

## **CONJUGIAL LOVE: A NEW CONCEPT**

### **REFLECTIONS BY THE REV. DAN GOODENOUGH**

The book *Conjugal Love* (or *Married Love*) has been controversial since its first publication. Different ages challenge different concepts in it, depending on which ideas seem alien to current ways of thinking. Sometimes the book is charged with generalizing from 18th-century Swedish cultural practices and customs. On these grounds many Victorians rejected the book's distinctions between various sexual evils. More recently some readers have argued that men's and women's "roles" are portrayed as too traditionally Swedish and European. The teachings about divorce have also been challenged as being derived from old custom rather than from Divine mercy.

#### **Conjugal Love Challenges Many 18th Century Traditions**

The reality is that *Amor Conjugal* is a remarkably new and even revolutionary book, and challenges many established traditions of 18th-century Europe concerning marriage and sex, male and female, and related topics, including adultery and sexual evils. The feeling that Swedenborg wrote only for his times often seems to come from ignorance about what those times were actually like. Let's look at some examples:

The definition of chastity is revolutionary and new, not 18th-century Swedish. And the clear proclamation that marriage is superior to celibacy, while not totally new in the Protestant world, went far beyond customary thought—that marriage is preferred because "it is better to marry than to burn" [with lust] (1 Corinthians 7.9). This new concept of chastity directly challenged traditional celibate piety that many Protestants (as well as Catholics and Eastern Orthodox) looked up to as a higher spiritual state (see *Conjugal Love* 138-156). New Church views of what is chaste remain distinctive today. From the beginning

the New Church has said sexual love in marriage is clean, chaste, good, and superior to avowed celibacy. While today more and more Christians are favoring this view, 240 years ago no one was ready to say that.

There are many more instances, and they're important. The general view of woman and the feminine in *Conjugal Love* is certainly more exalted than that found anywhere in the 18th Century, and probably has made a huge contribution to fairer and gentler ways of treating and understanding women in the last two centuries. Rejecting Christianity's relegation of women to inferior roles of subordination and obedience (derived from Paul's Biblical doctrine), the Heavenly Doctrines give women a central role in marriage, society and human life generally. It is no accident that educated women have been attracted to the New Church from its beginning, and that education of girls and women has figured prominently in New Church schools. This is not to say that New Church men and women don't still have much to learn about the essence of the feminine mind and heart, and how to listen to it.

### **A Spiritual and Eternal Love**

The main point of the book *Conjugal Love*, frequently repeated, is to show true conjugal (married) love as a spiritual and eternal love. Certainly that was new and unique in the 18th Century. Also new is the essential connection between spiritual regeneration and one's state of married love. All marital coldness is produced by some kind of religious and spiritual lack, difference, or conflict (nos. 235-239, 246, 275)—and this was a radically new concept for the 18th Century. Paul and other Christians told Christians not to marry outside the faith, but where can you find explanations of coldness coming from religious causes?

Similarly, the clear teaching that the husband should not

dominate in marriage threatened a long-established status quo of male superiority. Yes, as the church is implanted in a couple, the husband is to lead in developing a true understanding, because truth (the basic male component) is needed first in time for the church to grow. But the husband does not represent the Lord, nor does his wife represent the church, because husband and wife together are the church according as he accepts good (the basic female component) from his wife. As love and wisdom are married in them and between them, the church is formed. (See *Conjugal Love* 63, 122-125.) This new teaching flatly rejects Pauline doctrine that was dominant in 18th-century European society.

In discussing steps leading to marriage *Conjugal Love* 295-314 does refer to several customs common in Swedenborg's society—as they are in many societies. But daughters should decide for themselves about marriage choice—and this was progressive and liberal, not standard in 1768. The need for a daughter to consult her parents has been an essential in societies throughout history. Though it's less popular today, I submit that this precaution remains fundamentally relevant, and our present society ignores parental consultation with many bad consequences. Remember: she still makes up her own mind.

### **Betrothal as an Internal Marriage**

As for betrothal, this is revolutionary, or at the least it's a recovery from very ancient times, not 18th-century Swedish. Various customs have been practiced in connection with being promised, engaged or "betrothed," and some ceremonies of "betrothal" or engagement were known. These practices and ceremonies were principally social, legal and public in purpose. New Church betrothal is not a legal or social agreement, but solemnizes a spiritual and internal marriage of souls that precedes natural marriage of bodies. It's not a legally binding

promise, nor a family agreement, nor do they even promise the Lord they will marry in the future. They promise to prepare for natural marriage through a marrying of their spirits and minds. (If they break a betrothal, they don't necessarily break a promise to the Lord—unless they made no effort to develop a spiritual marriage. Breaking a betrothal does break a commitment to one's intended, but not to the Lord.)

Betrothal focuses fully on a couple's beginning spiritual marriage. Not just a waiting or get-organized period, the state of betrothal is a time for their spirits to marry, by the steps outlined in *Conjugal Love* 301. Not a legal step, betrothal doesn't even need to be public, and some New Church couples have been betrothed before any public announcement of their commitment. *Conjugal Love* 295 notes that this chapter includes "a number of practices which are accepted customs." But that list of "accepted customs" omits betrothal, which then becomes the subject of six sections (V-X, in nos. 301-306). And *Conjugal Love* 310-314 further explains how a betrothed state inspires and transforms the full marriage, making a spiritual, chaste, happy and lasting union.

So though the word "betrothal" [Latin *desponsatio*] is not new, its meaning and its focus on a spiritual marriage prior to the wedding are a new concept. All societies have a waiting period of some kind between a couple's decision to marry and a wedding. *Conjugal Love* 304.2 shows how this state remains purely natural if the two don't focus on a marriage of their spirits. This preceding spiritual marriage is really the central theme and key to the whole chapter, and is basic to their love in this life and to eternity.

### **The Writings of Women**

We need to look cautiously at what's said about women writers. They are said to use words very well, and that's not hard to see today as well. The comment about women writing "works

not of judgment and wisdom" (*Conjugal Love* 175.3) was in a context not of novels, journalism, stories and personal life descriptions, but of prose which was highly rational, factual, and impersonal—intended primarily to provide information, to instruct, and to carry on philosophical debate. Though the subject of women writers needs fuller discussion than I can give here, numerous examples can be found today of differences in male and female writing along the lines noted by Swedenborg.

Certainly Swedenborg draws some examples from 18th-century European society, but is the doctrine of conjugal (or married) love about examples? When examples seem to distract from a line of thought, I urge readers to center on the underlying points being presented, and to look for examples from their own experience. In general, the Heavenly Doctrines, far from seeking to universalize 18th-century customs, condemn worldly marital practices in 18th-century society and insist that a new spiritual way to married love must be found.

### **The Teachings on Divorce, Adultery, and Polygamy**

*Conjugal Love's* teachings on divorce are more restrictive than liberalized practices in many societies today. Are these based on 18th-century Swedish custom? While they do agree generally with 18th-century divorce laws in contemporary non-Catholic Christendom, their clear basis is the Lord's direct teaching in the Gospels that adultery is the only cause of divorce. The discussion of divorce in *Conjugal Love* reads primarily as a careful explanation of the meaning of Jesus's words in Matthew 19:9 and 5:32 (see nos. 255, 276, 339, 468).

The basic idea in these passages is not new in Christianity, and clearly comes from the Lord's plain sayings. The inclusion of exceedingly gross "manifest obscenities" and "malicious desertion" as involving adultery is somewhat new as an explanation of what adultery means. This has provided

important guidelines for women and men trying to understand the spiritual implications of serious problems in their marriages. So while the divorce teachings definitely agree with long-established Christian custom because founded on Jesus's direct words, there is also new thought showing the spiritual implications of divorce, separation, and different levels of adultery (see *Conjugal Love* 463-499).

Concerning sexuality outside marriage, the categorization of different non-marital practices is unique as far as public discussion goes (*Conjugal Love* 444[repeated] 514). The overwhelming condemnation of adultery as hell itself goes far beyond what churches were saying, and Swedenborg was brave to equate adultery with hell in such a sexually permissive society. Though forms of non-marital sexuality differed somewhat then, the essential elements are similar today. The principles shown in *Conjugal Love* about kinds and levels (degrees) of licentious love could provide a great deal of guidance for our own society's sexual maladjustment and disorders.

The chapter on polygamy is gentler on polygamy and Muslims, and at the same time tougher on Christian polygamy, than would be comfortable for 18th-century Europe. The teachings on zeal and jealousy, while not entirely new, reveal new spiritual levels behind common human feelings, and several times challenge common popular opinion, then and now (e.g., *Conjugal Love* 357, 365-366, 368, 379).

### **Presenting Feminine Viewpoints**

Perhaps the most revolutionary aspect of this doctrine is Swedenborg's revealing of feminine viewpoints and even secrets, which seldom see the light of day among males. In preparatory notes Swedenborg said he told angelic wives he would reveal information they wished to keep secret. (*Spiritual*

*Diary* 6110:2) Yet when actually presenting information obtained from female spirits and angels, Swedenborg was extremely careful to present ideas not by way of himself, but from them directly, and evidently with their permission. He said: “It is not appropriate for me to reveal” the particulars of wifely secrets. But he lets angelic wives speak for themselves (*Conjugal Love* 166; also 219; the best examples are found in nos.155 [repeated], 208, 293, and 294). Along the same lines he says it’s not possible to describe the highest state of conjugal bliss except on the basis of testimony from angels who experience it (*Conjugal Love* 69). Much of that information also comes from angelic females, and sometimes it contradicts the views of women on earth (e.g., *Conjugal Love* 330). Talks with angel men and women present a far loftier and deeper sense of married delight than accepted wisdom on earth, then or now.

Concepts such as these about conjugal love are alien to Swedenborg’s worldly culture. And we may wonder what hidden impact they have had in opening human consciousness to a new understanding of femininity in the last two and a quarter centuries.

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### **The Angels’ Sadness**

I said that although these secrets revealed at the present time by the Lord surpass in excellence and importance any concepts hitherto imparted, still on earth they are regarded as worthless.

The angels were surprised at this, and they petitioned the Lord to permit them to look down into the world; and on looking down, behold, they saw only darkness there.

After that, because the angels were saddened and thought to themselves how long this would be the case, they were told, “For a time and times and half a time.” (Revelation 12:14)

(*Conjugal Love* 533)