



Sexual Morality seen from a Spiritual Viewpoint

Report of a Small Study Group
of The New Church Conference

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Introduction

1.1 Task of the Study Group

What is right and what is wrong sexual behaviour? Is it always wrong to have sex outside of marriage? To live together without marrying? To develop a close special relationship with a member of the opposite sex separated from their spouse? The Study Group was asked to research and discuss personal morality of heterosexual behaviour as seen from a spiritual viewpoint. We seriously endeavoured to look at the Bible and Writings of the Church to glean what we could that is relevant.

1.2 Changing sexual norms in Britain

These days in our country it has become more socially acceptable to be known to have engaged in sexual activity outside of marriage. We think this is to do with the availability of the contraceptive pill in the 1960's, a decline in the institution of marriage and a growth of an increasing diverse pattern of relationships at a time when there has been a reduction in traditional values and church going. People tend no longer to live in a cohesive community - with the consequent social pressure towards shared principles of life - but instead live within loose social networks in a plural society. In their modern compartmentalised lives, individuals find a wide range of standards of sexual behaviour. In this context there has been a big change in British social attitudes towards marriage in recent years. For example couples cohabitating rather than marrying has become more common. Social trends relating to sexual activity outside of marriage is detailed in Appendix 1. It is for these social reasons that the old assumptions about sexual morality have been diluted and people need help to reflect on what is appropriate behaviour. Society has changed its expectations and values – so there is a need for the church to articulate its position.

1.3 Pastoral questions

The New Church ministry have recently asked for guidance on how to deal with related pastoral matters. Our Study Group was asked to consider what attitude is best adopted in circumstances such as for example:

- A church member having a relationship with someone married to someone else.
- A man and woman who are church members cohabitating with no intention of marriage
- Known sexual relations amongst young people associated with a church

People will vary as to when they judge it appropriate to start to engage in sexual intimacy. Yet there are pitfalls in them jumping straight into their own ideas about right and wrong. Not only do our ministers need guidance but help is needed for the individual conscience faced with dilemmas of modern life. Also a local church society needs to consider how it appears to outsiders. It needs to protect the good name of the New Church and its teachings. Integrity of church leaders is lost if hypocrisy is perceived. There is thought to be a need for the church to give a lead in the expression of moral standards in the face of sexual laxity particularly in youth culture and mass media.

What then are the spiritual principles that can guide our appreciation of right sexual behaviour?

2. Spiritual Principles

2.1 Charity

Whatever you want men to do to you, do also to them, for this is the Law and the Prophets.

Matt 7:12

Relevant values we would like others to apply when relating to us are described by Swedenborg as including sincerity and uprightness, charity, chastity, temperance, truth, prudence and benevolence. (D Wis 10).

The disciplines of self-restraint and selfless love that need to be practised within any close relationship - and that can only foster a person's spiritual development - apply equally to the sexual relationship.

2.2 Conjugal Love

Swedenborg's term conjugal love means a uniquely intimate love towards one person of the opposite sex (as opposed towards any or all of the opposite sex). Conjugal love is a spiritual love rather than a natural love. It involves far more than a mutual attraction between two persons of the opposite sex, which is commonly referred to as love.

Within the intimacy of a loving sexual relationship, two human beings can better learn to treat one another with courtesy, respect and care and do good things for each other.

The Writings of Swedenborg stand in an absolutely unique position relative to the entire body of the world's thought about sexuality, for they contain revelation about the spiritual basis of sex. The conjunction of love and wisdom, that most fundamentally defines God, is mirrored, as an "image" (Genesis 1:27, 5:1), in the ideal spiritual relationship of a man and a woman, a more perfect such image than either partner could achieve alone.

Conjugal love means a special kind of relationship. It includes for example in your heart wanting to give time to be available for your partner when needed. This is what is wrong with polygamy. If a man is busy with a second wife there is no chance of him giving his time adequately to the first and uniting with her fully.

Love taken by itself is nothing but a desire and hence an impulse to be joined; conjugal love is an impulse to be joined into one. For the male and the female of the human species are so created as to be able to become like a single individual, that is, one flesh; and when united, then they are, taken together, the full expression of humanity. If not so joined, they are two, each being as it were a divided person or half a person... That impulse to be joined lies deeply hidden in every part of both male and female, and

every part has the ability and desire to be joined into one.

CL 37

The conjugal arises within the individual with the linking of good and truth. Hence it is the state of conjugal love between a man and woman that is central to the experience of joy and peace. Hence Jesus said that there is no marriage in heaven of the kind entered into for merely worldly reasons.

2.3 Chaste Attitude

People may ask:

- Isn't sex a basic drive that needs to be satisfied, just like hunger and thirst?
- Isn't sexual expression one of our inherent freedoms?
- Isn't sexuality a way of expressing our unique individuality

To answer yes to these questions may be correct but it is to miss the point, for it ignores the principle of chastity. Chastity is a somewhat antiquated term in today's world. However it is a word that conveys a sense of purity, innocence, and decency with respect to sexual partnership.

It also has a connotation of not letting oneself have any fun, and of prudishness, but this is not the way the Writings for the New Church use it. In the work *Conjugal Love*, there is a whole chapter devoted to the subject of chastity. It is primarily concerned with a person's attitude, what is going on in a person's mind - with the purity of a person's thoughts (CL 140).

A chaste attitude is a deep desire for a one to one relationship. It involves not wanting to hurt your partner by having sexual relationships outside the partnership. Swedenborg talks about the fact that a person's love and respect for lasting partnerships, can become more and more purified or chaste (see CL 145). He also says that purification takes place to the extent that people stay away from what is impure. This includes not only infidelity and loose sexual conduct but also things like smutty thoughts about someone. Chastity means that a conjugal relationship is regarded as holy. The more "chaste" our thoughts and intentions are, the more the Lord can lead us towards happiness in this relationship. Impure sexual thoughts are perversions of the chaste attitude of conjugal love.

3. Immoral behaviour

3.1 Introduction

One has to choose one's words very carefully when talking about sexual behaviour. The Study Group asked itself what exactly is immoral sexual behaviour? We are aware the Writings give us guidance on the spiritual meaning of the commandments. But the question arises as to exactly what such a commandment as 'Thou shall not commit adultery' means in practice.

3.2 Treatment of morality in the Bible

The Bible doesn't spell out what exactly is adulterous behaviour. Jesus mentions adultery and sexual immorality as desires of the heart but does not define these.

For out of the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false testimony, slander.

Matt 15:19

Also what is moral conduct cannot be directly known from the sense of the letter of the Bible because there are serious problems associated with taking the commandments and the rest of Holy Scripture literally. For example:

- What does the commandment to not work on the Sabbath to keep it holy mean (Exodus 20: 10) when it was good for Jesus to heal on the Sabbath (Mark 3:1-5) and these days emergency service, personal care and health staff - not to mention the clergy - obviously need to work on a Sunday
- There is an apparent contradiction between the commandment to honour parents (Exodus 20: 12) and Jesus teaching that unless we hate them we cannot be his disciples. (Luke 14:26)
- We are commanded not to steal (Exodus 20:15). But should we never 'steal' an alcoholic's bottle, or steal a gun from a homicidal maniac?

3.3 Treatment of morality in Swedenborg's writings

In his writings Swedenborg's frequently treats moral matters in a simplistic way relying too often on the same examples he has given before. This leaves questions about moral guidance unanswered. The Book 'Conjugal Love' by Swedenborg does not define what is meant by immoral sexual conduct. Actually Swedenborg's own take on sexual behaviour does not give confidence as reliable moral instruction for our times. For example his views on:

- Expediency of a mistress (CL476) - how could he not regard taking a mistress as adulterous?
- State of an impregnated woman seen by him as only either a chaste wife or a prostitute (CL503)

He makes no mention for example of cohabitation, pornography, voyeurism, masturbation, petting etc.

Nevertheless, we believe Conjugal Love remains a wonderful Divine revelation of spiritual principles concerning marriage love, its origin and its need for protection and preservation.

3.4 Permission of milder degrees of disorder

Hebrew, Greek and Latin Words used in the Old and New Testaments, and Swedenborg's Writings carry a range of meaning often badly translated by the English word 'sin'.

The old Church view of 'sin' was as an affront to God who might angrily bring down righteous

punishment. This not a New Church view. The view of the Study Group is that most sexual disorder involves error of judgment, human shortcoming, going astray, acting contrary to Divine order, and failing to follow spiritual principles. Such behaviour is associated with ignorance, or self-interest and may result in skin-deep pleasure that cannot last.

We prefer the term `sexual disorder' to `sexual immorality' because the latter has acquired a judgmental moralistic connotation. There are grades of disorder from mild misdemeanours to serious acts of abusive violence and this applies to sexual behaviour as well as to other aspects of behaviour.

Living in spiritual order is being in a better position to receive heavenly influx. It enables people to experience the depth of joy and fulfilment. There is a parallel between order at an individual level and the degree of social order within a group or community. All people ideally need to live in external order. Civil laws and codes of conduct with penalties are required to restrain self-orientated and antisocial impulses in line with the needs of the community.

At the same time we realise that at least in this world people can't have any ideal order because of the fallen nature of humankind. People tend to break God's laws everyday in their hearts in one way or another eg envy, lust, or adulterous feelings or other emotions deriving from self-orientation. It is recognised that we all tend towards first doing what meets our bodily and worldly desires.

Under Divine Providence this external aspect of being human is brought into prominence so that it can be seen and tackled and also to preserve human freedom. What is disorderly in human conduct may thus be permitted by God for the sake of a higher good. For example concubines may have been permitted to some men in Old Testament times as preferable to roaming lust.

Yet acting in sexually disordered ways like other disordered behaviour is hazardous for spiritual growth and the ability to experience heaven within. People thus need a code of conduct

3.5 Need for rational thought

The view of the Study Group is that people in the church differ to the extent they want clear moral guidance regarding human conduct. Some people highly value a sense of right and wrong whereas others think more in terms of what good and bad can come from human situations. Members of the Study group ourselves discovered that we might be giving a slightly different emphasise from each other to the lawful nature of morality. In relation to this one of us wished to call attention to what one of the things the Writings say regarding the ten commandments.

The laws of spiritual life, the laws of civil life, and the laws of moral life are set forth in the ten commandments of the Decalogue; in the first three the laws of spiritual life, in the four that follow the laws of civil life, and in the last three the laws of moral life. (HH 531)

Nevertheless although the traditional view is that the ten commandments or some of it form an absolute moral code, we concluded that there is no authoritative definition of sexual

immorality either in the Bible or in Swedenborg's writings. At the same time there is much in both concerning general spiritual principles which can guide people in how to think about what is appropriate and inappropriate moral behaviour. The spiritual person is a moral person. Moral behaviour is behaviour in line with spiritual principles guided by the Lord.

Swedenborg writes:

The man who is principled in spiritual good is a moral man
Doc Life 13

But moral standards vary from place to place and time to time. What is good and appropriate in one situation may not be so in another. We ask should the Church be defining permissible sexual behaviour for all times and all places? We recognise that higher spiritual laws are absolute and universal but must be applied relative to situations, circumstances, times and cultures using rational thought. In other words in considering what is good or bad in moral behaviour in some particular circumstance, one needs to use spiritual enlightenment. What is morally good is based on reason (D Life 12).

Swedenborg put it this way in his work Conjugal Love:

The purpose the contents of this book are intended to serve is to enable the reader to see true facts by the light of his own reason, and so agree to them, since this is how his spirit is convinced. Facts on which the spirit is convinced are allocated a higher position than those which are taken on trust, as coming from authority but without the reason being consulted. For these do not penetrate further into the head than the memory; and there they become mixed up with fallacious and false statements, so that they occupy a position lower than the matters of reason which belong to the intellect. Every individual can use them to speak as if rationally, but this is the wrong way round. For then his thinking is like a crab walking, looking towards its tail. But it would be different if he thought from the intellect; when he does this the sight of his reason selects suitable items from his memory to enable him to prove the truth he has seen in himself. CL 295

Ultimately all of us need to be weaned from blind acceptance of church rules and creeds and look instead to the Lord. Swedenborg strongly encourages his readers to look to the Lord for enlightenment rather than blindly following the authority of the church.

3.6 Difficulty knowing how to respond to immoral sexual conduct.

So far this report has been implying there is a difference between inner desires of the heart and outward acts of behaviour. Everyone is surely capable of breaking many of the commandments each day in their inner thoughts for example looking at a someone with sexual desire (Matt 5:27-29)

Yet people are not held responsible for thoughts and desires that come into their minds if they do not welcome them, want to act on them or go even further and take them into their lives. The individual is constantly being held in balance - given every chance to make a choice

between accepting, loving and doing the good/right thing or accepting, loving and doing what is known in the heart to be wrong and against all the Lord has taught.

Moral guidelines can be seen as important 'rules of thumb' for sexual conduct in the context of human relationships. These need to be applied if a spiritually uninformed or unregenerate society is to be able to hold together. There does appear to be widespread sexual disorder to varying degrees in our country and we feel that the New Church with its spiritual principles should be providing guidelines in what sometimes appears to be a moral vacuum. We have to encourage change from disorderly to orderly behaviour for the sake of people's eternal happiness.

We suspect that part of the reason why the mainstream attitude in our country has become so sexually permissive in the last generation or so is probably because the idea - that sex outside marriage is wrong - is often seen as harking back to the judgmental and moralistic tone of previous generations in the church. As the Word of God says:

Do not judge, or you too will be judged. For in the same way you judge others, you will be judged, and with the measure you use, it will be measured to you.

Matt 7:1-2

How then should the church react to what it deems to be individual disorderly conduct? Judgmentalism is thinking in terms of some sexual conduct as 'a terrible thing', 'a sin', the 'priest should be defrocked', and 'we can't allow people like this amongst us'. Our new Church organisation is trying to be an orderly part of the spirit and life of the Lord's New Church. This is a big change from the Old Church which was into authoritarian decrees as to what behaviour is sinful and resulting condemnation of the sinner. How can we respond to people who transgress moral codes that will reveal the essence of the New Church that distinguishes it from the old religion. We need to better learn how to do this without being judgmental and using authoritarian moralistic tones.

A distinction can be made between making a judgment concerning behaviour and adopting a judgmental attitude. Judging between what is orderly and disorderly does not necessarily mean being judgmental about the person behaving well or badly. The Study Group feel the church can bring spiritual light to clarify moral issues without being judgmental and without appearing insensitive, prudish or discriminatory. However this clarification of moral issues does not necessarily mean giving all the answers in a black and white way that some may expect or prefer. Many people are living in darkness and don't know what the issues are but they need help to think things through rather than simply being told what to think.

It might be asked 'What if the person involved doesn't agree an action is disorderly?' How should one respond? Children are restrained in order to change their disorderly behaviour and adult criminals punished by court penalties. Our view is that according to the degree of disorderly sexual conduct there is unlikely to be lasting happiness; on the contrary it may lead to distress and in many cases pain or trauma that can last for years - especially if there are children involved. The Lord's concern and also our concern is for people's spiritual happiness and welfare. The church needs to find ways of talking about disorderly sexual conduct in a

non-punitive manner that expresses this concern without appearing rigid, intolerant, and self-righteous. Openness and honesty is necessary and often issues like cohabitation and marriage cannot be discussed except in a situation of trust and sometimes not without some degree of discomfort or pain. We believe compassion, understanding, and wisdom can help move the situation from less to greater order.

3.7 Need for discussion of moral issues at the grassroots

Spiritual principles are not moral do's and don'ts but they do illuminate and guide a person's use of reason. This report contains the opinions of the Study Group regarding the application of spiritual principles to certain types of circumstances in which sexual issues arise.

However we believe that only when people in the church engage in the process of exploring the application of religion to life, can any deeper understanding and shared view emerge of what behaviour is right and wrong for a person in any particular situation. In other words what behaviour is or is not contributory to that individual's ultimate spiritual welfare. Any report we write could be more useful if it stimulated local involvement in discussing the issues rather than as a piece of paper that might tend to be filed away to gather dust. The local church society as a whole needs to be involved in the discussion of appropriate sexual behaviour. This can help with shared understanding and psychological ownership of emerging consensus views.

A distinction can be made between discussing standards locally as abstract principles as opposed to dealing with a possible moral infringement by a particular person in a particular situation. It can be difficult to approach someone who seems to be behaving improperly and impossible to have any kind of clear thinking discussion in the context of an emotionally laden crisis. This Report needs to promote proactive discussion if such crises are to be prevented. For only when there is a common consciousness of the spiritual truths involved can people be enabled to nip problems in the bud. This is not to say the church should not think through what is an appropriate response to those in its midst who may be breaking currently accepted ideas of proper sexual behaviour. Where such a crisis does develop it will need very careful handling if there is disagreement about right and wrong personal conduct. Spiritual principles should be seen shining forth in all behaviour of those belonging to the church as well as in their response to disorderly conduct.

Although we have not seen it, we understand that there is a study workbook available that could aid the process of local discussion. It is published in conjunction with the book 'Rise Above It' mentioned elsewhere in this Report.

4. Extra-Marital Relationships

4.1 Adulterous Behaviour

Some may ask

- What's wrong with sexuality outside of marriage as long as everyone involved agrees to it?

- Wasn't the commandment concerning adultery merely given to keep society in order?

Sexual desire is not a bad thing in itself. However the Study group believe that relationships of a sexual nature with someone other than one's spouse, show a disregard for the principle of conjugal love. It usually also involves a disregard of the trust and intimacy that has been shared in marriage that is extremely hurtful to the innocent partner. In our country the term 'adultery' is often softened to such terms as: fooling around, sleeping around, flings, affairs and dalliances; suggesting that adultery can be guilt free and harms no one. If people are not looking for the conjugal, then it is possible to understand how they might come to believe in the myth that adultery is harmless. Actually, adultery greatly harms marriages and families and often leads to divorce.

We may agree with the commandment 'Thou shalt not commit adultery' – but we need to ask 'what is adultery?' Being unfaithful to one's partner has been commonly called adultery. In the past and today in some cultures, adultery is condemned. But it seems that the condemnation is because 'adultery' is considered a violation of the husband's rights. In many instances the 'wife' is considered the property of the husband and adultery is identified as 'theft'. In other words, the wife could be guilty of "adultery" but never the husband.

However this is a very different idea from that of Swedenborg, who criticises all adultery without discriminating against the woman. He wrote that there are four degrees of adultery (CL 478) as follows:

1. Adultery in the **first** degree is due to ignorance, when it is committed by those who are not old enough or are unable to consult their intellect, so as to refrain from it. Adultery committed by these people is said to be a mild offence.
2. Adultery in the **second** degree is due to lust, when it is committed by those who can certainly consult their intellect, but do not do so for circumstantial reasons. Adultery by these persons is imputed, depending on whether their intellect afterwards approves or disapproves.
3. Adultery in the **third** degree is adultery approved by reason, when committed by those who convince themselves intellectually that it is not a sinful evil. Adultery by these persons is a serious offence and it is imputed depending upon how far they are convinced of this.
4. Adultery in the **fourth** degree is adultery approved by the will, when committed by those who regard it as allowable and accepted, not deserving any consultation of the intellect on the subject. Adultery committed by these persons is an offence of the most serious kind, being imputed to them as intentional evil, and weighing on them as guilt.

4.2 Adulterous Desire

A general love of the sex (ie a natural openness to experience sexual desires) is implanted in everyone by the Creator. However when such desire is misdirected it can be compared with adultery.

You have heard that it was said, 'Do not commit adultery.' But I tell you that

anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart.

Matt 5:27-28.

Commenting on the commandment regarding adultery, it has been pointed out that an adulterous attitude can develop as one starts to watch extra-marital passions on TV or at the cinema; by lingering on the pages of a magazine with sexually provocative advertising; by gazing at the figure of an attractive man or woman in a way that arouses sexual feelings; or by engaging in any mental fantasy that violates this commandment.¹

When people speak of 'having dirty thoughts' and telling 'dirty jokes' they are acknowledging an attitude of disrespect towards the woman (or man) to whom such an impure thought is directed. This can only taint and dishonour the spirit of conjugal love that ideally corresponds with sexual desire. In finding some of the opposite sex attractive it is nevertheless possible to look at him or her respectfully as a whole person rather than just as a sex object.

Adulterous feelings can begin as quickly as a passing glance and emotions can be kindled that are difficult to quench. This is especially true when a husband or wife who feels unappreciated at home find affection, attention, and a sense of worth in a relationship outside of the marriage. A relationship can begin as a 'polite' flirtation, exchanging favours, perhaps an occasional hug that lingers a bit longer than it should, a luncheon date, a walk in the park, a longing gaze, a deep discussion about things one's spouse is too busy for or just not interested in. These powder-keg situations run the risk of exploding into full-blown affairs when people play with unholy fire.

Rise Above It: Spiritual Development through the Ten Commandments by Ray and Star Silverman 2000 Touchstone Seminars Philadelphia and Phoenix

Situations can be misjudged. One can start to think 'This person is satisfying my needs.' It is easy to feel one is being offered what one needs. This is more likely when one is desperately wanting affection and understanding.

4.3 Spiritual principles applied to extra-marital relations

The Study Group suggest the following principles be considered with respect to extra-marital sexual relations.

- **The Conjugal Principle** A committed couple do not give up easily on a relationship but actively work on their problems. Giving up too easily on a relationship amounts to looking for someone else who 'will give me what I need'. But this is a 'no give and all take' attitude.
- **Charitable Heart.** It is only too easy to jump to conclusion about a private relationship

¹ Rise Above It: Spiritual Development through the Ten Commandments, by the New Church ministerial couple, Ray and Star Silverman, 2000, Touchstone Seminars Philadelphia and Phoenix

as the whole story cannot be assumed to be known. When what is good in a person is ignored, judgemental attitudes arise.

- **Understanding** People need to ask about who is being hurt when a person strays? This can be for example the betrayed partner and the children.
- **Good Order.** It is probably common and acceptable for the individual to hold slight differences of view from other church members about personal behaviour as long as the views are not very divergent and as long as the difference does not cause disorder within a church. The spiritually informed consensus view needs to be respected and conformed to especially by church leaders for the sake of outward order. Good order enables co-operative working together and prevents the church being seen as hypocritical.

The Study Group firmly believes that a person contemplating or entering into an extra-marital relationship is being disorderly if no irretrievable breakdown has occurred in either the marriage of that person or the marriage of the other individual.

5. Separation and divorce

There is a view that the legal and public commitment of marriage is something to fall back on when a relationship is going through difficulties. In the 18th century Swedenborg promoted preserving the legal bond or contract of marriage for life, in this world. (CL 307). At the same time he thought that marriages on earth are generally contracted on the basis of outward rather than inward affections (see CL 274). There are some wives and husbands who believe they have solemnly vowed to stay married 'come what may, 'til death do us part'. However the Study Group think a wedding couple can do no more than promise to make a serious commitment before God and other people of their present intention to try to make a long-lasting success of the marriage relationship. In a sense the marriage vows should be regularly repeated as the couple focus their minds on working at the problems that normally arise in close relationships.

With the high rate of separation and divorce (please see Appendix 1 for details) it might be asked whether couples these days give up too easily on their marriages. Ray and Star Silverman¹ point out that even in those situations where parents 'stuck it out for the sake of the children', the married partners may never have learned how to resolve their conflicts or communicate in healthy ways. Though they may have begun their marital relationship as lovers they may never have learned how to be friends. However when God is present in a marriage relationship, there will be no intent to deliberately hurt one another. And when partners do things that cause pain to each other they are quick to acknowledge their error, express sorrow and make amends. Similarly when one has been hurt by one's spouse it is possible to be quick to forgive.

Sometimes the healing process is best achieved within the context of marital counselling for such people who might be able to learn better how to be happy together. There are bound to be problems in any marriage relationship and so if one gives up easily one could end up marrying several partners without giving any of them a proper chance.

Perhaps because of the ideals of the conjugal relationship in marriage, Swedenborg doesn't treat of divorce unless there is adultery involved. However the church cannot assume any absolute moral conclusion from this view on divorce as these days people are only too aware that bitterness and coldness between partners who stay together can adversely affect children. Not all marriages may be appropriate or sustainable, despite the lack of adulterous behaviour.

Swedenborg seems to be alert to the dangers and pitfalls for society and individuals of easy divorce (CL 276²). However he comments on the spiritual world after death:

As married partners put off outward appearances and enter into their inward qualities, they gradually perceive what sort of love and mutual feeling they had had for each other, and consequently whether it is possible for them to live together or not. ...If it is not possible, they separate.

CL 45

And the Study Group asked itself if in the spiritual world it is often appropriate for a couple to part as inner states of mind are being revealed, why cannot this begin to become appropriate on earth also? It seems that many people generally, in this present age, are beginning to gain this inner awareness sooner – before death - in these days of greater psychological awareness and counselling processes. We ask whether the legal binding nature of marriage as in the 18thC world (until death or act of adultery) still is as helpful to the cause of conjugal love, or might it be becoming more detrimental? We realise that in the world external matters still need to be taken into consideration. Domestic arrangements, finance, and the needs of children and others should be considered and balanced with what suits the couple wanting separation. There are likely to be genuine moral dilemmas which may need great wisdom to work through. In his book *Conjugal Love* Swedenborg has much to say concerning the causes of coldness in marriage. The Study Group appreciate that during times of marital difficulty and disharmony the partners can so easily be fooled into thinking this woman or this man 'is more ideal for me than my married partner' – especially in our country where divorce is relatively easy to arrange.

The issue remains for some couples as to where to draw the line beyond which a break up would be wise or appropriate. The Study Group believes that a disharmonious couple should have engaged in some form of marital counselling over a reasonable period before planning divorce. An extra-marital relationship is inappropriate until the marriage is completely over. During the period of separation every effort should be made to make the marriage work again. Only when it seems clear that an irretrievable marital breakdown has occurred, and the needs of others balanced with the needs of the couple, should they proceed towards divorce.

In our consideration of marriage breakdown we noted Swedenborg also writes about religious differences and marriage :-

Those born within the Church and imbued since early childhood with the fundamental truths taught by the Church ought not to enter into marriages with those who are outside the Church and have therefore been imbued with ideas such as are not the Church's. The reason why is that they are in no way joined to one another in the spiritual world; for in that world everyone's association with others is determined by his good and from this

by his truth. And since such are in no way joined together in the spiritual world, they ought not to be on earth; for essentially a marriage consists of one human mind and inclination joined to another's, which derive spiritual life from the truths and forms of the good of faith and charity. Therefore also in heaven marriages on earth between people of different religions are thought to be detestable, and especially those between members of the Church and people outside the Church.

AC 8998

We have noted that in religious wedding ceremonies as opposed to civil ones, the couple are asking the Lord to be part of the relationship and we feel this is important to help the couple to thrive spiritually. However we wonder how to understand Swedenborg's point about religious compatibility between sexual partners. We feel one should take into consideration the possibility of a deeper spiritual harmony between two people in addition to the degree of similarity of outward religious ideas. And so we take Swedenborg's statements to be essentially referring to incompatibility between people of totally different spiritual outlook and feeling rather than between partners who do not both belong to a specific religious organisation. Outward religious differences alone seem insufficient to be a genuine cause of marital breakdown.

6. Re-marriage

Jesus says:

It has been said, 'Anyone who divorces his wife must give her a certificate of divorce. But I tell you that anyone who divorces his wife, except for marital unfaithfulness, causes her to become an adulteress, and anyone who marries the divorced woman commits adultery.'

Matt 5:31- 32

If it were to be assumed that these words ought to be taken as literally true, it could be asked how the cause of conjugal love is furthered and protected by banning a divorced person from remarrying – just because no act of adultery was involved? Can it really be that a former act of adultery can make a remarriage non-adulterous, and a lack of any such adultery can make it adulterous?

In his books Swedenborg fails to consider the case of initial marriages in which there turns out to be no conjugal love able to develop, and (without the death of one of the partners) subsequent marriages where that might have a better chance of occurring. He fails to consider such a case despite acknowledging,

On earth it is very difficult to contract a marriage which forms an inward link, because it is impossible for the choice of inward likenesses to be provided for by the Lord as it is in the heavens, because choice is restricted in many ways; for instance, to those of similar rank and condition, to those living in the same district, city or village. In these circumstances it is mostly outward bonds which bring them together, and so not inward ones

How slim then were the chances in Swedenborg's day of first marriages proving suitable for the formation of the conjugal bond! Why then, should remarriage be restricted to death or the involvement of an act of adultery in the first marriage?

We suggest that there are likely to be more complications in relation to a second, compared with a first, marriage. Quickly starting a new life with someone else after a failed relationship may be unwise partly as this may partly be due to a short-lasting rebound effect. The needs of any children and previous partner should be taken into account. It is charitable to give a wounded party time to adjust to the breakdown of a marriage before remarriage takes place. Marital or individual counselling may help resolve things. A proper balance needs to be struck between the needs of all concerned. However it should also be borne in mind that individuals may vary as to their willingness to work through negative experiences. Emotionally letting go of an ex-partner by some may be unreasonably delayed even until after a remarriage has put the final nail in the coffin of the old partnership.

7. Adult Singles Dating

In today's world we are often surrounded with images of men and women in seductive, alluring poses. Sexualised advertising is used to sell, soap, cars, toothpaste, fitness equipment, and any number of other things not normally associated with sexuality. Clothing styles, the lyrics of popular music, the plots of novels and the content of many films are often designed or produced in ways that stimulate our sexual appetites. Young people, perhaps more than ever before, find themselves in situations where chastity is regarded as an old-fashioned notion, and where sexual activity is seen as a key to social success, fulfilment and happiness.

Rise Above It: Spiritual Development through the Ten Commandments (chapter on adultery) by Ray and Star Silverman 2000 Touchstone Seminars Philadelphia and Phoenix

Swedenborg's position and the Study group's view is that it is disorderly if a union of bodies precede a union of minds. Yet in the western secular society in which we now live, the idea - of the physical side of a growing relationship being delayed until it can be the expression of love and commitment - is not readily acknowledged. The typical attitude is – 'there is love between us now – who knows whether that will continue into the future.'

Conjugal love as life from the Lord flows down in Divine order from the highest point of our being through the inner and outer levels of the mind, and finally arouses the physical body sexually. Swedenborg thus distinguishes between a sexual relationship developing according to a true order and according to an inverted order.

The mind of one is joined to the mind of the other, so that a marriage of the spirit takes place before a marriage of the body.

Swedenborg distinguishes between the love of sex and the love of one of the sex. He makes clear his view that what he terms 'chastity' is not the absence of sexual activity as in the case for example of a married person, but a state of mind which aspires to the union of one man with one woman to the exclusion of all others.

Sexual love changes from natural to spiritual when a person abandons roving lust and commits himself to one partner, with whose soul he unites his own.

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If sexual intimacy takes place before the minds of a couple are becoming united then according to the Writings it is not giving expression to conjugal love and this can be thought of as a disorderly progression. Yet Swedenborg points out that people inherit a fallen spiritual state. They naturally do things necessarily at first the wrong way round. It is to be expected that those who do not know or accept this ideal, may easily confuse sexual and emotional attraction with genuine self-giving love.

We hear of couples starting a sexual relationship soon after meeting. Casual sexual activity can be a common response to a sense of isolation. Such activity breaks all the spiritual rules about true caring. The individual may simply be using the other person as a sex object to satisfy a self-centred need. He or she may be using and relating to only a part of the other rather than relating to their whole being.

Swedenborg advises against engaging in sexual behaviour before conjugal love descends into the body. But we are left unsure of at what point this might happen in a growing relationship. We would offer some signs of the presence of conjugal love:

- A couple have an exclusively affectionate relationship
- Each partner has a good knowledge of and accepting attitude towards the other
- They hold similar deeper values
- Each feels emotionally close to the other

We recognise that some couples can move inwardly as an intimate loving partnership more quickly than others.

8. Cohabitation (without marriage)

We have asked ourselves about the attitude people often take to marriage today. As a mere legal convenience? As the ideal to which many fear committing themselves? Couples tend to live together before contemplating marriage. There may be different reasons for this. We suspect that one of these reasons may be because the state of the inner union between partners is now often taken more seriously than in the past when it was surrounded by hypocrisy as in Victorian times and earlier.

Different is the attitude of many Muslims in our country who emphasis the need for family unity, harmony, stability, and security – hence the tradition of arranged marriages eg between

extended family matched according to external similarities with a hope that love will blossom. This is not to argue that this way of life should be copied. Asian families feel shame and disgrace if a female member gets pregnant outside of marriage. Sometimes the family is castigated and might even do terrible things to try to defend its sense of reputation and honour.

However the western secular attitude is characterised by no commitment to stability. We would like to ask whether there is any sense of responsibility in this? Swedenborg's ideal is betrothal, marriage and then sexual intimacy. Is it thus disorderly if couples live together before marriage?

We believe that where possible divine providence works in the sphere of our finding suitable intimate relationships – especially the uniquely conjugal one. However the attitude of many towards finding lasting love on earth seems to be determined less by this consideration than by their own experience of - or of not - seeing deeply rewarding relationships in other couples including their own parents. Many people have been raised in families that have been torn apart by abuse, addiction and divorce. No wonder they are sceptical about the feasibility of a happy long-lasting marital union.

The divorce rate has soared in recent times with all the damage this does to children and the social fabric of society. Perhaps, because of this, sexual partners seem to avoid commitment to each other for fear of the failure of divorce. We believe that such fears about the future of their living together can be helped by looking to the Lord and gaining confidence in him as a sustaining presence in the commitment of marriage. This is not to say the couple can sit back and not expect to have to work on improving their relationship on a daily basis.

With the general postponement of marriage in our country, many people start a sexual relationship before they are willing to make any kind of commitment beyond engaging in an exclusive relationship for the time being. People speak of living with their boyfriend or girlfriend. This use of words shows not only a lack of any sense of shame about what used to be called 'living in sin', but also a lack of avowed expectation of the future of the relationship. As a consequence without any explicit agreement about the future there may well be different private expectations by each partner. Certainly there will not be the same social expectation that the couple are trying to stay together.

There is no legal institution of marriage in the spiritual world. What counts is the inner conjugal reality of the state of a partnership. One's attitude on earth towards cohabitation perhaps should be concerned likewise with the level of commitment between the partners to make a go of their exclusive relationship rather than getting hung up on their legal state. It is our firm view that living together is disorderly unless there is an explicit and shared intention of long-term fidelity and commitment.

In considering the quality of their bond, a pointer can be the length of time a couple have been a couple, and thus aware of what is inward rather than just external about their relationship.

It might be asked is cohabitation morally wrong when a loving couple are prevented from marrying due to only legal reasons; eg the postponement of divorce for up to five years when a previous marriage is clearly over in everything but name.

A difficulty arises these days where fewer people are getting married. It may be more difficult for an individual to know whether a newly developing relationship is potentially an adulterous one. Is the idea of adultery applicable in the situation where neither partner is married nor have children but one or both is being unfaithful to their boyfriend/girlfriend with whom they are or have recently been cohabiting?

9. Teenage relationships

Appendix 1 gives some information concerning unplanned teenage pregnancy. There can be other negative physical and emotional consequences to teenage sexual activity - sexually transmitted infections and diseases, loss of self-respect, embarrassment, anxiety and regret. These also can apply to adults. Teenagers more so, experience great difficulty in dealing with the emotional and financial problems of having a child.

Through drama such as TV soap operas a lot can be learned about close emotional relationships. Also young people get sex education in schools but probably – at least in the past - not enough education in good relationships. And in particular we would wish to commend what we consider to be the spiritual ideas inherent in the campaign of The Challenge Team UK. This is a group of young volunteers who educate teenagers about healthy sexuality. It claims to presents its message from a common sense and health perspective, without any religious references. Its message is that:

- Saving sex for marriage is a positive, realistic and healthy lifestyle.
- Saving sex for marriage is a lifestyle of sexual self-control and respect.
- Anyone can start over again and choose chastity, which basically means saving sex for marriage.

Teenagers want to be different from their parents and so are under social pressure from their peers to join in the sexualised youth culture. Those who don't want to go with the crowd often haven't got any alternative peer support. There can be pressure on girls to have sex in order to avoid being insulted as frigid. One of their concerns may not be looking for a deep lasting relationship but rather for ways of boosting their self-confidence perhaps through having sexual success. This, we believe, is clearly disorderly. All teenagers need a safe environment where they can flirt and experiment with their sexuality without it having to lead to intercourse. Discussing sex in conjugal relationships with young people is best done appealing to their sense of idealism.

A small pilot study conducted by one of us found that the few teenagers still connected with our Church, when asked tended to:-

- believe that their generation today is under pressure to enter physical relationships too early,
- think that teenagers in general do not have enough advice and knowledge about the emotional implications of entering into physical relationships,

- have an interest in learning more about the New Church teachings on relationships.
- have a preference for experiencing living with a partner before getting married
- have a preference to be married before having children.

Young people tend not to ask for advice about sexual matters. Their developing sexuality is a very sensitive area for them as they struggle to find their own way in life rather than following rules laid down by authority. However there is an opportunity before the teenage years for parents and others to share New Church ideas in the home and at weekend schools with a younger age group.

10. Children

The recent publication of the Churches Child Protection Service has recently been distributed to each New Church Society. It addresses definitions of abuse, managing risk in the church, and dilemmas for church leaders.

We have not studied this publication nor have we discussed sexual behaviour in relation to children but are concerned that this be done in some form by others. We support The New Church Youth Association's setting up of child protection training for Sunday school teachers and leaders of residential schools for children.

11. Conduct of Ministers

The recently issued New Church Ministerial Guidelines states that 'Ministers are called to a high standard of moral behaviour'. While the guidelines are meant specifically for the ordained clergy they are commended to all engaging in ministries, of whatever kind, within The Conference. We support a view that the church should expect just as high a standard of conduct from congregational members as from its ministers. If a church leader is expected to behave in a moral way so should the rest of the church.

However given human nature and the fact that tongues will wag and some people will jump to unwarranted conclusions, we suggest that more circumspect behaviour is appropriate from a public figure in the church and especially a worship leader whose spiritual message is undermined and lacks credibility when his or her personal conduct is thought to be contrary to accepted moral teaching. In order to maintain that teaching, the authority of the church should be seen to be brought to bear to arrive at a discerning position not in a moralistic manner but in a fair, enlightened and sympathetic way. Following sensitive discussion the individual should desist from and make an acknowledgement of any communally regarded improper behaviour.

12. Concluding Remarks

We accept that there is a clear need for firm moral guidelines to help control and regulate unregenerate and disorderly sexual impulses – especially in the young. Nevertheless, in searching without success in the literal sense of the Word and the Writings for incontrovertible moral absolutes as regarding human sexual *behaviour*, we find ourselves thrown back (or

rather inwards) to the inner Voice of enlightenment from the Lord coupled with the use of reason - as directed by Swedenborg himself.

The Study Group discussed the vital distinction between spiritual principles, moral principles and moral behaviour. For example conjugal love is a spiritual principle, chaste non-adulterous desire is a moral principle and fidelity to one's sexual partner is moral behaviour.

In any situation – sexual or otherwise, we should be repeatedly asking the question 'What spiritual and moral principles are especially relevant to this particular scenario, and what particular type of action or behaviour might best support and express them?' In this way the appropriateness of human conduct may be more easily discerned in what at times may be highly complex human relationships characterised by deep dilemmas with no simple clear cut answers. The Study Group at times were unsure how much we were in agreement and how much (or exactly where) we differed in reality in relation to the difference between principles and behaviour in specific circumstances. We recognised perhaps to a small degree in moral matters we are in the realms of different interpretations that cannot be avoided because enlightenment is to come more from within than from without.

Every one of us needs to re-examine rationally how the 'precious jewel' of conjugal love in the human spirit may best be protected, preserved, and developed in our radically changed and changing era, by appropriately expressed guidelines regarding matters of sexual conduct. No room for lazy, rigid enforcement of old moral codes here!

13. Summary Guidelines

- With the growth of socially acceptable sexual behaviour outside marriage, the individual members of the church need to work together thinking through what is spiritual healthy and unhealthy sexual conduct in different types of situation.
- Clearly stated spiritual principles regarding orderly behaviour rather than prescriptive moral rules can best guide this process.
- Relevant spiritual and moral principles include a chaste attitude, loving concern, responsibility & good order.
- A high standard of personal sexual conduct is required of both church leaders and congregations.
- The risks involving children in relation to adult sexual behaviour need to be considered in some way.
- The Study Group is of the opinion that :-
 - Sexual intimacy should not take place between single people before clear signs are present to the couple that they are uniting their hearts and minds in a state of conjugal love.
 - A couple living together without being married is disorderly unless there is an explicit and shared intention of long-term fidelity and commitment.
 - A person contemplating an extra-marital relationship is being disorderly if there is no irretrievable breakdown in both the marriage of that person and if relevant the marriage of the third person involved.

- A disharmonious couple should not plan their divorce until after some form of marital counselling has occurred over a reasonable period.
- The needs of any children and previous partner should be taken into account before a decision is made to proceed with remarriage