



Dalton get-together

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Lifeline

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Editor: Alan Misson,
Tel: 020 8777 5098 Email: alanmisson@btinternet.com

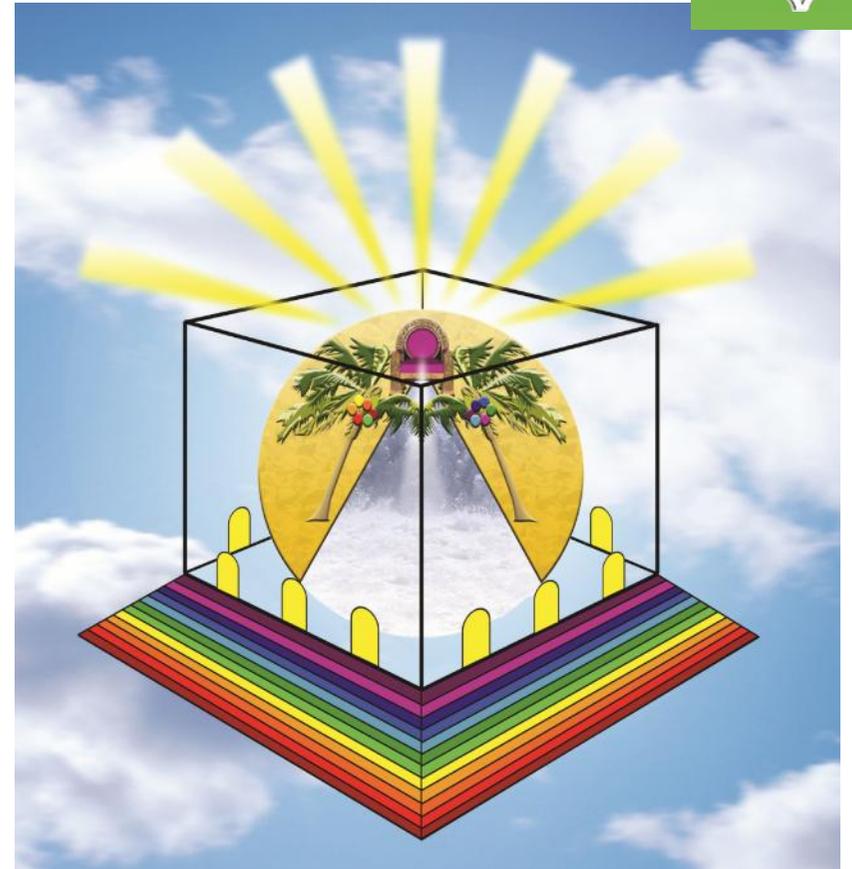
Distributor: Howard Turner,
Tel: 020 7229 9340
Email: howard.turner@generalconference.org.uk

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Lifeline



And I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband.
[Revelation 21:2 ESV]

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Our mission is to express, share and experience with others in life an inclusive, non-judgmental vision of God's kingdom.

Editorial

It has been said to me in the past by a few people that sometimes an issue of Lifeline has proved *'heavy going'*. Well, it is probably right for me to say that this issue of Lifeline is likely to prove *'heavy going'* for many people since in just one issue I am publishing a lengthy article by Rev Michael Stanley on *'By What or on Whose Authority?'* and two promised articles from the Committee of Ministers on the subjects of *Ordination* and *Human Sexuality*.

I felt that it was really important to place all three articles together in one issue in June and so give time for the wider body of the Church to reflect carefully and prayerfully on what is being said.

Michael's article does not in any way enter into the issues presented by the Committee of Ministers but it does provide a framework within which these issues can be more widely discussed, most importantly at Conference in July.

With the celebration of New Church Day coming into view as I write this I am reminded of those vitally important words of Swedenborg recorded in True Christian Religion 508 concerning a vision of a church building in the spiritual world:

Later, when I got closer, I saw there was an inscription over the door: NOW IT IS PERMITTED. This meant that now it is permitted to enter with the understanding into the mysteries of faith.

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Area AGM get-together at Dalton 22nd April 2012

For more years than most can remember, the churches at Keighley, Seaburn Dene and Bradford were all closed on this Sunday, in order that the congregations could travel to Dalton for an all-day event of joy and worship.

The basic purpose of this significant get-together was to hold the annual 'Yorkshire and North East' Area Provincial meeting, which have been very poorly attended in previous years. Also, the Area Executive team (chaired by Kathie Brooks) were concerned that more should be done to bring people together to strengthen the isolated societies and families and 'mutually enhance spiritual living', which is part of the 2011 Vision Statement. Furthermore, 4.2 of the Strategy for implementation of the Vision Statement is 'people are empowered to develop their enthusiasm for the Lord's Word in non-traditional ways'. So this resulted in this unusual gathering.

The theme of the day was 'building church', which is all about people first, not buildings. Nevertheless, we met in the Dalton Church which has an enthusiastic but small group of Church workers who rarely see many non-Huddersfield folk. So, to encourage visitors, the other Societies came by coach, paid out of Area funds. Happily, over 70 people of mixed ages attended, including isolated families and individuals from Sheffield, Darlington, York, Ripon and Harrogate. Jan Miller (Area Secretary) helped to organise the day's events, which included an afternoon tea. Once again, the Dalton church demonstrated their expertise with mass catering, thanks to the key work by Jean Mrozek, Janet Jessop and Gordon Sandford.

On arrival, people were encouraged to write their names on a brick-shaped label and to attach it to a model to symbolise their coming together as a church. After welcoming refreshments, the opening service was led by Rev. Christine Bank, with contributions from each Society on the theme of 'building church' i.e. people coming together to follow God's teachings in the Bible. It included a children's talk from Kathie Brooks (with working models) of the houses built on rock and sand.

Then, after a brief but formal AGM, an adult bible study was led by Rev. Bruce Jarvis on John 14 whilst the young children decorated some cakes beautifully and created hand shapes to link everyone together. The teenagers created a collage of faces using photos they had taken at the meeting. These planned activities were supervised by Kathryn Higgins, Gwendolen Rowe and Lesley Raistrick plus other willing helpers.

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The function of the church is to lead us towards the heavenly role or place the Lord has prepared for us. This should be our prime role: to preach and teach that which leads to the establishment of the conjugal principle in men and women. Our more natural and external instinct may be to tell people that anything goes, that any expression of love is okay. But this is surely to make the mistake of the prophets of old who said *“Peace, peace”, when there is no peace.*

The church at large is becoming increasingly isolated from public opinion through the stance it takes towards homosexuals.

Encouraging people to go in a wrong direction is not being loving towards them.

There is a great desire to love and support all people and to offer a welcome and a place for everyone within the church.

By What or on Whose Authority?

How should complex Moral Issues in the Church be debated?

As with many other Christian denominations our Conference organisation is now embroiled in the very emotive debate on moral and religious issues concerned with homosexual attraction and behaviour in humans. Our ministers, in particular, have been wrestling with these matters for many years now, and continue to find themselves divided over what is to be believed in this area, and what decisions to take, if any, to guide the Church as a whole.

Particularly because of the emotiveness of the subject perhaps, I have felt that there is frequently a lot of confusion in the debates as to where one is really coming from, and where the ultimate authority for answers lies. We can all easily pay lip service to our looking to the Lord with the guidance of the Word and the Writings, but what does that mean in practice? What really counts for each one of us? And that may be the real cause of our inability to come to a consensus.

The following thoughts are my attempt to help each of us to identify our underlying ‘ultimate authority or authorities’. My hope and belief is that this may clarify our thinking and debating on deep spiritual and moral issues, and avoid much argumentation that often simply takes us round and round in circles that fail to advance our insights in any way.

In the Table below I have identified at least seven distinct possible ‘authorities’, any of which may consciously or unconsciously influence us as our ‘ultimate authority’ in deciding some moral issue. All except the last one (A7 Gut Feeling) find clear support in the Writings, as well as clear indication that it is unwise to rely on just one or two of these alone to decide every issue.

If on some particularly emotive issue we find we differ from one another in our ‘chosen’ authority, we may well have found the real source of our inability to agree, and can move the debate to the real underlying issues.

So, which of the different ‘authorities’ listed below counts most for us in these major moral issues our Church is faced with at the present time?

Wanted - Council Recorder

After the Annual Meeting in July there will be a vacancy for the role of Council Recorder when Mrs Marion Curry retires from the position.

If you are interested in the work of the Council and would like to take on a voluntary role which includes attending all meetings and taking and subsequently circulating the minutes, then look no further.

Applications should be sent to **Mr Michael Hindley**, Council Secretary,

If you would like an informal chat before applying please ring Michael on 01206 303800

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The day finished with a drawing game based on ‘Beetle’ but using the bible, a church building and people. Due to the number of people present, we were forced to do this in the pews. A tricky place to throw dice! Feedback forms are being studied to consider what form next year’s event at Sunderland should take.

Phillip Brooks

“Authorities”

Exterior		Interior	
A1	Bible (Word) - Literal texts - Interpreted texts	A4	Reason(ing)
A2	The Writings - Literal texts - Interpreted texts	A5	Intuition
A3	Church Decrees	A6	Own Life Experiences (of persons)
		A7	Gut Feeling (not to be confused with Intuition)

A1 The Bible (or Word)

With Christian denominations (especially in the Protestant churches) this has always been a primary source for an authoritative word from God on moral matters. Even in the New Church the Ten Commandments, for example, have remained an axiomatic foundation for a moral life. However, exactly which texts in the Bible are to be taken literally as opposed to needing to be interpreted or regarded as no longer applicable, remains a problem area for ongoing debate and argument.

A2 The Writings (of Swedenborg)

In the New Church these have traditionally formed *the* basis, not only for interpretation of the Bible, but also for the determining of allowable moral behaviour. But here again problems can arise such as, for example, their advocating the taking of a mistress as an allowable practice in certain circumstances for avoiding Jesus' prohibition of divorce in Matthew 19:9.

A3 Church Decrees

Some in the Church feel their primary need is to be told authoritatively what is the Church's current moral stance or acceptable practice on any particular moral issue. However, as in the recent or current discussions on the ordination of women or on homosexuality issues, deep irresolvable divisions of opinion and belief may occur.

The above three sources of authority are all in the form of *external* dictates involving not personal involvement or choice but simple obedience to an external authority.

However, the last four sources move the decision process inward to the individual's own thinking or feeling, or at least to some involvement of his or her own personal view.

The church's focus in sexual matters should be less about what people do and more about what their attitudes are.

In making moral judgements applied to individuals, the church can, albeit unwittingly, exclude people.

It may be that there is a separate provision within the spiritual worlds for those who are homosexual?

The idea of anal intercourse was felt to be distasteful but what is meant by the terms 'lewd' and 'perverted' mentioned in the Bible in sexual contexts? The Bible does not specifically define these terms, how can we be certain what is meant?

Homosexual relations do not seem to be in accordance with divine order, but this does not mean individuals living this way should be condemned or judged. Is a blessing (as in marriage) for same sex relationships orderly?

There was a feeling that within the body of the ministry the actions of one minister will inevitably reflect on others. This is particularly a concern if individual Ministers go their own way in conducting same-sex ceremonies outside the currently agreed and accepted practices of the church.

Ministers should be encouraging people to move towards the good order wanted by God.

Being homosexual may be something over which people have no control.

We already do welcome homosexual people in the life of our churches; the debate is moving to the area of our understanding of the eternal heavenly and conjugal potential we affirm in marriage and if this same potential exists in other than male/female couples.

Our teachings hold much about the joy and power of marriage. There is a reluctance or unwillingness to support something that leads away from the Lord's desires for us.

Can committed partnerships (of any sexual inclination) provide something of benefit towards a person's regeneration?

The function of a priest is to lead people to the good of life. It is difficult to see how a same-sex relationship could lead to this as it is based on physical union, not the spiritual union of love and wisdom. If the church blesses or solemnises such relationships, is it not leading people away from what is good and which has the potential to last to eternity?

Human Sexuality

These views are offered as an indication of the spectrum of thought and opinion within the Committee of Ministers and are intended to be a basis for discussion and consultation around the difficult area of human sexuality.

This does not claim to offer the fullest explanation of viewpoints but tries to give a flavour of the thoughts expressed by Ministers as they shared their own perspectives, difficulties and insights in this area. Within the Ministry there is a wide range of opinion and interpretation; we acknowledge colleagues hold these views sincerely and hope the wider church will feel able to discuss, explore and challenge these ideas as part of a process of debate and exploration we can undertake together. (note: CoM statement on human sexuality previously published in Lifeline March 2011 still stands)

The opinion was expressed that our current view of conjugal relationships is very black and white in terms of a male-female marriage. Some Ministers feel it may be more appropriate to think in terms of masculine and feminine characteristics rather than being limited by sex. The Writings speak of men as totally masculine and women as totally feminine but some feel that in practice there is more of a spectrum of masculinity and femininity. How would the conjugal principle work with a strongly masculine woman marrying a strongly feminine man?

For others the distinctiveness of the male and female cannot be put into terms of a spectrum; the sex and gender of each unique individual is from conception and has spiritual as well as physical dimensions.

If homosexuality is such an important issue, why does Jesus not mention it directly in the gospels?

It is implicit in the Bible that there is a God and that He makes everything in the world for a use. How do we square this with the unnatural use of genital organs in homosexual acts?

We look to conjugal marriage as an ideal but we are imperfect creatures and God loves us as we are. If people don't fit a heterosexual pattern in their relationships but still wish to be within the church sphere then is it better to encourage stability if the alternative is promiscuity or loneliness?

The focus of debate should concentrate on issues directly impinging on the church, which is around homosexuals, lesbians, trans-sexuals and bisexuals who want to live in a good spiritual way.

A4 Intuition

With this authority, one is attempting to draw on one's own spiritual awareness, insights, and sensitivities. Justification for this approach may also be found in many places in the Writings where it is expressed as receiving 'enlightenment from the Lord'.

A5 Reason(ing)

In attempting to decide on more complex moral issues the Writings strongly advocate the use of one's own reasoning powers. But when? And to what extent?

A6 One's Own Life Experience

This is similar to A4 except that the sense of authority comes not so much from inner *insight* as from one's more close personal knowledge and *experience* of people in daily life - as to what sort of person you sense and believe they really are - regardless of their outward conformity or not with generally accepted norms of behaviour. Are they essentially loving and caring persons in what they are doing, or not? The Writings have seen this as the angelic way. [Conjugal Love 527]

A7 Gut Feeling

This is not any sort of insight or thinking, but rather an intense feeling, such as personal attraction or, on the contrary, horror or aversion, towards some persons and/or their behaviour.

It is tempting to proceed by dealing first with the first two sources (A1 and A2) which are our New Church Divinely revealed sources. But I shall start with the last (A7) in order to point out how strongly that particular one can *unconsciously* influence the way we approach and use the Word and the Writings. Take the case of someone who has a very strong gut *feeling* for or against the thought of homosexuality. He or she is highly likely to find themselves scouring the Word and the Writings for texts that overtly support their feeling and belief. On the other hand they will tend to skip over, be ready to excuse, or find a different interpretation for any that seem to go against such feeling and belief. I myself am not at all immune to using these sources in that way, but at least I can try to be honest and admit what I am doing and why. If I am proceeding in that way, I need to be aware that I am placing my ultimate trust in my gut feeling and using the Word and the Writings merely for support and 'ammunition' in the debate. Others may then rightly feel at liberty to dismiss my opinions.

Interpretation of Divine Revelation

But surely we must *first of all* learn what is right and wrong from the Lord through His written revelations [see A1 and A2] before we allow any feelings or intuition to influence us?

However, there are two main problems here. First, such written revelations are very far from being complete in the area of morality, failing necessarily to cover every aspect of human relations. They are therefore silent on countless vital moral issues such as premarital intercourse, euthanasia, abortion or the use of torture in the interests of national security, to name just a few.

Secondly, they are at times contradictory in their literal statements. The problem here is, who is to tell us which statements are to be taken literally at face value, and which should not, but should be interpreted to mean something different? So we have two religious schools of thought.

Literalist - Scriptural texts are to be understood literally at face value.

Interpretist - Many or all scriptural texts need to be interpreted.

Sometimes Jesus in the gospels helps us here, and so does Swedenborg - sometimes! But if not, we have to seek another 'authority' - but which? And this is where the interior 'authorities' A4 - A6 come in. But again, who is to tell us which of these is the best or truest? If we each know which underlying 'authority' we have chosen to put most trust in, our moral debates and wrangles might be radically foreshortened, and a much clearer picture of why we can't always come to same conclusions can then emerge.

Relation of Moral to Spiritual Laws

Let us now look a little more closely at our approach to the moral laws of our written revelatory sources, A1 and A2. There are two main ways, the **absolutist** and the **situationist** which I am defining as below.

Absolutist - regards Scriptural laws as absolute - admitting no exceptions. (using or implying the terms 'always' and 'never')

Situationist - with the exception of the Law of Love, recognizes Scriptural laws as non-absolute or non-appropriate in certain circumstances. (using or implying terms such as 'usually', 'mostly', or 'normally')

The absolutist would place highest importance on the absolute nature of all the laws of scripture (usually taken literally). This makes life simple in one sense - that of not having to think about the applicability or not of any biblical laws. But at times he may find himself in horrendously complex or clearly unacceptable legal situations - as did the Pharisees of Jesus' day.

Ordination could be seen as an initial element in a person's ministry, with potential development into other directions that may include different ordinations.

Views around ordination cover a spectrum, from it being simply an organisational process to one that is divine in origin.

For other Ministers the concept of more than one ordination presents significant difficulties.

Some see their New Church ordination as having specific value to the church, placing the ordained individual in a special position. This draws on the spiritual principle of the Levite tribe being set apart to serve the Lord and the community as a priesthood.

Others see the concept of 'ordination' as a bringing into order, the culmination of a process which accepts the individual as trained, prepared and suitable to be a priest/minister. Organisations tend to have different values and concepts; it is difficult to see how it would be possible to hold true to more than one at the same time.

Some felt it would not be possible to suspend or ignore an ordination on a temporary basis where different priorities or practices conflict. Ordination covers the whole of life and all actions and behaviour need to be congruent.

More than one ordination holds the potential for confusion, and may dilute the individual's commitment to each body.

Multiple ordinations devalue the significance of ordination into each specific organisation and may diminish the leadership that can be offered.

Some feel that multiple ordination reduces ordination to the status of a diploma. There are no main stream religions which allow their ministers to hold more than one ordination. Multiple ordination denudes the uniqueness of the concept of ordination in the public view and along with it an important orderly structure in the world.

Ministers have left the New Church in the past and given up their ordination as they have moved into different organisations, putting themselves in an orderly situation appropriate to the new body within which they work.

Descriptions of order in the heavens speak of many distinct societies with their own structures. Each is precious and different but the variety of the whole is heavenly. Variety comes from these distinctions and their interactions; mixing things together is chaotic and disorderly.

Ordination

There is a range of feelings among the Ministry about ordination. Each holds their New Church ordination as special, but for some this does not automatically preclude someone seeking ordination with another group and holding more than one ordination at the same time.

For others the idea of ordination marks a specific personal commitment and calling into the priesthood of one organisation or church. Ordination holds a special and sacred quality for the individual in their ministry and for the body of the church they seek to serve. The vows, promises and commitments made in the ordination ceremony are therefore felt to be unique, and not easily “mixed” with the requirements of other organisations.

The Ministry wish to encourage discussion on this subject. The points below give a flavour of opinions within the ministry, and we hope the whole church can be part of considering issues around ordination. They are in no special order, and contain some overlaps.

For some Ministers the idea of being ordained by more than one body is not seen as problematic and does not necessarily lead to conflict.

Some feel that such multiple ordinations could allow a sense of an individual's calling to be expressed through different uses or forms of ministry.

It is seen by some as offering wider possibilities and opportunities to be more open to different organisations and offers potential to cross boundaries and perhaps enable an individual to serve a greater range of people.

There is a sense of different approaches being complementary rather than in opposition to each other. For some this is related to a belief that barriers between different groups (and even potentially different Christian denominations) are tending to hold back humanity's spiritual progress rather than helping it.

Accepting more than one ordination is closely related to ways some Ministers feel a desire to acknowledge the variety of spiritual needs of people and the potential for them to be reached by the Lord in different ways.

The concept of a sense of “calling” might allow for an individual to seek more than one ordination, as the “uses” of ministering to people can take different forms, which may include working in ways that can be related to different ordinations.

But for the situationist the criterion is whether or not the application of any moral law in some situation is compatible with the one absolute or unconditional Law of Love (Jesus' Two Great Commandments). If they clash in any particular situation, the lower non-absolute law should give way to the higher absolute Law of Love.

Jesus was situationist in his understanding of the Sabbath Day commandment, allowing healing work on the Sabbath, “*The sabbath was made for man, not man for the sabbath*” [Mark 2:27]. In other words, the commandments though given to help restrain us from going astray, are not intended to put us into a straightjacket that would hold back our spiritual growth of wisdom in life. On one occasion [Luke 14:26] Jesus even called for not love, but hatred of one's father and mother for true discipleship. And can we really believe that all parents without exception are honourable?

The unconditional Law of Love is internal or spiritual, whilst moral laws are external or natural, and depend on the two great commandments for their validity. Moral laws are intended to protect, demonstrate and fulfil the Law of Love in all our forms of behaviour (see Matthew 22:40). But that requires careful sensitive thought and deliberation in each and every situation with room for doubt.

The Nature of Heavenly Love

Many people misunderstand those who call for love to take precedence over strict moral obedience in all circumstances. This comes about through thinking of love simply as a warm feeling or affection that at times can lead to a willingness to condone deviations from the moral code. But the Writings show us that heavenly love in essence is a determination of the will or *'perpetual endeavour to act'* [Divine Wisdom 19]. Affection, or warm feeling, they describe as being an offshoot of love, rather than the essence of love itself. This should help us to comprehend how it is possible to *'love our enemies'* as Jesus commands - to will or desire the ultimate welfare of those towards whom it would be impossible for us to have warm feelings.

The Authority of the Church

This authority to issue moral decrees has normally resided with the hierarchical priesthood, including their interpretation of Scripture and/or, in our case, the Writings. It assumes either a divine right on their part, or recognition of their calling, training and studies of the sources of revelation beyond what lay members are able or capable of themselves. Many still 'look to the minister' or the ruling body of the Church for answers and directives.

But in our own age the younger generations are, rightly or wrongly, choosing in the main to reject all external moral authorities, and looking to role models and/or to one or other of the 'internal' authorities on our list. But now let us turn to the

inner sources of intuition, reasoning and life experience.

Intuition, Reason and Experience [A4 - A6]

According to the Writings,

... whatever the Lord teaches he enables us to perceive rationally. This happens in two ways. One is by our seeing its truth within ourselves as soon as we hear it; the second is understanding it through rational analysis. [Divine Providence 150].

In other words, we are not expected to accept and obey moral laws taken in blind faith.

In the most moral of all his books, *Conjugal Love*, Swedenborg wrote concerning wisdom,

Considered in its fullness wisdom pertains simultaneously to knowledges, reason, and life ... Wisdom pertains to reason and at the same time to life. It is becoming wisdom when it is the wisdom of reason and thence of life; and it is wisdom when it has become the wisdom of life, and thence of reason. The most ancient people in this world recognized no other wisdom than wisdom of life ... The ancients who succeeded the most ancient recognized the wisdom of reason as wisdom [CL 130].

Thus we might ask, for example, is it wise or even rational to require ministers to cease all work on a Sunday - let alone all the policemen, firemen, hospital staff, carers, etc. etc., because of the prohibition in the Ten Commandments concerning work on the Sabbath day?

Wisdom surely should guide us in each situation to consider any moral law in relation to its superior spiritual law of Love which it is designed to protect. This is far from licence to break moral laws through special pleading for exceptional permission. On the contrary, it is acting according to a good conscience motivated to act positively according to the spiritual laws of heaven and God-given rationality.

But of course, this is not to deny that our intuition and reasoning about moral matters on their own, can be very fallacious - motivated by selfish concerns. The apparent intuition might in reality be merely gut feeling! Practicing the art of truly insightful self examination remains vitally important here.

Drawing on one's own experience life and people [A6]

As it has been pointed out above from the Writings, *'wisdom pertains not only to reason but also to life'*. Moral laws, as also indicated above, are not absolutes or unconditional in the way that the Law of Love is. It is our sensitive experience of life in personal relationships that can and should teach us so much. In applying a

moral law to some particular situation to be able to recognize when it would violate the higher Law of Love, is part of a more mature developed conscience - one willing to think through each situation, rather than take the easy way of 'mechanically' applying a moral law as a rule of thumb.

Conclusions

- In our endeavour to 'look to Lord' there is more than one source or pathway from which we may receive guidance in how to resolve difficult moral issues which may well depend on the particular situation or circumstances; but we need to be clear, with ourselves and with others, which of these sources (and why) we believe to be the appropriate ones in the issue or circumstances under debate.
- In our initial spiritual ignorance and lack of life experience, it is right and proper that we should treat the exterior moral standards of our society, church or culture, as a vital basis or initial reference point. But with developing spiritual experience and maturity in life they should be seen as good first approximations to enable the channelling of heavenly love from the Lord - rather than as being an absolute law code that is unchallengeably valid or appropriate to each and every situation.
- Moral laws are to be recognized as a divinely natural basis intended to serve and be subservient to the spiritual directive of Love as given in Jesus' Two Great Commandments. For example, the brevity and simplicity of the Ten Commandments is both their strength and their weakness.

Where does all this leave us as a church community faced with a deeply emotive moral dilemma? Is the Lord endeavouring to lead us into a more mature way of remaining united in charity and respect for any sincere conclusions of others when they differ from our own in matters of understanding and applying doctrine? Is it not better to leave some moral matters to the individual understanding and conscience rather than to split our organisation into ever smaller divisions as has happened in the historical past of the New Church movement?

Rev Michael Stanley