

Homosexuality and the Ministry

Homosexuality has been around since time immemorial. Sometimes it is overt, and sometimes covert, depending on the beliefs and practices of the time. In the 21st century, there is a broadening acceptance of homosexuality, although it is despised in some quarters, sometimes for religious reasons, and sometimes out of a feeling of distaste or revulsion.

Religious objections are often based on Paul's first letter to the Corinthians chapter 6 verses 9&10:

neither the sexually immoral, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor men who practice homosexuality, nor thieves, nor the greedy, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God.

In it, Paul is simply claiming that various groups of people will not end up in heaven. But does this mean we should treat them as outcasts in this world? How Christian is this? Recently the Church of England fell foul of religious objections when they tried to install an openly homosexual man as Bishop of Reading, as the evangelical wing of the Church raised very strong objections. Some arguments were made on his behalf that his homosexual relationship was celibate, but this cut no ice with the objectors.

So where do we stand in the New Church? Would we ordain a homosexual man or woman as a minister? Or would we raise scriptural objections? I don't know, I'm exploring. Swedenborg has virtually nothing to say about homosexuality directly, and precious little indirectly, beyond hinting that, in the next world, practicing homosexuals existed only in hell (see for example SD 3895-3900). There is no "official" view of homosexuality in the ministry in the General Conference, although one of the American New Church organisations has ordained an openly homosexual man as a minister, and the New Church in San Francisco has undertaken single sex marriage services.

For some guidance, let's take a lateral look at some of Swedenborg's statements.

The purpose of the actual creation of the universe was none other than the formation of a heaven of angels from human beings, one where all who believe in God might live in everlasting blessedness. (TCR 773)

The fact that the human race can only continue to populate heaven with angels by means of procreation between man and woman seems to suggest that homosexual relationships were not what God intended when He created the Universe. But does this make it wrong? I'm sure God never *intended* that HIV or cancer would become major killers, but this is one of the accidents of allowing the universe to develop without absolute control, which is not the way of Divine Providence.

Marriage in heaven is a conjunction of two into one mind. In heaven the husband acts the part called the understanding and the wife acts the part called the will. When this conjunction, which belongs to man's interiors, descends into the lower things pertaining to the body, it is perceived and felt as love, and this love is conjugal love. From this it is clear that conjugal love has its origin in the conjunction of two into one mind. This in heaven is called cohabitation; and it is said that they are not two but one. So in heaven a married pair is spoken of, not as two, but as one angel. (HH367)

This tells us that conjugal love exists between husband and wife in heaven, to the extent that a married couple, man and woman, form one mind in the heavenly marriage of good and truth, and are therefore called one angel. It is difficult to see how homosexual partners could form such a conjugal relationship in this world, and impossible to see how it could be formed in heaven. A sharing of minds between two men would be two understandings trying to merge, and between two women, two wills trying to merge. No heavenly marriage exists in either case.

So what does this tell us? On the one hand, it could be argued that as a homosexual person cannot form one half of a conjugal relationship, and does not contribute to the continuance of the human race, he or she could not possibly experience the heavenly marriage of good and

truth, and therefore be unacceptable as a minister. It could be argued that a minister who is a practising homosexual would find it difficult to accept and therefore teach the Swedenborgian principles of conjugal love. Alternatively, is it right or fair that someone is excluded from a deep and sincere calling simply because there are no homosexuals in heaven? Is it not possible or likely that the Lord in His wisdom would ensure that any homosexual inclination shown by a sincere, loving, charitable Christian could be removed while in the world of spirits? This would not remove a man's maleness, or a woman's femaleness, and would leave them in a state where they are able to find a conjugal partner in heaven.

Current research shows that, far from being a conscious decision to be homosexual, there is something in their genetic makeup that determines someone's physical attraction to members of the same sex. It is therefore not in their control that they are drawn to same-sex relationships. Is it right or fair that they should be penalised for this?

And who are we to judge, anyway?

When I started writing this, I was intent on putting up a case that homosexuals should not be ordained as ministers in the New Church. But now, having done some research and reflection, I'm not so sure.

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