

DOCTRINE FOR THE YOUNG

THE TEST OF LOVE

by the Rev. Dan Goodenough

The supreme virtue in the New Jerusalem, as in the first Christian Church, is love. Love is the dominant theme of the New Testament and of the Writings. But how do you know if you have this highest good?

The answer was relatively simple to understand in the first Christian Church, though not easy to actually do. Love meant mercy and forgiveness to all, including your enemies. Turn the other cheek, suffer passively rather than hurt even your oppressor. “Bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you, and pray for them which despitefully use you and persecute you” (Matt. 5:44). The Lord’s teachings are true when understood in the light of the spiritual sense. But the literal sense alone suggests that love is somewhat weak and ineffective in the real world.

Under the influences of faith alone many Christians came to seek forms of love less connected with daily life than showing mercy to everyday neighbors and forgiving everyday enemies. They wanted forms of love more directly related to times of worship and prayer. With many the test of love came to be the ability to feel and experience sensations of love within oneself, especially while praising God, or perhaps when contemplating one’s own sinfulness. In the experimental tradition, the test of love is whether you *feel* love in your heart. Do you yourself experience emotions and feelings of love, especially when you worship?

Can our own sensation of religious, holy, warm feelings tell us whether or not we have love? It’s a popular idea today, more popular than the New Testament test of loving your enemy. But *Heaven and Hell* 401 says people on earth can perceive the true joy of heaven only most faintly and dimly, if at all. They very frequently confuse worldly and external joys for those of heaven.

This is easy to understand. The feelings we are aware of are often external, arising from the changing states of our natural mind. People differ greatly in their ability to express feelings openly. Some people tend towards very open emotions, others towards holding their feelings within. Some people are very excitable; others are much less so. In general, youth is more openly emotional than old age, and women more so than men. But what has open expression or sensation of feelings to do with your capacity to love your neighbor? Enthusiasm in worship, exuberance towards others may reflect a deep charity or only the most superficial stirrings of our external. Some feel less worshipful in enthusiastic expressions of religious feeling than in quiet, solemn states of deep peace. In conjugal love outward show of affection is important. But it is hardly a test of whether there is genuine love within. Our ability to feel and outwardly express affections tells more about the state of our external mind, than about whether we really love.

In the New Church the test of genuine affections is not their external expression, but whether or not they produce something useful for others. This is because affections produce uses in forms. The New Church test of love is use, because use is love in its form. This doesn’t mean abstract

mental desires for use, but down-to-earth, concrete, space-time deeds of use that we actually perform. Unless affections are in actual forms, they are nothing but ideas, mere potencies. Affection first becomes something 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 love, no matter how full of good feelings you sometimes are.

Love means co-operation, because all uses involve other humans in some degree. You can't perform a use in total isolation because then your work won't actually help anybody. Cooperation means *operating* or *working* together with others. This is often difficult to do, especially when everyone has a way of doing things, a theory of how to proceed. Try getting out a car that's stuck in the mud when everyone has a different plan in mind. Moreover, in human actions there are a lot of imperfections, failings, and weaknesses. No one is right more than a percentage of the time. Our various human failings get in the way of cooperation, and make people want to quit. It's especially easy to get disgusted at others' mistakes when we're certain *our* way would have succeeded. The temptation to walk out on a use is often real.

Usually it is our own proprium that is the big obstacle: our conceit that our way is best, or our pride in our own leadership abilities. That's why shunning evils is essential for love. Nearly everyone enjoys being the leader or director of an operation. But if you love, you'll find a way to *work together* for the use—you'll shun the evils you need to shun. Maybe you're right that your own procedure or idea is the best way. If you really love, if your affections are genuine, you'll find ways to cooperate. People who don't agree on procedures or their understanding of truth, who sometimes fail, who may not even like each other very much: if they love, they'll find ways to work with each other. And they'll quit trying only if they're convinced that the mode of procedure is so wrong that it will destroy the entire use.

The New Church on earth has always been full of strong-minded, opinionated individualists who thought their way was the right one. They disagreed among themselves about many points, even important matters of faith and life. When people do their own thinking, they are bound to see life differently from each other. But if they love, they will continue, as in the past, to find ways to put use above disagreement. They will cooperate for the common good of the church.

In the long run our success as a church will not be from agreeing with each other in all questions that come up. Nor will it be 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, it will be because we love truly enough to set aside ourselves so that we can cooperate with others for the Lord's uses. Love means uses, and that means to cooperate.

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