

Same sex relationships

There are different heavens with different beliefs and different ways of serving our LORD Jesus and our neighbour. It is no wonder that we see the issue of same sex relationships, or even marriages, differently. Our church's teachings inform us that charity – goodwill, kindness, caring, tolerance, empathy, friendship and respect – is more important than what we believe. Is how gently and compassionately we treat other people and the way we agree to disagree, more important than what we believe individually? Is it more indicative of our progress as angels? We can choose to develop our own opinion from a range or spectrum of New Church beliefs, all of which are appearances of truth, or are aspects of reality. There will be views expressed that we personally find fearful and pessimistic, even awful and ignorant, but a person's sincerity and desire to follow the LORD in their way is a greater consideration. The Conference Ministry wants to encourage people to share their concerns and their opinions in safe spaces, in their own time, and at their own pace.

One thing we share is a loyalty to the Word and the Writings, although we disagree on how they should be interpreted. We all agree that the internal sense of the Word, or the inner meaning lying beneath the symbolism, is the Word of God, but we differ as to what in the literal sense are the traditions and beliefs of the Israelites, and what is the 'face and hands' of the Word, or what can be taken as literally true and applicable for all time. For example, the passages about men having sex with men, (Leviticus 18:22; 20:13) are they Israelite customs and taboos, or the Word of God? Do they apply to situations of rape or non-consensual sex? Another passage is the story of Lot, the men of Sodom and the angels. Are the men of Sodom, homosexuals, bisexuals or heterosexuals? (Genesis 19:1-11) Is Swedenborg's book *Conjugal Love* or *Love in Marriage*, a book that advocates heterosexual marriages only, or does it teach our LORD Jesus' involvement in the heart and minds of all people, with particular reference to how it manifests in heterosexual marriages? Each of us have different tolerance levels. Some New Church people will react with fear and horror, at the mere mention of same-sex relationships, while others will be quite calm and relaxed. Yet we are all brothers and sisters, all members of our LORD Jesus' family, and all ministering to each other.

Some New Church people insist on the Biblical basis of heterosexual relationships: a man should leave his parents and find a wife, (Genesis 2:24; Matthew 19:5; Mark 10:5-9) and for them it is a definitive, authoritative piece of Scripture, which rules out same-sex relationships. Other New Church people see some truth in, and don't rule out women taking the initiative! They view it more from the spiritual meaning of turning away from our worldly parental or church programming to a more loving, expansive, heavenly view of our LORD Jesus, other people and everything. They feel that the use of these Scriptures, not only divides, but discourages homosexual people. They question whether this is an abusive use of Scripture, and feel very acutely the shaming, the pessimism and what they see as a lack of love. If heterosexual marriages are "the Divine Plan", which everybody believes is at least partly true, we could also say that the heavenly marriage between our hearts and minds, is

“established from creation”. It seems that the more literal we take the Bible, the less we emphasise its spiritual meaning. Should we start from the literal sense of the Bible, or begin with the LORD and the internal sense of the Word?

Another issue is the use of our intelligence. The more we take the Bible literally, the less we have to rely on our ingenuity, our sophistry, our desire for innovation, and indeed our God-inspired enlightenment. Yet can't each of us be inspired by the LORD, to use our ability to reason and to think, which would at least be acceptable in our heavenly community, if not others? We are not a Christian denomination, that advocates blind faith, or prevents people from using their reason to explore and scrutinise our beliefs and traditions.

Some Ministers and laity feel that we should concentrate on promoting heterosexual marriage, while others feel that we should emphasise the balance and interplay of inspired minds and hearts moved by the Divine, that is, “the heavenly marriage”. I can attest to heterosexual marriage bringing many heavenly benefits, but it depends on my spirituality, my humble application of religious teaching in my heart, mind and life. If some Ministers want to promote heterosexual marriage, I suggest that an even more important Biblical teaching is our being married to the LORD: he is our husband/bridegroom and we are the bride.

One view of “conjugal love” is that it only applies to heterosexual people, but more liberal Swedenborgians have shown that Swedenborg teaches that it can apply to individuals: their relationship with our LORD Jesus and how their individual heart and mind work together, to produce kind words and helpful deeds. Rather than using Scripture to divide people, we should rather start with our LORD Jesus, and what he is doing in other people's lives: when do we feel inspired; when do we feel creative; how do we feel when we build another up? Everybody in heaven is engaged with and promote mutual love, whether they're heterosexually married or not. Some New Church ministers have argued that you need to be married to be a good relative or friend, which other New Church Ministers struggle with.

Some New Church people view homosexuality as a weapon of the hells to attack, undermine and destroy heterosexual marriages. As a self-reflecting heterosexually-married male, my impatience, insensitivity, arrogance and other failings can momentarily undermine my marriage, as can my wife's. Other New Church people recognise and affirm the Lord's relationship with individuals, whatever their sexuality, and the interplay between their hearts and minds, and then acknowledge how this is manifesting in how they treat each other. I've always believed that the New Church has optimistic, hopeful, balanced teachings. Society is not all bad, people are not all wicked, and so on.

Some New Church people believe that marriage is only for heterosexuals. Other New Church ministers and lay people, see that a homosexual wedding affirms our LORD Jesus' influence on the two individuals' hearts and minds, and in the way they care for and love each other.

There are issues with our English translations of the Bible. 1 Corinthians 6:9-10 is a prime example. I will just list the options for you, from which you can choose:

- “nor effeminate, nor abusers of themselves with mankind” (Authorised Version)
- “nor homosexuals, nor sodomites” (*New King James Version*)
- “nor adulterers nor men who have sex with men”. (*New International Version* (UK))
- “male prostitutes, sodomites” (*New Revised Standard Version* (Anglicised))
- “those who lack control” or the “self-indulgent” (*New Jerusalem Bible*) and those who are economically and sexually exploited

Some Christians would argue that 1 Corinthians 6:9-10 refer to pederasts and young male prostitutes, or masters and sex slaves or prostitutes, not consensual partners. The word “sodomite” is ambiguous, because the men of Sodom could be homosexuals, bisexuals or heterosexuals.

Respectfully submitted,
Revd Brian Talbot

If you’d like to talk anything through, you’re warmly invited to Meet the Minister for a confidential and supportive conversation. You can find further information here <https://www.generalconference.org.uk/contact/meet-the-minister/>, or email ministers.secretary@generalconference.org.uk

You can also visit our website <https://www.generalconference.org.uk/same-sex-marriage-consultation/>, which we will regularly update with helpful resources from ministers i.e., films, written materials and details of workshops.

Whatever your questions or reflections, you don’t have to navigate them alone.