

## DOCTRINE FOR THE YOUNG

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# HELL IS EASY TO PICTURE

by the Rev. Donald L. Rose

The New Church concept of hell is very different from the usual concepts people have. No wonder many in the world doubt that there is a hell. For they think of it as some place of fire, horrible beyond imagination—into which an angry God will cast them if they are not good.

A whole chapter of *Heaven and Hell* is devoted to the truth that “The Lord Casts No One Into Hell.” And we are told directly that people in hell are not in fire. They are “conscious of no burning, but only of a warmth like that which they had felt when in the world” (HH 571).

The experience of hell is in many respects like things we have already experienced. Instead of being warned about some horrible place we might go to some day, we are being told we are already in hell and that we may be saved from it! “No man can be withdrawn from his hell by the Lord unless he sees that he is in hell and wishes to be led out” (DP 251).

One useful way to think of hell is to think of selfishness or the love of self. We all know pretty much about selfishness, as we have observed it in others and in ourselves. We have known a kind of pleasantness that seems to go along with the love of self, but we have also sensed something of its under-lying misery. We can see examples of extremely selfish people, and we sense that they have a built-in unhappiness. “What is more restless at heart, more frequently provoked, more violently enraged than self-love and this as often as it is not honored according to the pride of its heart, and as often as anything does not succeed according to its wish and whim?” (DP 250:2).

As long as the love of *self* is kept in its place it has a useful part to play (TCR 395, 403). But there is one thing you can never do with the love of self. You can’t make a heaven out of it. It just doesn’t work. Imagine an organization or association of people in which everyone wanted only happiness for self. Each person would be thinking, “Others exist for my happiness. ” The Writings say that in such a situation “what everyone wished for no one would have” (HH 403).

One passage in the Writings about such a situation shows that it is *easy* to imagine what government would be if it were based on such selfishness. The passage is from the *Arcana Coelestia*. It says that the love of self has a kind of glow in it from which people imagine that it could bring them eternal happiness. “And therefore many place eternal happiness in becoming great after the life of the body, and in being served by others, even by angels, while they themselves desire to serve no one ... Thus they carry in their hearts the desire to become lords themselves and to rule over the universe. It is easy to conceive what kind of government this would be, when many, nay, when all, were like this. Is not that government hellish in which every one loves himself more than any other? ... There is concealed within the love of self-hatred

against all who do not subject themselves to it as slaves, and because there is hatred, there are also revenge, cruelties, deceits and many other wicked things (AC 1594:3).

We catch little glimpses of hell when we see people all striving for self alone. Even a conversation in which everyone wants the subject to reflect the glory of self, gives us a picture of hell. “He who loves himself above all things regards himself in each thing; he thinks about himself, he talks about himself, he acts for the sake of himself, for his life is a life of self” (HD 55).

Someone who only “regards himself personally”, we are told “is like a king who thinks that the kingdom and all the people in it exist for his sake, and not he for the sake of the kingdom and the people.” (DP 220:8) A kingdom made of the love of self is one in which nobody will do a single thing unless he can see self—advantage in it. Otherwise he says, “Why should I do this? What do I get out of it? And therefore he does not do it” (HH 556, TCR 400). This is easy to picture.

It is easy to see the *contrast* of selfishness with the unselfish love of the neighbor, which the Lord gives. “Any one can see that love of the neighbor and love of self are opposite loves; for the love of the neighbor wishes well to every one from itself, while love of self wishes well to itself alone from every one; love of the neighbor wishes to serve every one, while love of self wishes every one to serve it; love of the neighbor regards every one as its brother and friend, while love of self regards every one as its servant, or as its enemy if he does not serve it; in a word, it regards itself only, and others scarcely as men, holding them in heart in less estimation than its horses and dogs. And because it regards them as of so little account it thinks nothing of doing evil to them; and this is the source of hatred and revenge, adultery and whoredom, theft and fraud, lying and defamation, violence and cruelty, and other such evils” (DP 276).

We were not born for this hell but for heaven. “Man is born not for the sake of himself but for the sake of others; that is, he is born not to live for himself alone, but for others (TCR 406). Although we have had enough experience of selfishness to have a picture of hell, we have also had happy experiences of unselfishness from early childhood, and we know the joy of being useful. As the Writings say, we stand midway between heaven and hell (Life 19), and the more we learn the nature of each, the more we see the Lord inviting us away from hell into the happiness of heaven.

**Text: Arcana Coelestia 1594:3**