

DOCTRINE FOR THE YOUNG

THE TEST OF LOVE

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Love is the supreme virtue in the New Church, as it was in the first Christian Church. Love is the dominant theme of the New Testament and of the Heavenly Doctrine. But how do you know if you have this highest good?

The answer was simple to understand in the first Christian Church, though not easy to actually do. Love meant mercy and forgiveness to all people, including your enemies. You were supposed to turn the other cheek and suffer passively rather than hurt even your oppressor: “Bless those who curse you, do good to those who hate you, and pray for those who spitefully use you and persecute you” (Matthew 5:44). These teachings of the Lord are true when understood in the light of the spiritual sense of the Word. But the literal sense by itself suggests that love is weak and ineffective in the real world.

Over time, many Christians came to look for forms of love that were less connected with daily life than showing mercy to everyday neighbors and forgiving real enemies. They wanted forms of love more directly related to times of worship and prayer. The test of love for many people came to be feeling and experiencing sensations of love within oneself, especially while praising God, or perhaps when contemplating one’s own sinfulness. In this way of thinking, the test of love is whether you *feel* love in your heart. Do you experience emotions and feelings of love, especially when you worship?

But let me ask an important question about love—can our own sensations of religious, holy, warm feelings tell us whether or not we have love? This is a popular idea today, more popular than the New Testament test of loving your enemy. But the Heavenly Doctrine says that people on earth can perceive the true joy of heaven only faintly and dimly, if at all. They often confuse worldly, external joys for the happiness of heaven (*Heaven and Hell* 401).

It’s easy to understand why. The feelings we are aware of are often external. They arise from the changing states of our natural minds. People are different in how openly they express feelings. Some people are very excitable; others are much less so. But what does open expression or sensation of feelings have to do with the capacity to love our neighbor? Enthusiasm in worship or exuberance toward others may reflect a deep charity, or only the most superficial stirring of our external minds. Some people feel less worshipful in enthusiastic expressions of religious feeling than in quiet, solemn states of deep peace. In conjugal or married love, an outward show of affection is important. But it is not a test of whether there is real love inside. Our ability to feel and outwardly express affections tells more about the state of our external minds than about whether we really love something or someone.

In the New Church the test of genuine affections is not outward expression, but whether or not affections produce something useful for others. Truly loving affections will result in actual useful

service for other people. The New Church's test of love is use, because use is love in the form of actions that serve others. This doesn't mean abstract mental desires for usefulness, but down-to-earth, concrete, space-time useful deeds that we actually perform. Unless affections take active form in works, they are just ideas, mere possibilities. Affection becomes something lasting when it is in act. Love, unless it becomes deed, ceases to be love. If you don't do something about it, you don't really love, no matter how full of good feelings you sometimes are.

Love means co-operation, because all uses involve other human beings to some extent. You can't perform a use in total isolation, because then your work won't actually help anybody. Co-operation means operating or working together with others. Sometimes this is difficult to do, especially when everyone has a different way of doing things, a different idea on how to proceed. Besides, in all human actions there are imperfections, failings, and weaknesses. No person is right more than some of the time. Our human failings get in the way of cooperation and make people want to quit. It's especially easy to get disgusted at other peoples' mistakes when we're certain *our* way would have succeeded. There is often a real temptation to walk out on a use.

Usually our own proprium or self-love is the biggest obstacle to success—our conceit that our way is best or a pride in our own leadership abilities. That's why shunning evils is essential for love. Nearly everyone likes to lead or direct a job or project. But if you love the use, you'll find a way to work together for it—you'll shun the evils you need to shun. If people love, they'll find ways to work with each other. And they'll only quit trying if they're convinced that the procedure is so wrong that it will destroy the entire use.

In the long run our success will not come from agreeing with each other on all questions. Nor will it come from our being able to share strong, warm, good or holy feelings with each other. If we succeed in furthering the Lord's church on earth, or just in regenerating individually, it will be because we truly love enough to set our selfishness aside, so that we can cooperate with others for the Lord's uses. Love means uses, and that means cooperation.

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