

Who can have conjugal love?

In 1768 an 80 year old, Swedish bachelor called Emanuel Swedenborg published a book in Latin, which is usually translated in English as *Conjugal Love*, or *Marital Love*, or *Married Love*, or even *Love in Marriage*. Swedenborg uses the term “conjugal love” to refer to a range of monogamous, heterosexual relationships from marriage to the almost married, or apparently married. In his eighteenth century, male-orientated way Swedenborg describes how the Lord can work in marriages, or heterosexual relationships involving mistresses or courtesans, or even concubines or sex servants. So one New Church view based on this evidence would be that any heterosexual couple who are married or in a relationship could have “conjugal love”, to the extent they reject promiscuity and adultery. Another New Church view might be that only a Christian married couple can have genuine conjugal love. (CL 142)

A good quotation to support the New Church belief that only heterosexual couples, or only married couples, can have conjugal love is:

“Genuine conjugal love is not possible except between two married to each other, that is, within the marriage of one man and one wife. ... for the marriage of one husband and one wife is descended, as has been stated, from the marriage of good and truth, or the heavenly marriage, which is of such a nature” (AC 2740) ¹

But fascinatingly, anti-homosexual New Church people emphasize the first part of this quotation, while pro-homosexual New Church people emphasize the second part, arguing that homosexuals can have the heavenly marriage, if not conjugal love.

Using sound-bites in theology or any walk of life can be frustratingly limiting, because writers or speakers are bound to seemingly contradict themselves eventually. Swedenborg also wrote:

“Consequently genuine conjugal love does not exist except within good and truth, and so at the same time within the heavenly marriage.” (AC 3942:3) ²

A similar passage is:

“love truly conjugal is from the Lord alone, and exists in those who are in the conjunction of good and truth from the Lord.” (AE 983:2)”

This second definition of conjugal love of a balance of heart and mind, I would argue applies to single people, or married people, or couples in relationships, or divorced people, or widows or widowers, but does it apply to homosexual people? As with all moral issues there is a range of opinion amongst New Church people. If an individual shows genuine compassion, honesty, love and openness towards a partner – authentic spirituality, if you like – how can this not be the embodiment or manifestation of “the heavenly marriage”?

People are in heaven because of “the heavenly marriage”, ³ not because they are married. In 1758 Swedenborg claimed that children made up a third of heaven.

¹ cf. AC 4865:1; CL 332; 337; MA 119; AE 993:2; CL 156xx,xxii; cf. also CL 65-70; 181; 457

² cf. AC 3960:3; 4779:1

³ AC 9325:3; AE 983:4

Children in heaven are initially looked after by virgin nurses or governesses. There are many passages which talk of virgins or maidens in heaven. There are “chaste virgins” in parts of the kidneys in the Grand Man. ⁴ So these children and virgins are in heaven because they have “internal” conjugal love, which makes heaven and the church, or conjugal love in potential. ⁵ Not only are there unmarried angels inside heaven, but there are those who don’t want to be married at the edges of heaven, such as celibates, and also polygamists. ⁶

I sometimes wonder whether some New Church ministers and lay people over-rely on couple-focussed doctrine as opposed to individual-focussed doctrine. Do too many New Church people read Swedenborg’s theology through the lens of *Conjugal Love* especially, and ignore what Swedenborg says about individuals. In emphasising “the love of natural marriage”, do some New Church people ignore the more important “love of spiritual marriage” or “the heavenly marriage”? ⁷

Swedenborg didn’t just write that conjugal love exists in married couples or those in whom is “the heavenly marriage”, he also wrote: “conjugal love ... exists in chaste virgins”. (AC 3081:1) By “virgins” he means people who are innocent, or who are willing to be led by the Lord, which actually relates to people who have balanced hearts and minds. After all the seven Virgins of the Spring or “spring-maidens” were wives. ⁸ Further evidence for the more internal definition of conjugal love can be found in the symbolism of the tribe of Israel called Zebulon and “loins”, that is, that conjugal love is not just the marriage of two spouses of the opposite gender. ⁹ Zebulon symbolises “the conjugal love of good and truth also with those who will belong to the New Heaven and the Lord’s New Church.” (AR 359) After all an individual angel or person in the church has “true conjugal love” if they are joined or linked to the Lord. (AE 1004:2) Surely the conclusion is that individual people linked to the Lord and individual angels have conjugal love whether they are married or not? It seems to me that loving, faithful homosexual couples can have conjugal love at an internal or spiritual level, and even a physical or conscious level, as all love descends from “the heavenly marriage”:

“From the marriage of good and truth in heaven all loves are descended, which are such as the love of parents towards their children, the love of brothers for one another, love towards other relatives, and so on down in their order according to their degrees of affinity. According to these loves that have their origin solely in good and truth, that is, in love and faith to the Lord, all heavenly communities are formed. And these are joined together by the Lord in such a way that they resemble a human being, which also is why heaven is called the Grand Man. There are indescribable varieties, all of which have

⁴ HH 4; AC 2296; HH 337; CL 42:5; CL 20-22 = TCR 747-749; CL 17:2; 19:4 = TCR 745:2; 746:4; AC 5391 = SE 970

⁵ AE 630:14; 721:23; 983:4; 988:5; AC 3610:3,4) Children “reside with angels, they themselves are not angels”. (AC 2304)

⁶ CL 54:3-5; 332:9; TCR 832

⁷ AE 983:2,3; 991:2

⁸ AC 3081:7; CL 293:6; 294:1

⁹ AC 9325:3; 6432:1

their origin in and are derived from the union of good and truth from the Lord, which union is the heavenly marriage.” (AC 2739; cf. MA 118) ¹⁰

Whatever relationship we are in, whether as spouse, parent, sibling, relative, friend, work-colleague or whatever, our spirituality determines how much of the “heavenly marriage” we and our associate bring to the relationship.

Going back to the second definition of conjugal love as being a marriage between our heart and our mind, we need to recall that each of us has an inner yearning or inclination, which Swedenborg calls “the conjugal” principle or impulse or influence or union ¹¹ to match the right idea with the right feeling. This “joining of truth and good is the fundamental marriage in the Lord’s kingdom.” (AC 3915:1) In one passage Swedenborg makes an extreme statement, that the consequences of a good not being joined to its own truth is “good could not possibly be held together but would be torn apart and so would perish”. ¹² I would suggest this over-statement applies to self-centred people like flatterers and hypocrites, as Swedenborg ‘softens’ the sentiments when applying to people who are making a genuine attempt to live a way that leads to heaven, as elsewhere when he talks of good being joined to apparent truth” as a stage we all have to go through. ¹³ Also, Swedenborg talks about degrees of the “heavenly marriage”, that is, of how truth and good attach themselves to each other, like blood relatives, which descend from the heavenly marriage. ¹⁴ In other places Swedenborg describes this spiritual process, as the more a person shuns evils as sins, the more he longs for the heavenly marriage. ¹⁵

There is at least one passage in Swedenborg’s Writings, which suggests that the Lord is more concerned about how our heart and mind are functioning together, rather than whether we are married or not:

“The Lord’s providence is concerned first and foremost with that joining together of the two. It is good and truth thus joined together that makes a person human and marks him off from animals, making him a human being insofar as he accepts that providence, that is, insofar as he allows the Lord to achieve the objective. This therefore is the good that exists with a person. No other kind of good exists which is spiritual and lasts for ever.” (AC 3951:1)

¹⁰ Swedenborg continually emphasises that inner conjugal love (the heavenly marriage) underpins outer conjugal love in marriages and love in any heterosexual relationship, because conjugal love at the inner level is “the fundamental love of all the loves of heaven”, (AC 3021:2; 3960:3; 4280:4; 4779:1; 9960:18; 9961:6AE 993:2; 997:4; AR 830:1; AE 993:2cf. CL 67) and “also he is in love to the Lord, and in love towards the neighbour, consequently, in the love of all good, and in the love of all truth” (AE 993:2) I would suggest that in passages like AC 5053; AE 993:2; CL 80:2; 238:2; SE (M) 4604-4607 and throughout *Conjugal Love* (37-38; 42; 48; etc.), Swedenborg (or the reader) might merge the two levels of reality, implying that you have to be married to have conjugal love, (see AC 2470 and note 1 above) or to be married to be a good friend or relative.

¹¹ AC 3610:4; 3942:1,3; 3952; 4334:4e; 4837:1e; 4899:1; 6179:1; 10185:3; 10756; AE 434:8

¹² AC 4434:9; cf. AC 4334:4e; AE 1004:2; 1121:1

¹³ AC 3102:2; 4643; 2284:4; 2425:2; 2657; DP 14

¹⁴ AC 2739; 3908:1; 9325:3

¹⁵ Life 41; MA 70

But remember I am talking about virtuous people, not adulterous and promiscuous ones. “But such a marriage cannot exist with the evil, only with the good, that is to say, with those who have those things as the end in view.” (AC 3952:4e)

If marriage between partners of the opposite sex is the “perfect resemblance” or “a complete likeness” of the heavenly marriage. (AE 1121:1) Is a faithful homosexual relationship, a perfect enough likeness? “A married couple between whom or in whom that love is together shared are models and a visible form of it” [“the marriage of good and truth”] (CL 65 (Chadwick)) New Church people can choose to agree or disagree with that. As pointed out already, a loving, open, empathetic, honest encounter between parent and child, uncle and nephew, aunt and niece, friend and friend can descend from internal “conjugal love”, so why can’t this happen in a homosexual relationship?

Possibly the most challenging passage in the Writings I have found researching this article, is about “the brotherly relationship of Divine Truth and Divine Good in heaven”:

“In the Word the two [good and truth] joined together are represented by a married couple or by two brothers, by a married couple when the heavenly marriage – the marriage of good and truth – and the succeeding generations which spring from that marriage, are the subject, and by two brothers when two kinds of ministry, namely those of judgement and worship, are the subject.” (AC 9806:1e-2)”

New Church theologians will disagree whether homosexuals can have internal or external conjugal love, so let’s consider what this love is at its outer, or conscious and physical level. In Swedenborg’s many descriptions of married love, I would suggest that the only characteristic not applicable to a loving homosexual relationship is love for one of the opposite sex. Homosexual love, I would argue

- can be monogamous,
- can be spiritual,
- can desire “inner union and the delights of the spirit it gives”, as well as “bodily pleasures”,
- can be selfless, non-materialistic, not fearful of one’s partner, or doesn’t have to be a relationship merely based on worldly or financial or sexual reasons; (AC 2742)
- “the love of good and truth” can be present
- can be giving and receiving, and long for “everlasting union” (CL 44:7)
- can be a linking of minds. (CL 252)
- can be beyond mutual love, because it wants to give everything one is to the other, and reciprocally. (SE 4436)

Pro-homosexual New Church people argue that the “countless varieties” of conjugal love (CL 57) include monogamous homosexual couples, both internally and externally. Plato, Socrates and Xenophon were allegedly homosexual or loving pederasts – even though imposing a 20th century social construct on ancient Greeks is fraught with danger and easily leads to misconceptions – and yet they and their followers seem to be in heaven. (CL 151a; 182 = TCR 692:1; 693:1)

So are we New Church people pro-marriage, pro-heterosexual marriage, anti-promiscuity, anti-adultery, pro-marriage-of-heart-and-mind, pro-homosexual, anti-homosexual, or what? Whatever our New Church view on homosexuality, does our belief that the marriage of an individual's heart and mind is more important, unite all views?

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