

Communication

Why Not Reincarnation?

Dear Editor:

In reply to Jenny Keal's letter about my article "Why Not Reincarnation?" (*New Church Life*, January 2007), let me affirm what she says about the Lord's love for all people. Yes, He gives us "as many chances as we need to live the kind of life that would get us to heaven. The Lord's love extends to all people, and he never gives up on us. He forgives seventy times seven, and his mercy endures forever." As Jenny shows, all people have been predestined for heaven and no one for hell, and all human beings are born with the image of God in them (*Divine Providence* 322).

Yet this doesn't mean everyone ends up in heaven or that people return to this life again and again until they accept the Lord's offer of goodness in themselves. The "image of God" which He creates in everyone (*Divine Providence* 322) is the "ability to understand truth" and the "ability to do good." These abilities give us the capacity to be free and rational and make us spiritually free. But this capacity doesn't mean we'll choose to understand truth and do good. A God of love does create us for heaven (*predestines*, intends us for heaven), but He does not determine that we must go there (He doesn't *predestinate* us to heaven).

Remains enable the Lord to lead us away from evil toward good and, as Jenny quotes, "not even the least of them perishes." Someone without any remains "would inevitably be subject to eternal condemnation" (*Arcana Coelestia* 561). But the passage doesn't say that remains lead everyone eventually to heaven or prevent people from choosing to make their lasting home in hell.

The Lord uses remains to provide all of us with ample opportunity to follow spiritual paths different from those we walked in our childhood and in prior cultural experiences. Heredity and good upbringing from loving parents affect the kinds of spiritual choices we have. Still, God gives every individual an inner spiritual ability to put first, in seemingly small ways, either ourselves or a goodness higher than self—God, a “Higher Power” (AA), other people, or something else beyond self.

We all have changes of state in which we can understand and feel with different perspectives, and so we have freedom to rethink, and start in new directions. Freedom includes the capability of developing habits, choosing our own character through decisions, and confirming (reaffirming, strengthening) the loves we ourselves want to feel by acting from them again and again. Even when we’ve confirmed in ourselves who we want to be, we’re still free and are given many opportunities to change. But we’re also allowed to continue to be as we are if that is our wish. The options that come to us in life—the good ones from the Lord and bad options from hell—are more than enough for us to decide whether we want to look toward God and goodness for others or to ourselves above all.

It’s an age-old fallacy that birth, upbringing, and conditions of life give some people a better chance than others to be good. (This belief is especially strong in lands where many believe in predestination or in reincarnation.) History and literature are full of people who became very different from what one might expect from their early conditions of life—sometimes becoming wonderful examples of love and accomplishment. Nurture is important but does not determine either our natural or spiritual life.

If God continued us through many lives till we became fully receptive of His goodness, our two personal memories, which embody our spiritual character and identity, would not work (see

Heaven & Hell 461-469, etc.). Moreover, would such a God care above all about our freedom? Or would He in effect be pursuing us, against our already-chosen preferences, and insisting that we accept His happiness sooner or later? A system that didn't permit an individual to choose to love himself as his primary life goal would allow only one kind of decision. True granting of freedom means letting people be what they themselves wish to be, allowing them the full reality of their free choices.

A final point of agreement with Jenny: The Lord always forgives everyone, and no one ever goes to hell because He doesn't forgive them (*True Christian Religion* 409, 539, 651, 652, etc.). It's not possible for the Divine to hold evil against anyone—even though we do that to ourselves. People go to hell and prefer to stay there, not because God doesn't forgive them, but because they don't want His forgiveness. They prefer to remain with their own chosen pleasures. We accept the mercy and forgiveness He extends only by turning to Him and repenting from the evils that keep Him distant. But whether or not we do that, He leaves to our free decision.

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Laurel Camps—Week one: July 29 – Aug. 4; week two: Aug. 5 – 11.

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