

Did God "Change" At the Time Of the Incarnation?

by Karin Alfelt Childs

"I have received information from heaven that before the Lord from eternity (who is Jehovah) took on a human nature in the world, the first two levels in him [heavenly and spiritual] were actual, while the third level [earthly] was potential, which is the way things are for angels." DLW 233

"Although the Divinity that had filled all space without being bound by space also penetrated to the most remote elements of nature, before taking on a human nature the divine inflow into the earthly level was indirect, through the angelic heavens. After taking on the human nature it was direct from Divinity itself. This is why all the world's churches before his coming were representative of spiritual and heavenly realities, while after his coming they became spiritual and heavenly on the earthly level and representational worship was done away with." DLW 233

"The reason the Lord from eternity, or Jehovah, took on this third level by assuming a human nature in the world is that he could not enter this world except through a nature like our own." DLW 234

What HAPPENED to God at the time of the Incarnation? Why was the Incarnation necessary, and why didn't it happen sooner? I have held several concepts about this — that things had to get very bad before Jesus came on earth in order for people to be willing to receive him; that before the Incarnation God was with people indirectly through the Heavens; that the human race is in the process of "growing up" — but I've never understood WHY there was indirect contact before Jesus was resurrected. Why wasn't Jehovah, or Yahweh, with the human race directly before this? Was this a

permission, or was it meant to be this way? And why?

Reading some comments about this subject by people on the Divine Love and Wisdom online discussion group I participate in triggered a new way to look at this that makes sense to me. The following may be totally obvious to many of you, but it's clicking for me in a new way.

I have a one-year-old daughter right now, and also children who are 12, 17, and 19. I compare the process of the development of the human race to the development of an individual person, and the relationship of God with us to the relationship of parent to child.

When my child is young, I am with her, loving her, caring for her, providing for all her needs. But I am not having a complete relationship with her. My relationship with her is modified. I am not explaining all my thoughts to her, for instance. I am just talking with her about things that she can grasp. I am only explaining things that she can understand. I am only showing the parts of myself to her that would mean something to her immature mind. You might say I am having a "representative" rather than a full and direct relationship with her, embodying a role for her that she needs. I'm not relating to her in full friendship, because it is simply not possible. She is not ready for it. It would only be confusing and upsetting. It would be ridiculous.

When my child becomes an adolescent, she will do some breaking away from this less-than-direct relationship, the totally-guiding-parent relationship. And contained within this rebellion, whatever form it might take, is the very beginnings of an ability to understand me more as a human being, and to have a much more real, direct relationship with me. But of course this is a gradual process. It takes a lot of years, and a lot of exchanges between the two of us. The "rebellion" phase might be quite mild, or it might be just awful.

And the thing is, as my grown child and I move toward this new relationship, I as the parent don't change who I am. But I most certainly have to change my approach toward this young lady. I must become more direct. I must find the way to enter her world, to understand what she goes through, so that we can have more real communications and exchanges. Before, I did not really enter her world — the world of childhood. I was there all the time, but I was also apart from

it, so that I could guide from a higher perspective.

From these thoughts, I can now picture that maybe Yahweh had an indirect relationship with the human race before the Incarnation because that's the only way it could be. There were many times of closeness and love between the Divine Parent and the human race, but God could not have a full and direct relationship with people because they simply weren't ready.

And then, when the human race had reached an "adolescence" of sorts, the old ways of relating to God just weren't O.K. anymore. There was a pulling away from God, a rebellion, probably mild in some parts of the world, but quite severe in others. The time was ripe. The human race, amidst all the messes, held the ability to begin to understand their God better. And so Yahweh came down into their world as Jesus, to face all that they were facing, and to begin to tell them more about the Divine. And the learning continues, century after century. And when I look around, I see lots of evidence of more and more direct relationships between human beings and God.

If there's any truth in this theory, I don't know if people who lived on earth in the "childhood" time continue to have that kind of a relationship with God in the spiritual world, or if they progress there to a more mature relationship. Maybe that depends upon what kind of relationship the individual wants.

I don't know if this way of seeing this issue is correct, but it gives me something tangible that I can grasp about the Lord before and after the Incarnation. The One God didn't change. What changed, by an active decision of Divine Love, was God's loving approach to us. ¶¶

Twin Heresies

Linda Simonetti Odhner

He cried, God, why have You forsaken me?
They must be One only as all are one,
Unless He called Himself mistakenly,
Seeing Himself like any father's son.
Faced with the Gospel's puzzle, who would not
Turn from a monstrous triple-headed God,
The Word made human flesh too dearly bought
By union splintered into shards so odd?
The Christian Mystery is misconstrued
Not just from blind perverseness, but because
His coming turned existence inside out,
Stretched all the laws of order, madly skewed
Appearance, till all flesh of sin cried out:
This Child cannot be born! And yet He was.

I recently read, in James Gleick's biography Isaac Newton, about the great scientist's interest in theology and anger over the Trinitarian heresy, which he found despicable. In the light of what we are taught in the Writings, the New Testament can actually be quite misleading, and I began to reflect on how the full, paradoxical truth of Christianity — that God is One and Christ is the One God — has been preserved through the years by means of two incompatible heresies, namely, that Christ is not divine and that God is three Persons. If Jesus Himself got mixed up, surely He doesn't blame us for being confused. And so I wrote this poem. ⌘

(The following sermon was given at a Caritas Worship service on March 26, 2003.)

Hold All Things Loosely

Rev. Sarah Buteux

Exodus 16:11-26 Acts 4:32-36

I encountered the writings of Swedenborg before I encountered the Swedenborgian church. I guess you could say that eight years ago I was a lost sheep of the evangelical movement, searching for a framework to understand my persistent belief in a loving God. And when I found Swedenborg I was very relieved. At first, I couldn't get enough. My now husband Andrew gave me "A Thoughtful Soul" and "A Scientist Explores Spirit" and "Sorting Things Out" - all Swedenborgian books by his father, the Rev. George Dole. And I quickly moved on to the large compendium of Swedenborg's writings, and then began dipping into "Heaven and Hell" and other primary sources. I fell in love with the ideas in Swedenborg's writings because I had finally found a Christian theologian who professed to believe everything I longed for and hoped to be true about God.

And then I began to meet Swedenborgians. I found this little chapel. I went up and spent some time at the summer camp in Fryeburg, Maine. Eventually I came to work here as an intern, and at first I felt as though I had found my little piece of heaven on earth. I loved everyone. I was tremendously impressed with the littlest things that people would say or do. Every sermon was brilliant. Every lecture enlightening. Every conversation a small miracle. I thought I had found the perfect church.

I probably felt a lot like those early Christians in the book of Acts. There was no fear in my heart. There was no pretense or desire to take control and run things better. I was content, safe, and full of joy. I implicitly trusted everyone simply because they were Swedenborgian. I felt overwhelmingly blessed and wanted for nothing but more of the same. And gradually, as I settled in and became more of a known quantity, as I looked around, observed, and listened, I realized that the Swedenborgian church, much like the church I had left behind, and indeed like all other churches that exist here on earth, was not quite as perfect as I had hoped. And, for the record, I wasn't quite as perfect either.

I learned about this chapel's struggle to gain independence from its landlord — the Swedenborgian seminary. I soon ran into personalities I found difficult. I became aware of the larger politics that inform, support, and move this little denomination forward. And I came to realize that, in spite of our beautiful theology and our sincere intentions to live according to its precepts, we Swedenborgians were just as human and flawed as everyone else.

Of course my initial beliefs were naïve. I really should have known better. I had even read some evidence to the contrary. Evidence that should have dulled my initial enthusiasm. As I said, one of the first books

I read was *Sorting Things Out*, a collection of George Dole's sermons, in which he admits that at times he had more affection for the Swedenborgian plumbing at our Fryeburg church camp than the Swedenborgian people. He writes: "My mind goes back to my 'first term' as president of our church camp in Maine, when I was doing the opening and closing of the facilities. I would really enjoy myself getting tents put up, getting the waterfront ready, and especially battling the old galvanized plumbing. I had a personal affection for the marvelous variety of toilet tank mechanisms. The one in the Murdoch cabin especially is a work of art; it ought to be part of a guided tour of the premises, and if it is ever replaced, I want it. But as opening Saturday drew near, I would begin feeling tense. People are much harder to deal with than plumbing. You can't take a wrench to personal problems. There are very few times when you can say, 'Well that's fixed'. There would be a sense of relief when everyone [finally left], and I was faced with straightforward tasks that allowed me to enjoy a sense of competence."

I understand George a lot more now than I did back then. And I appreciate him even more, because what George acknowledges in his sermon is that people — even Swedenborgian people — are difficult. It can take a great deal of effort and patience to stick with our little faith community. And what I would like to share with you this morning is an idea that might make our attempts at working with one another a little bit easier. It is a phrase I encountered early on in my spiritual journey and the phrase that forms the title of this sermon: "Hold All Things Loosely" (p. 33).

Now I know it's not the traditional sort of advice you might expect in a sermon about community. It doesn't call to mind any techniques or instruct us in how to be more patient, loving, kind, and sincere. But for me, that simple phrase, "Hold all things loosely,"

is important because it can enable us to approach people as people, as ends in and of themselves, rather than as means to ends that we personally desire.

Allow me to explain. In churches, as in all institutions and communities, there is usually a fixed amount of resources, and the greatest tensions often lie in who controls and receives those resources. And, paradoxically, it is also often the case that the more there is to go around, the more some people seem to hoard while others suffer from lack of access. Our whole world demonstrates this principle, as does our country. Our planet produces enough food, enough oil, enough water, really enough of everything to meet the needs of everyone. But these resources are not evenly distributed. I have heard from various sources that our country, which comprises roughly 20% of the world's population consumes approximately 80% of the world's resources. And, even here in America, people go hungry. As Lars and I were driving home from Bryn Athyn this week he told me it cost him over \$50 for a tank of gas in England. In our country you can spend more on a gallon of bottled water than on a gallon of gas. This kind of inequity is strange and sad and unnecessary.

And what is even stranger and sadder and more unnecessary is that you often see the same dynamics at work in churches. People vie for control and store away wealth, while neglecting each other. One of my favorite museums is the Cloisters, which houses the Metropolitan Museum's medieval art collection. But there is one room which always makes me sad. It is the room where the cloaks and accessories of the church clergy from that time period are kept. The little placards tell you to look closely at all the hand wrought detail, whether it is the carving on a scepter, or the embroidered detail in a stole, and then explain to you that some poor artisan spent his or her whole life

in poverty creating something exquisitely beautiful for a priest who was probably living in luxury.

The cost of one such artifact probably could have fed that artisan's whole village for a year if not a lifetime. And it is not that I don't believe in creating beautiful things in honor of the church. I mean I love this church for its beauty. It's the fact that the church at that time had so much to give and yet withheld so much from its people, that makes me sad. And this kind of selfishness that we are all prone to, is typically born of fear...fear that if you start sharing soon there won't be enough to go around. I think of the tragedy of the Titanic.

When that great ship went down there were not enough lifeboats for everyone, but those who made it into the boats rowed as far from their drowning fellows as they possibly could. Even worse, most of the boats were only half full. Those in lifeboats rowed away for fear that the people in the water would swamp the boats in an attempt to save themselves. We operate like this a lot in our world. And yet we know that God doesn't work that way, that heaven isn't structured that way, and that as Swedenborgians, as scary as it might seem, we are called to do our very best with the Lord's help to try and live according to the way of heaven here on earth.

I chose our Bible readings with great care this morning. Usually I just follow the lectionary, but for today I wanted to read this passage about the early church community in Acts and the passage about the Israelites and their manna. I love the story of the manna because it reminds us that God will always provide for us, even if it's just enough. Those who hoarded their manna didn't end up with any more than those who took the allotted amount. God evened it out and everyone had just enough; nothing in savings, no extra just in case, just enough to get through the day.

And I love the story in Acts, because we see a true Christian community at work. We get a glimpse of a group of people who counted everything they owned as individuals as what they had to share with their community. No one went hungry, no one suffered from want, because everyone did their best to take care of everyone else. It reminds us that the greatest joy we can feel is in giving and that everything we have should be seen, not as a personal possession to hold onto, but as something we have to give.

This is how Swedenborg describes heaven, as a place where no one need worry or fear about caring for themselves, because everyone is occupied with caring for each other. He says: "The Lord's love is a love of sharing everything it has with everyone; it intends the happiness of everyone. So there is mutual sharing of angel's pleasures with everyone." It's a beautiful vision, a vision where we see that because the angels hold all things loosely they always have more to give. And although it may at times seem impossible to bring such a vision to life here on earth, it is still a worthy vision to hold on to and to hold out for.

I know, as well as you do, that living in any community of people is bound to be difficult. And we know that the early church got it right for a while, but even these sincere hearts eventually succumbed and adjusted to the pressures of living in this world. We can see that the Swedenborgian church began with the best of intentions. So high were their hopes that they declared this institution the "New Church." But even here in the New Church, much of the old lives on. And yet I love this church and its people. I am ordained by this church and its people. And I have dedicated my life to serving this church...and its people. I know it is not perfect, any more than any of its members

are perfect. I know that we as a people have a lot of growing to do. And I also am intimately aware of the struggles we face as an institution. But I also trust that God will always provide enough for us if we are willing to provide for one another.

I'd like to close with some further thoughts on plumbing from George Dole. Yes, he admits that at times he prefers toilets to people, but he also writes that: "What [such an idea] overlooks is that galvanized pipes can't give you a smile or a hug. Even the Murdoch toilet can't ask a questions or make a comment that gives a fresh glimpse of life. What it overlooks, that is, is the fact that if I had appreciated and liked people as much as I assumed I did, there would have been a mounting sense of anticipation as [the opening days of camp] drew nearer. There would have been affirmative images coming spontaneously to mind, images of dear folk who were packing their bags and arranging for their mail to be forwarded. Of course there are more strenuous responsibilities involved in dealing with people than there are in dealing with plumbing. [But] there are also far deeper rewards."

Plumbing may lead to peace and quiet, but it doesn't lead to heavenly community. For that we need each other. It is only in the context of our communities that we find the human material with which to build the New Jerusalem we talk so much about.

So my friends, let us set aside the pipes, the riches, the politics of church, and really look at each other as people. As we come together and ready our hearts for communion, let us consider how we can hold those things loosely that threaten to keep us apart, that we might hold each other close as the dearest blessings God has to bestow.

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Story of Two People Finding Each Other

The following passages from the Spiritual Diary illustrate how Empress Elizabeth of Russia met Count de La Gardie, the man who is her true heavenly partner. I find this story inspiring, at times more so than stories in the book Conjugal Love, because Elizabeth was known in her lifetime to have had many lovers, and also to be preoccupied with aging and looking young. At her death she left behind fifteen thousand dresses (History of Russia, by Paul Dukes). Yet the Lord guided her through her cupidities and vanities, leading her to her heavenly partner within a few short months after her death.

They were together, getting acquainted, and liked each other. Afterwards, she was informed about his relatives and traveled to the society in which they were — to that of R. Ekeblad, where there was easy entrance and where she was honored... Before this, De la Gardie was separated from his wife, with whom he had sometimes had intercourse, but latterly, seldom: he referred, however, to the council, to see if he could get a divorce; and they examined, and found that there was no similarity as to affections, and so they were divorced...

Afterwards, the Empress came to speak with the Bishop in Lubeck to whom she had been engaged; but she was not pleased with him, particularly as there appeared with him a pretty-faced woman, who was his mistress, whom he loved much and whom he had not abandoned in the world. It was afterwards shown where his home now was; which was down in hell, where it looked bad, and he had low work to do, as is usual there. Thereby her fancy for him was dispelled. She afterwards spoke with one from Holstein and Mecklenburg, who had courted her, to observe him; but she found dissimilarity, and would have nothing to do with him, as also was the case in the world.

She traveled round and came far from her place; and then, as often happens, she did not know where she was, nor who she herself was. On the way, she met Count De la Gardie, and accompanied him, both unknown to one another, when they again found pleasure in each other. He

accompanied her about to a way which went homeward, when, by accident, they were separated. A second time she also traveled about, when I did not see what took place. A third time she traveled the same way as the first; and then, also, of the Divine Providence, she met De la Gardie; and then they saw, as is usual, that the one was destined for the other, loved each other well, and were then carried home each to his own society.

The Empress was placed at the head of the best society of Russians, who loved her well. Ex-emperor Peter [her father], then took leave of that society... De la Gardie came also to govern a fine society. Then De la Gardie came to her palace; and it was decided between them about the marriage, they having been together long enough. When it was decided on, an angel, in beautiful white garments, was sent from here up to heaven to get a priest from there to marry them; which was done in this way, simply that he asked both if they consented, and, when he had heard that, he wished them the grace and blessing of God. Nothing more. This happened on the 5th of March, 1762. Then he traveled to her behind four pair of horses, splendid.

Congratulations were received: (1) from small children who were brought from heaven to speak to them; which so moved her that she went into another room and wept from heavenly joy over their speech. (2) When she returned, eight older children came and made a very pretty congratulation. When

they went away, she kissed them all. (3) Adults who had died as children and been reared in heaven. (4) Lastly came such from the Russian nation as also had been reared in heaven, and brought their congratulations. Finally, there were heard short congratulations from the societies in heaven one after the other: although [they were short, they were] pretty, according to the order of the provinces there; and were continued from one hundred to two or three hundred, one after the other; and there were yet many who wanted to congratulate, but as it took a long time, many together made one congratulation, and so on. Music was also heard accompanying...the affections of the children who had been there.

A feast was afterwards held, which was splendid; at which were thirty persons. In the morning, after they had slept together, they sat down together in a carriage, when I saw him changed, [wearing] the red knight-ribbon; and then they traveled to his home. When they reached there, the house was changed into a beautiful palace with many rooms, at which he wondered much. They went about these; it was beautiful everywhere. Afterwards, they went into the upper story, and found servants who belonged to the society, whom she at once recognized, as usual; and there were many rooms in which, as yet, nobody was, a kind of sign that the society was likely to increase. Afterwards, there came some who were

permitted to make representations, and who with beautiful representations represented the government.

They then traveled to her [home] in the former place. Their love grew so strong, that she desired to be one with him even as to body, which also took place; and they found it agreeable that it can be so when desired. Then they seemed to be lifted up, as it were, from the mass [of people]. Thus they can be one, and be two as to body, yet with one life. De la Gardie has been of such a mind that he always used to speak of useful things discursively, both carefully and vivaciously, and of many spiritually; thus, to speak understandingly, and not from memory only...

They went round in a carriage within the society, to show themselves, as is done in the world. She was seen afterwards, and was thoroughly good-looking... Afterwards came Queen Ulrica, with her consort, to visit them. He spoke first with the Russian Empress, and was shown all honor; afterwards, Queen Ulrica first to De la Gardie, and then to the Russian Empress; and she made her speech at first simple, afterwards more and more interior; which was answered in order, and somewhat more. On the 25th of March both were in a state of innocency together, and went about, and were seen about by many, as small children.

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For me this story illustrates very really that the Lord is sincere in His promise of a true heavenly partner for each one of us, no matter how things look in this world. Compared to the shining brightness of conjugal love, for many of us the bitter realities of our failings tarnish the promise and seem to destroy all possibilities. But a dose of reality as to what happens, this telling of the after-life story of someone known not to have been perfect, gives hope to anyone struggling in the void of broken relationships and unquiet cupidities. The Lord is capable and competent in His work of redeeming us, and He does it diligently. He not only promises to bring into our lives an eternal partner, He does. Heavenly happiness is possible.

Helen Kennedy

Abuse in a Dissociated Culture

Linda Simonetti Odhner

(Reprinted from *Out of Silence*, Sept. 2001)

In his book *Dissociative Identity Disorder*, Colin Ross advances the idea that, like people whose psyches are fragmented into multiple personalities, Western culture, especially Western Christianity, is dissociated into elements that don't acknowledge one another and are at odds with each other. The splitting of personalities in DID often reflects these cultural fault lines, among them disconnection between mind and body and between intellect and emotion. Ross writes:

The demon alter [alternate personality], I believe, occurs in our culture because of a fundamental dissociation at the root of the Christian religion, a dissociation of religious consciousness from the physical body ... In Christian culture the spontaneous, pagan sources of physical vitality, including but not limited to sexuality, are dissociated and disavowed. They are then identified as evil and undesirable, needing to be fought and contained. It is culturally normal for DID patients to create demon alters to embody irreverent, hostile, and "bad" aspects of themselves, and for the "badness" to be linked to sexuality (p. 118).

Non-dissociated people also try to distance themselves from the thoughts and desires within them that don't fit into their picture of what they are or should be. Most of us want to be good and socially acceptable, and yet integrated, honest and open. We want not only our appearance and actions, but also our feelings and motivations, to be presentable to others. We may look back at some action we regret and say, that wasn't really me, or the devil made me do it. Even in the New Church we focus a lot more on attributing our evil thoughts to evil spirits than on crediting our goodness to the Lord and the angels. We may only admit forbidden

thoughts when we are very angry or upset, and they gain force from having been suppressed and denied.

Recognition is growing that dissociative identity disorder results from sexual abuse, and that both are common. An abusive disposition may in turn result from a dissociated culture and religion. Ross says, "It is no accident that contemporary evangelical preachers are so often chronic, frequent abusers of prostitutes. They are highly dissociated men. Their religion is dissociated from their sexuality" (P. 181). He also says that the abuse causing DID is often committed by a father operating under an alter (alternate personality) himself.

Tappan King, writing in *The Armless Maiden* about men who grow up in families where they watch sisters being abused and are powerless to help them, concludes,

The result, for many men with this sort of history, is a division of the personality into a day self that is pleasant and accommodating, and a night self that is given license to express forbidden rage through such avenues as irresponsibility, substance abuse, and violence. Some men yield entirely to their night selves, becoming abusers themselves (p. 225)..

Ross also points out the dissociation of Freudian theory based on the denial of abuse. Freud concluded that women who recalled being abused were bringing out something sinister from the unconscious and had not actually suffered abuse. Otherwise he would have had to believe that his friends and colleagues were abusers.

It is not true that normal children literally, consciously want to have intercourse with their opposite-sex parents. That is a dirty-minded view of the unconscious and children, not because intercourse is dirty, but because the theory defines normal children as sexual perverts. In terms of the suppression of public

awareness of child abuse, Oedipal theory provides a rationale for blaming the victim. Freudian theory offers an "out"—the abuser can be excused as the victim of his child's projective identification and/or unresolved Oedipal conflict. That is one reason why Freudian theory caught on; its unhealthy sexualized projections onto the unconscious mind were "culture-syntonic" (p. 181).

All the dark shapes Freud unearthed from people's unconscious minds were there not by nature, but because they had been driven underground, suppressed from conscious awareness and memory.

The silence and discomfort that surround the topic of sexuality are symptoms of a dissociated culture. Even when sex happens in its rightful place, the marriage bed, it is often carried out in darkness, silence, and secrecy, with closed eyes and no talking, under the covers and with as many clothes on as possible. Parents read books for guidance about how to break the news to their children. Even though the content of television shows is so much more sexually open than it used to be, sex is still mainly a topic for innuendo, joking, nervous laughter, and shocking revelations.

Many otherwise intelligent, responsible adults abandon their rationality where sex is concerned. They know how to handle the physical and emotional risks and consequences of sexual relations, but often fail to act on that knowledge. For them, having sex happens in a different world, almost as if to different people. It's not part of everyday life; it doesn't go by the

same rules. (See *What Really Happens in Bed*, by Steven Carter & Julia Sokol.)

Because sex is already such a different, secret thing, a father who abuses his daughter at night can wall off the whole experience and disconnect it from the rest of his life. He might already have done the same in his relations with his wife, so it may not even feel very different to him. The fact that sane, healthy, spiritually intimate sex is missing from his marriage—that he has no glimmering even of what sex is supposed to be — may help to numb him to the wrongness of what he does in his daughter's bed.

Abuse leads to fragmented consciousness. Fragmented consciousness leads to abuse. The only way to break the cycle is to figure out how to pull ourselves together, to be willing to admit that we have sexual thoughts and feelings and that they are an important part of us. To be whole and integrated we need a time and place where it's okay to think and talk about sexual issues, and work on finding a place for sexuality in our daily lives. Our children will benefit from appropriate honesty and openness on the part of parents and teachers; they gain reassurance when they learn that they are not weird or evil because of thoughts they might have and things they might do in private. Realizing that chastity is a channeling of sexuality, not a suppression of it, is an opportunity for attaining greater wholeness.

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It must be known, however, that interiorly conjunctive marriages can be entered into on earth with difficulty, because choices based on internal similarity cannot be provided by the Lord there as they are in heaven. CL 320:3

Let's Talk About It

by Mary Alden

"I want to know what this church teaches about sex. Who should I go and talk to or is there a book or something that explains it?"

That really got my attention. I was sitting with a group of women, aged from twenty-something to the mid-sixties. We were in a small group discussion accompanying a series of classes for newcomers to the church. The purpose of these classes is to introduce our church's mission and values and help people explore their own values and experience together. It was the youngest woman who asked. She had been coming to church for only a few months. The others had been coming for a bit longer, but no one really had any answers for her. Some suggested talking to a minister. One woman said that they thought Swedenborg had written a book about it and she should check that out. Another suggested that she talk to me about it and then the discussion went on to other things.

I felt severely challenged at that time to try and set out and explain what exactly it is that this church teaches about sex. I was especially reluctant to tell her to go read the book *Conjugal Love*. I studied this book in high school at the Academy of the New Church. By that I mean I read selected excerpts that were assigned by a minister and listened to his interpretations and fed all the right things back on papers and tests and passed the course. I believed that what I learned at the Academy about proper and improper man/woman relationships was the revealed Word of God. I somehow got the conviction that if I did this sex and marriage thing right, I would be pleasing to God and have a happy life, period, the end.

So what does this church teach anyway? I think I know what it used to teach: "The sense of touch is proper to conjugal love." I must have heard that sentence one hundred

times. What did that mean to my 16-year-old mind? Don't kiss, hold hands with, fondle, pet, have sex with your date or boyfriend. These were to be reserved for marriage or at least everything following the kiss and hand holding part. Kissing and holding hands were OK if you were engaged. Sex is bad unless it is done within marriage, and then it's good. God has given us sex but focusing on bodily pleasure is bad, it somehow has to be spiritual. If you goof this up, you can easily destroy your chances (to eternity!) for achieving a happy marriage or in achieving/receiving this ethereal something that will bring eternal bliss called Conjugal Love.

In thinking about this question (what does this church teach about sex?) I wonder if "the church" teaches it any differently today. I also wonder who qualifies to teach as "the church". I have not heard of any policies or statements or position papers on this subject, so do we assume it's all there in the one book, *Conjugal Love*?

At various times in my adult life, when faced with issues about who God intended me to be as a woman, or in dealing with some of the hard realities of marriage, I have gone back to the book *Conjugal Love* for encouragement and answers. Sometimes I have gotten some answers that helped. Sometimes I have felt discouraged and ashamed because I didn't seem to be the right kind of woman. But what I felt most about this book when someone suggested to this woman that she read it was worry. How could I explain this book to someone new to the church? How can I explain it to my own children? What validity does it have? What do we say about some of the parts of it that seem so culturally dated? But I also feel that this book IS from God. There are a lot of good things here. There must be a way to read it outside of the context in which it has been taught that will not feel shaming to

people sexually or black and white about the nature of women and men.

With these issues in mind, I recently read the last part of the book *Conjugal Love*, the part entitled, "The Pleasures of Insanity Concerning Scortatory Love". I tried to read in a spirit of openness, as if this was new to me, putting it into a context of what I know about the Lord as my Creator and Savior in my life. Something comes out very strongly to me as I read: The love of adultery and the love of marriage are strongly, diametrically opposed. This seems the central message of this part of the book. So the notions that were either taught or implied that we could ruin conjugal love for ourselves by abusing touching prior to marriage or by making other various mistakes, even perhaps the mistake of committing adultery, seem very off balance to me. The book is very clear that the person in the love of adultery is a gross, hateful person, and willfully so. The person really wants to be that way and has repeatedly and knowingly chosen to be hurtful to others in his relationships altogether, not just his sexual relationships. There is no mention of making mistakes unknowingly or even willingly when we are in a rebellious phase that will eternally harm our love of marriage, unless we want that to be the case. God works purposefully, powerfully, unceasingly, to help us learn to love and respect others outside of ourselves. When we allow God to do that, God has promised us this loving relationship to eternity, called *Conjugal Love*. This premise seems to be the context in which the rest of the chapters are set.

I am very troubled by the labeling of women in the back of the book. The proscriptions about how to orderly do the disorderly (sex outside of marriage of one man with one woman) are addressed to men. The women they do sex with are put into categories of OK or not OK for the men.

Taken literally, this seems to be treating the women as objects for the men's salvation. Women are classified as virgins, (chaste) wives, or harlots. A woman is a virgin if she has not had sex. She is a (chaste) wife if she has had sex only inside marriage although that is not completely spelled out. There does not seem a way for women to redeem themselves after a sexual encounter because men are enjoined not to fornicate with women they are planning to marry (whose sake is that for?). A woman is a harlot if she has had a sexual encounter outside of marriage. When a man has sex with a woman, not his wife, it must never be with a virgin or a wife of someone else, but only a harlot. Therefore a harlot's job or purpose appears to be to save the love of the conjugal for a man. I have a hard time recognizing these to be the literal words of the Lord and God I know in my life. They also are at odds with the opening context above. It does however remind me of some stories in *Genesis*.

Abram offered his wife Sarai to Pharaoh to be his wife while he was in Egypt so that he would be safe (*Gen 12:11-19*). Isaac passed off his wife Rebecca as his sister to the king's court for the same reason (*Gen 26:7-10*). In both of these instances, women are treated as objects (even as sexual objects) for the purpose of keeping men safe. We don't see that as a lesson to be valid for today when we read it in the Bible. How are we to take it when reading what looks to be similar in *Conjugal Love*?

So, what does this church teach about sex? I still hear the question and have no good answers. How do we teach our children to cope in a world where there is overwhelming sexual activity apart from marriage? How do we help all of us deal with sexual guilt brought on by reflecting on our actions that do not measure up to the ideal? What do we tell newcomers that this church teaches about sex and sexual relationships?

I would like to see some good healthy dialogue on this subject. It seems as if everybody else in this world is talking about it. I know that most of us are interested in it. I know that God wants us to participate in sexual relationships that are life giving. Let's get on with the discussion.

C

*Human beings are discourse. That flowing
moves through you whether you say
anything or not. Rumi*

C

The Worst Kind of Sex

Anonymous

My children, a boy and two girls, reached sexual maturity a while ago, and proceeded to scare the heck out of me by having their own ideas about how to use it. I practiced free-form motherhood in their early years, experimenting with holistic health, home birth, and alternative schooling. But when puberty hit, in my son's seventh grade, I panicked and called on my Victorian ancestors for inspiration, (despite living in post-sixties cultural revolutionary times). No dating until sixteen! No co-ed parties without chaperones! Conferences with parents before all events! Early curfews! These were the rules that I had to live by, and I assume my mother and grandmother also, so they were good enough for my kids. I earned the nickname "Meanest Mother in Town", but was proud of it, even considered making a T-shirt with the slogan. Being one of the first to have a teen in our church group, I felt an obligation to pave the way for how to raise young people in a society that was rapidly relaxing the rules about

what children could do and see. Of course, R-rated movies were off limits in our house, and sometimes even PG. I formed parent groups at my children's school to discuss the problems of un-chaperoned parties, and what to say to our kids when they asked if we had even taken drugs.

I had escaped my own carefully protected town at age 18, (where a kiss meant engagement, and holding hands on campus was a sin), in 1968. I heard the call of my tribe outside the invisible walls of the cloistered church community. Whatever a hippie was, that's what I wanted to be. I hopped the first VW flower painted van and traveled the country in that brief time when youth united in a web of communal euphoria, and everyone with long hair and a tie-dyed shirt was your sibling. I found myself in a series of potentially "compromising" situations with men, but thanks to my naivete, skirted any actual sex. And, yes. I did take a couple of puffs.

Sex, drugs and rock'n'roll — I enjoyed them without getting into too much trouble before settling down with an artist, somehow managing to stay a virgin until the big white wedding day. After all, I was a preacher's kid, and 21 years of constant programming to be a good wife, that it would bring me eternal happiness, had shaped me. And that meant no actual sex before marriage.

My son tolerated my hyper-vigilance about his dating life with a mixture of annoyance and amusement. He had always been a good son, and wasn't really giving me any reason to distrust him, but still I persisted in trying to beat the pressures of modern life, where statistics stated that half of all high school students were sexually active. Of course, the result of my strict rules was that my son had to sneak around. One night he stayed up all night at a prom party. I went crazy and kicked him out of the house. He simply moved into his girlfriend's home. Her mother, a liberal

feminist, adored having a male around the house. My helplessness at getting him back under my control caused nervous breakdown number one. After a few weeks of that, I tried to not think about what he was doing, and concentrated on making sure my daughters were safe from the boys.

They, too, had to suffer my Nazi mother routine. They probably had to sneak around, but it appeared they both followed the no dating until age 16 regulation. My oldest daughter decided to forget about dating altogether, since I made it so hard, until college. My youngest daughter had an active dating life, and slipped beyond my control before I knew it. Because she couldn't, as she put it, "talk to me about her life, like all the OTHER girls can with their moms" (meaning, taking her by the hand to the gynecologist for birth control pills?), I didn't really know what was happening with her. She ended up in a seriously abusive relationship in which the boy took advantage of her sexually. When I found this out, my world crumbled and I had my second nervous breakdown about my children's sex life. I felt I had failed as a mother.

Now my son is 30 and lives with his long time woman friend — someone I love. I have come to accept this single sex life. Since he doesn't misuse sex or exploit women, (and I think he is such a great person), I no longer judge him as being a lost cause for not waiting until marriage for sex. My oldest daughter lives with a wonderful young man, and although she says they don't have sex, it's pretty hard to believe. I guess she just can't tell me, afraid I will have another nervous breakdown, so we just cruise along and don't talk about it a lot. My younger daughter was scared into celibacy by that abusive boyfriend, but how long can that last for a beautiful 19-year old girl?

I equated sexual purity with being a good person, growing up. I tried to impose it on my children, even though living in a liberal

East Coast community in the 80s and 90s. I have had to redefine my conception of a good person, and it hasn't been easy knowing what might have been different in my life if I had had partners before marriage, or slept with my husband before our wedding, but now I see that virginity is not the one determining factor to marital bliss. After 32 years of struggling with the real issues in marriage such as: becoming a person someone else can stand to live with, detaching from your spouse to replace romance and enmeshment with mature love, and how to be adept to realities in life — like your children's sex lives.

I wish I had been more thoughtful and patient, more trusting and conscientious about raising teens. But as we parents all soon discover, our children will have to recover from our mistakes in their own way. Whatever we didn't hash out in our own therapy (and I have had plenty of all sorts, being an aging hippie), becomes the grist for our children's therapeutic mill. Now I am just trying to accept whatever lives they choose, and support them in any way I can. The best support for adult children, I believe, is doing yourself what you want them to do. So I keep working on my own "issues".

(But it does help to never let your imagination wander in the direction of picturing your children having sex lives, just as they have to do the same about their parents.)



*When people intend well, the Lord will lead
the way to see things in clearer
heavenly light.*



A Quick Glance at History and Women's Sexuality

by Rebecca Cooper

In discussing the topic of sex one must make some definitions; sex can be a transitive verb or a noun. For my purposes I will narrow the definition to a discussion of female sexuality. Raised as a New Church (wo)man, I have been taught certain doctrines of what it is to be a woman as though they are fact. Learning things about sex from a male teacher in a religion class as though it came from God did not leave me much freedom to debate anything, even though I had *experienced* things relating to sexuality differently from how they were being taught in the class room. Later as an adult woman I found that others had experienced similar dichotomies while sitting in class.

For the sake of simplicity this paper will recount historical views of women's nature and their sexuality as it pertains to Western culture. When I returned to college in 1996, I was surprised to learn that up until recent history, women were thought to be the cause of men's sexual deviance, this because women were so very interested in sex. In Ancient Greece and Rome, once a woman of noble birth married, she could not be seen in public or go the markets at all. She became a prisoner in her own home. No other person was even to know her name. Her husband could kill her for almost any reason, but most especially if he thought she was unfaithful. The following is recorded in the first century AD in Rome:

Egnatius Metellus took a cudgel and beat his wife to death because she drank some wine. Not only did no one charge him with a crime, but no one even blamed him. Everyone considered

this an excellent example of one who had justly paid the penalty for violating the laws of sobriety. Indeed any woman who immoderately seeks the use of wine closes the door on all virtue and opens it to vices.

There was also the harsh marital severity of Gaius Sulpicius Gallus. He divorced his wife because he had caught her outdoors with her hair uncovered.¹

The 70's Virginia Slim's Cigarette Ad was not too far off: *We have come a long way, baby.*

But Cato's words are perhaps the most chilling:

If you catch your wife in adultery, you can kill her with impunity; she however, cannot dare to lay a finger on you if you commit adultery, nor is it the law.²

On the other hand, a woman consort could accompany her lover to the Senate and partake in political conversations. The drawback with it was that it was mandatory that the woman renew her contract with a given partner every year. She could change partners, but as she aged she would be less appealing. Unwanted children were another problem, but they always could be exposed or sold into slavery.

The term *lesbian* comes to us from Ancient Greece. Daughters of noblemen spent their final years of growing up on the isle of Lesbos preparing for marriage. Often they developed deep friendships with the other women and knew it was the last time they would be able to indulge in female friendships to that extent. From a poem between two friends containing sexual language we today have the notion of

¹ Lefkowitz, Mary R and Maureen B Fant, *Women's Life in Greece and Rome*. 96.

² *Ibid.*, 97. This book is full of court cases from antiquity.

'Lesbianism." Below is an excerpt from Sappho written in 6th century BCE.

The Truth is, I wish I were dead. She left me weeping often and she said this, "Oh what cruel fate is ours, Sappho, yes, I leave you against my will."

And I answered her, "Farewell, go and remember me, for you know how we cared for you."

"If you do remember me, I want to remind you...of violets...you set beside me and with woven garlands made of flowers around your soft neck

'and with perfume, royal, rich...you anointed yourself and on soft beds you would drive out your passion

'and then ...sanctuary...was...from which we were away...'³

From this it is obvious that noble women from Classical times knew what fate awaited them once they left the island and married.

We have Aristotle to thank for the view history has of women. As a biologist, Aristotle viewed female genitals as a "deformed" version of the penis and testicles. He also thought that it was a law of nature that woman lacked reason and were given to emotions. In Aristotle's view, the male's contribution to the female in reproduction is the active and "acts" upon the material that the passive woman supplies in the form of an embryo. The woman herself does not contribute anything besides "material" to the offspring:

If, then, the male stands for the effective and active, and the female, considered as female, for the passive, it follows that what the female would contribute to the semen of the male would not be semen but material for

semen to work upon. This is just what we find to be the case, for the catamenia [name Aristotle gave to sexual female matter in procreation] have in their nature an affinity to the primitive matter.⁴

In addition, Aristotle held the view that a child could be conceived whether a woman enjoyed sex or not. Aristotle, considered both a biologist and a philosopher, held the view that just as their sexual reproduction was passive, so too, by nature, was their character.

The fact is, the nature of man is the most rounded off and complete, and consequently in man the qualities or capacities above referred to are found in their perfection. Hence woman is more compassionate than man, more easily moved to tears, at the same time more querulous, more apt to scold and to strike. She is, furthermore, more prone to despondency and less hopeful than the man, more void of shame or self-respect, more false of speech, more deceptive and more retentive of memory.⁵

Do not underestimate the influence of Aristotle. For centuries humankind has felt the influence of his thought and did not bother to question its validity. He also believed that since the soul, the *anima*, came from the father, his semen held the "motion" which acted upon the mere material that women offered in reproduction. The obvious drawback for wives is the utter disregard for her pleasure during lovemaking. This would change about four centuries later with another classical authority on biology, Galen.

Galen, a second century physician and philosopher to the Roman emperor Marcus Aurelius, thought that female orgasms

³ Sappho, cited in Lefkowitz, 3-4.

⁴ Aristotle, 729a.

⁵ Aristotle, 608b, 10.

enhanced the chance of the woman conceiving a child. But before we moderns hail this as a breakthrough, consider this: If a woman accused a man of rape, and from this rape she became pregnant, the court/church/social stigma all found her guilty of seduction as she must have been orgasmic when she was raped. So it could not be considered rape after all. Natalie Angier notes the problem Galen's theory created for women from our past.

Unfortunately, the insistence that an expectant woman was a postorgasmic woman spelled tragedy for our forefathers. Women who became pregnant after rape, for example, were accused of licentiousness and adultery, since their swollen bellies were evidence of their acquiescence and their pleasure, and they were routinely put to death.⁶

Is it any wonder that a woman might seek the protection of a father or husband when laws were this blind to justice and reason?

While pious nuns and abbesses were seen as virginal, throughout history women were thought to be pretty randy. Salic Law of early medieval Europe did protect its women from being raped with a very strong penalty; it was considered more grievous for a virgin to be violated than a married woman, thus revealing that a "deflowered" virgin was a more egregious crime because it devalued the virgin *in the eyes of her father and future husband*. The pain that rape caused a woman, whether a virgin or not, was not considered.

Throughout most of Western history, women were regarded as lacking "reason" and virtue. This view of women, as seen in Aristotle, was due to the common belief that women were incapable of reason. (The word virtue was a "manly" attribute derived from

⁶ Angier, Natalie, *Woman: an Intimate Geography*, 50.

the Latin word for man: *vir*.) Ideas began to change with Descartes who thought that women were certainly capable of being rational and having intelligence. Cartesian *dualism* allowed that the soul and mind were separate from the body and a woman's mind had the equivalent potential for rationality as a man's. ☼

(Part Two will appear in the next issue and it will cover the modern era.)

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(Rebecca assures me the unevenness in Sappho's poem comes from the translation. Ed.)

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Letters in response to ideas, thoughts, and feelings expressed are encouraged.

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With so much of our spiritual life depending upon the free flow of ideas, this newsletter is intended to be a forum for people to explore their affections and thoughts in areas of their choosing. Our hope is to give expression to the differing voices that go to make up the tapestry of the Lord's creation.

Instead of one thing being right, expression of the spiritual life becomes more a jigsaw puzzle, with many pieces needed to fit together, and the more pieces, the bigger and better the quality of detail.

Excerpt From Swedenborg: Religious Savant in the Age of Reason

By Ernst Benz

The link between the conquest of his carnal life and his vision of Christ deserves special mention. Many Swedenborgians have sought to transform Swedenborg into a saint, using all manner of arguments to suggest that he never ate Eve's apple either before or after his conversion. Such apology seems to be a fundamental error. These apologists are confounded by Swedenborg's own claim that he had a lover in Rome on his Italian journey. What is certain is that Swedenborg never married and that, after his conversion, he led a life in which he had obviously surmounted carnal desire. To claim apologetically that he never knew carnal desire, because a saint may not be a sinner at any time in his life, is simply to deny the profound character of conversion and his hard-won inner transformation, which he understood as an inconceivable act of grace. There is no recognition of sin without experience of sin. The illustrious community of saints has always been recruited from the ranks of sinners and not from the class of pharisees.

On this point, Swedenborg's own testimony is more reliable than his apologist's. Even if he had not confided in

his diary that his passion for women was the strongest of his life, his numerous erotic dreams and visions assert this. The leaves of his diary, perhaps torn out by an apologist, could probably give more information on this point. It is impossible to establish how much he lived his passions to the full, and the report about his lover in Rome has been challenged. But it is decisive that his conversion intervened in the sphere of sexual desire, a fact frequently found in the conversions of great sinners. His friends still describe the youthful energy of the seventy-year-old and the amazing health he enjoyed until his last days. Apart from his illness as a student in Paris, there is no mention of a serious illness until the cold that killed him at the age of eighty-four. Throughout his life, he retained his fresh, cheerful temperament and a great energy for work... He radiated vitality and an exciting sense of dynamism. But after his conversion, he had the same experience as the hot-blooded Augustine and many other sinners and subsequent saints. They all found that, after their decisive encounter with God, their vitality developed on a spiritual plane. (pp. 183-184)

Excerpt From Messages From Beyond

By Margaret Scott Houts

Mother is much with me, but she has her own home duties and employments. She makes happy a number of children who are in her care. My father is with her in heaven. Many who lived together in the natural world are still together there. Many others are separated with the death of the body and do not wish to see each other again. My parents were united in heart as well as body, and that union lasts forever. I was surprised to find it so, for the Bible, as I thought, said that there was no marriage in heaven; but I find that true marriages are only found with those who get to heaven at last. All other marriage is for material advantage in some way, though the persons may not know it at the time. The Bible is having another life in view than the one the Sadducees had in mind. I will not undertake to make this plain. Heaven is the home of true lovers, and love is the life of heaven.

Subscriptions and Contributions (Change to \$5.00)

The estimated cost of the Voice is \$3.00 per issue. To get the next issue, please contact Peggy Mergen or send a check to Lynne Smith. A year's subscription costs \$6.00. When sending us money, please indicate the amount you intend for subscription, and the amount (if any) towards a contribution.

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CARITAS STATEMENT OF PURPOSE

To seek the Lord's will as we provide opportunities for women and men to pursue their spiritual growth and change in the New Church, including but not limited to: women in the clergy, governance structure, decision-making and variety in doctrinal interpretation.

To deepen our understanding of the Old and New Testaments and the Writings. To research other religious and secular literature for fresh perspectives. To come to terms with how historical and cultural influences affect our thinking.

To understand the effects on everyone of the suppression of women in the church.

To cultivate tolerance and respect for the variety of spiritual paths, and ways to worship, within the New Church.

To acknowledge the alienation of women and men whose gifts have been lost to the General Church.

To promote a true understanding of the Lord's Second Coming, so that we can help the church on earth to heal and grow.

c/o Lynne H. Smith
Box 3
Bryn Athyn, PA 19009

TO:

Michaelangelo's genius lay in the fact that he took a situation where he was very angry, felt inadequate, and didn't want to see it through, and created a masterpiece.

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