” Secrets of Heaven 231

Not believing the Lord or the Word but trusting oneself and one's senses. This is the evil that is the dragon, and the information that he trusts in and uses to advance his cause is the flood.

People in the church are sometimes confused about what the dragon is and what is so bad about him. In the Writings the dragon is most frequently identified as people caught up in “faith alone.”



“The dragon here means people who are caught up in faith alone and who reject works of the Law as not saving, and I have had this attested several times by personal experience in the spiritual world. I have seen many thousands of such people assembled into companies, and at a distance then they looked like a dragon with a long tail, which seemed to be covered with thorn-like spikes, symbolizing falsities. I also once saw a still bigger dragon, which arched its back and extended its tail up to the sky in an effort to draw down the stars from there. I thus had it visually shown to me that these and no others are the people meant by the dragon.” Apocalypse Revealed 537

What is “faith alone”?

The imagery is chilling, but what isn't clear is exactly what is meant by the term “faith alone.” On its face it means the idea that we are saved by what we believe, and that what we actually do in life is not the key to salvation.

The problem with this is that it is unlikely that you will ever meet any religious person who will say that the way you live is not important. Many New Church people familiar with these teachings have concluded that they no longer apply today.

But “faith alone” is a larger category than this gives it credit for. If we understand what it is really about we will see that it does describe the issues we face.

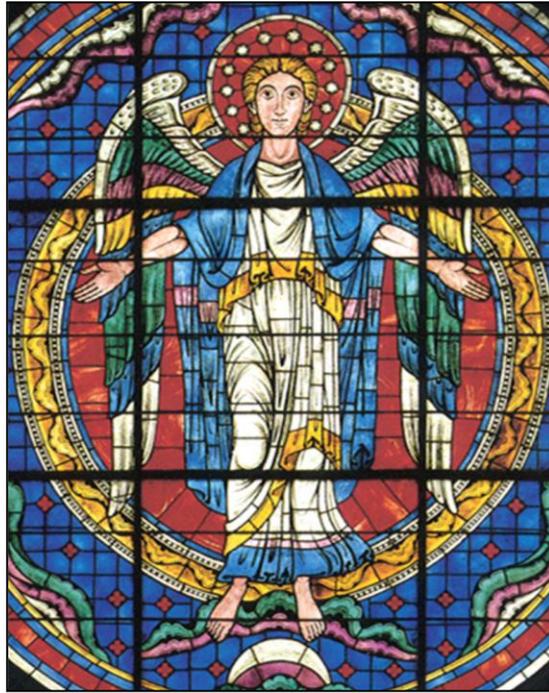
Faith alone is the doctrine of the atonement.

Specifically, what the New Church calls faith alone is the classic Christian doctrine of the atonement. It is described in *Wikipedia*:

“Atonement refers to the forgiving or pardoning of sin in general and original sin in particular through the suffering, death and resurrection of Jesus.”

That is, Jesus took on our punishment, and if we believe in Him our own sins are forgiven, and we are saved. This doctrine, or some version of it, continues to be the official understanding of all Christian churches. This is the almost universal Christian answer to the question *“What did Jesus do to save us?”*

This does mean that, for those who believe this doctrine, keeping the Commandments is not the most important thing. It also means that non-Christians are not saved, even if they lead good lives. It also assumes three distinct persons in the Godhead. These are the things that New Church teachings condemn when speaking of this doctrine, calling it the dragon.



Faith alone is not living your religion.

But there is more to it than that. Faith alone is the key issue that all modern religions share. Before the Flood described in Genesis, the earliest people, the people of the Most Ancient Church called Adam and Eve, were intuitively good people. Since that time people are not naturally good, but we can learn to be good. So all religions since ancient times are about following teachings and practices to become better people.

The issue that immediately arises is that people might learn what religion teaches but fail to practice it. This is faith alone. The issue with the atonement doctrine is that it allows this to happen because it describes the mechanism of salvation in terms other than how a person lives their life.

Faith alone is being led by sensual reasoning.

There is even more to it than that. This is where we begin to see what the dragon is, and why he is so dangerous.

We read that *“a single evil has afflicted the church”*

since ancient times. *“It is the evil of not believing the Lord or the Word but trusting oneself and one's senses.”* *Secrets of Heaven* 231

Trusting one's self and one's senses is to be led by sensual truth – the visible, provable truths of the natural world, by what we can see and easily grasp.

“It was revealed to me who are meant by the dragon in Revelation. They are those who reason about divine truth on the basis of the natural

sciences, thus on the basis of such things as are in nature, and who for the purpose of corroborating their conclusions, make use of the literal sense of the Word, which they twist into agreement.” *Spiritual Experiences* 4760

The things that these people have real confidence in are the things that are demonstrated by the physical and social sciences. They then apply this kind of information to every area of life, including religion.

The connection with faith alone is that when we don't actually follow the Word in our lives we are inevitably led by this kind of

sensual truth.

The reason that this is called a dragon is because the dragon is none other than *“that serpent of old, who is the Devil and Satan”* (*Revelation* 20:2) from the Garden of Eden. He induced Adam and Eve to believe the information of their senses, rather than what the Lord told them. This is *eating of the tree*.

The reason that he is now a dragon and not just a serpent is that dragons can fly. We read:

“The dragon' means in general those who are more or less natural, and yet are in a knowledge of spiritual things from the Word, because "serpents" stand for the sensual things in a person, and so for sensual people. Therefore "the dragon," which is a flying serpent, signifies the sensual person who yet flies towards heaven in that he talks and thinks from the Word or from doctrine from the Word.” (*Apocalypse Explained* 714.5)

The serpent in the Garden of Eden appealed to common sense. The dragon quotes the Word, yet he thinks purely naturally and sensually.

The appeal of sensual reasoning

Sensual reasoning has tremendous appeal. “Sensual people are able to reason sharply and skillfully, because their thinking is so close to their speech as to be practically in it... They also have great skill at defending things that are false. They base their reasoning on mistaken impressions from the senses that the public finds captivating and convincing.” *True Christianity* 565

The mistaken impressions from the senses that the public finds captivating and convincing are such things as appeals to success, to common sense and fairness, and skepticism about the authority of revealed truth. Think of sensual reasoning as the things that you would expect to be credibly asserted and accepted on the national news.

In its own realm there is nothing wrong with this approach – it is about facts and causes as they are believed by the average person. But when it flies up into the realm of spiritual things it becomes a dragon. We read:

“When we are under the sway of the world and our bodies, (that is, when we think sensually) we say in our hearts, “As for faith and its ramifications, if my senses do not teach me to see, or if facts do not teach me to understand, I refuse to believe.” In confirmation, we remind ourselves that what holds true on the earthly plane cannot conflict with spiritual realities. So our senses teach us about heavenly and divine affairs.” *Secrets of Heaven* 128

This is all part of what the Heavenly Doctrine calls faith alone, and it is the dragon. Most of us are prone to fall for arguments based on this approach. These arguments are the flood from the dragon’s mouth, hoping to carry away the woman.

The earth helped the woman.

Fortunately, not everyone falls for these arguments. “The earth helped the woman”: “This means that the church, in which there are also dragons, rendered assistance, and did not accept their keen reasonings respecting faith alone.” *Apocalypse Explained* 767

Not everyone falls for these arguments, and there are many people who help the cause from all religions and walks of life. But the more important solution to this flood is what we read in our lesson:

“The earth helped the woman’... symbolically means that the multitude of reasonings flowing from

falsities that followers of the dragon put forward come to nothing in the face of the spiritual truths rationally understood that are advanced by the Michaels of whom the New Church is formed.” *Apocalypse Revealed* 564

The solution is “*spiritual truths rationally understood.*” That is, the solution is for people to read the Word, to study it, to gain a genuine and deep understanding of what it teaches, and to live by it. Ironically, this approach – involving the extensive study of doctrine - is sometimes criticized as “faith alone” by people who see a common sense approach as more useful than “*book learning*” - which can sometimes seem like counting angels on the head of a pin. But it is just the opposite. Without a real understanding of the Word all of us are prone to fall for the arguments of the dragon.

The same is meant by the eagle’s wings that the woman was given to enable her to escape the flood. They stand for “*the spiritual intelligence and circumspection which the Lord gives to those who are of that church*” (*Apocalypse Explained* 756) and its protection while it is still among a few.

There shall be no more curse.

The curse of the dragon is our tendency to fall prey to the arguments based on sensual reasoning that defeat the truths of the Word and support immoral and atheistic things in our life. This is the danger that the Writings call “*faith alone*” and it is more powerful today than ever.

But *spiritual truths, rationally understood*, defeat that dragon. They answer our spiritual questions, they nourish our soul, and they lead us to live a loving and useful life. They take away the curse, which was pronounced on the serpent in *Genesis* 3. So it says in *Revelation* 22:

“And there shall be no more curse, but the throne of God and of the Lamb shall be in it, and His servants shall serve Him. ⁴ They shall see His face, and His name shall be on their foreheads. ⁵ And they shall reign forever and ever.”

These are the “*Michaels of whom the New Church is formed*” who not only escape from the dragon, but lay hold of him, “*cast him into the bottomless pit, and shut him up, and set a seal on him, so that he should deceive the nations no more... Blessed are those who do the Lord’s commandments, that they may have power in the tree of life, and may enter through the gates into the city.*” *Revelation* 20, 22

Readings from the Word

Revelation 12

Now when the dragon saw that he had been cast to the earth, he persecuted the woman who gave birth to the male *Child*. ¹⁴ But the woman was given two wings of a great eagle, that she might fly into the wilderness to her place, where she is nourished for a time and times and half a time, from the presence of the serpent. ¹⁵ So the serpent spewed water out of his mouth like a flood after the woman, that he might cause her to be carried away by the flood. ¹⁶ But the earth helped the woman, and the earth opened its mouth and swallowed up the flood which the dragon had spewed out of his mouth. ¹⁷ And the dragon was enraged with the woman, and he went to make war with the rest of her offspring, who keep the commandments of God and have the testimony of Jesus Christ.

Revelation 20

Then I saw an angel coming down from heaven, having the key to the bottomless pit and a great chain in his hand. ² He laid hold of the dragon, that serpent of old, who is *the Devil* and Satan, and bound him for a thousand years; ³ and he cast him into the bottomless pit, and shut him up, and set a seal on him, so that he should deceive the nations no more.

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And He said, "Who pointed out to you that you were naked? You ate from the tree from which I commanded you not to eat, didn't you?" And the human said, "The woman whom You gave to be with me, she gave me from the tree and I ate." And Jehovah God said to the woman, "Why have you done this?" And the woman said, "The snake deceived me and I ate." Genesis 3

The symbolism in all of this is that our rational capacity allows itself to be deceived by our sense of autonomy--which we love tenderly--or in other words, by self-love, so that we give no credit to anything we cannot see or feel.

Anyone can see that Jehovah God did not talk to a snake and that in fact there was no snake. Nor did He talk to the sensory part of the mind, symbolized by the snake. Rather, other things are involved. Specifically, people perceived that they had been deceived by their senses, and because they loved themselves, they were eager to know whether the things they heard about the Lord and about faith in Him were true. Only then would they be willing to believe.

231. A single evil afflicted not only the earliest church, before the Flood, but also the ancient church, after the Flood, and the Jewish church, and then the new church or the church among non-Jews that came after the Lord's arrival into the world, just as it afflicts the modern church. It is the evil of not believing the Lord or the Word but trusting oneself and one's senses. The result is an absence of faith, and when faith is absent, so is love for others--a situation that leads to all falsity and evil.

232. Conditions are much worse today than they once were. People can now employ knowledge unavailable to our ancestors in justifying the skepticism bred by their senses. In doing so, they produce so great a darkness that it could never be described. If people knew how great a darkness results, they would be astounded.

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But the earth helped the woman, and the earth opened its mouth and swallowed up the river which the dragon had spewed out of its mouth. (12:16) This symbolically means that the multitude of reasonings flowing from falsities that followers of the dragon put forward come to nothing in the face of the spiritual truths rationally understood that are advanced by the Michaels of whom the New Church is formed.

