

Coming To Terms With What Love Is

My talk a week ago was on the subject of marriage. Can the dream with which most marriages start become a reality? And, if it doesn't, why is this so? I said then that I would take up the subject, again tonight, focussing more particularly on what love is. All the evidence suggests that very few of us could, if asked, define love, or say just what it is. Before we look at this, however, you would, I think, appreciate my recapping the major points I made last week. So let's then just look at these briefly, first of all.

I began, you may remember, by tracing the origin of our masculinity and femininity. The starting point of it all is, in fact, God Himself. He is a Being of Love and Wisdom and this 'duality' in Him is reflected, or seen in an image, in all things of creation. "He who made them at the beginning" we read "made them male and female." (Matthew Ch. 19). And, quoting from the teaching given in Swedenborg's Writings: "The Divine Love and the Divine Wisdom cannot but be and come forth in other things created by itself." (*Divine Love and Wisdom* 47). In other words, creation is bound to bear the imprint of the Creator. And it most certainly does.

There is no call to stop over this but I was intrigued and fascinated by a television programme I watched last month which discussed the question, 'How do people become male and female? There was much said, as was to be expected, about genetics; and that's fine as far as it goes. But then it went on to raise the possibility that the mental characteristics we identify with the male on the one hand and the female on the other are largely, if not entirely, the result of conditioning in early infancy. It is shown in Swedenborg's writings how it is that masculinity and femininity are deeply impressed on the innermost being of a person. It is not, as is argued in some quarters, merely a bodily, physical thing. It goes so very much deeper than that. We are masculine and feminine because of the way our minds have been created to function and because of the way they will strive to function even though that functioning may be distorted at some stage after birth.

From creation, therefore, there is the male and female mind. We cannot and do not impose masculinity and femininity on a child. It is there within, irrespective of what we do, and it will surface in all cases so long as it is not, I repeat, too heavily distorted or suffocated by those under whose influence the child comes. Moreover, as

Love and Wisdom, of which our masculinity and femininity are a reflection, are perfectly united in God, the one the partner of the other, so it is that there is a deep seated, instinctive longing, the one for the other, with the male and female human being. God created us this way. This is how it is meant to be. I spoke of that longing, from the time it is first awakened through to the time it takes the form of love between a man and a woman, as being raw and unrefined. And we saw how important it is that the partners in a marriage be prepared to come to terms with, and to overcome, habits and attitudes of selfishness which invariably intrude into the love, colour it, twist it, even poison it. If love is to endure; if love is to grow purer and richer and be an ever deepening bond between partners in marriage; there must be this willingness with each to reject and overcome before God the evils active with them, in their hearts and minds, and of which they will only be too well aware if they look.

The love which endures is not instant. And it is not a matter of blind luck whether it stays with two people or not; whether they keep it or lose it. Here again, it's more than a feeling. It's much more a commitment. And I repeat what I said last week, it's very much up to the partners themselves what their love becomes.

The American lecturer and author, John Powell, touches upon this point in his book, "*The Secret of Staying in Love*", where he writes:

"If love is anything it is a gradual process, the long round curve that must be carefully negotiated, not the sharp right angle turn that is made in an instant, once and for all. A man or woman must set out upon a long journey and walk many miles to find the joys of love. They will have to pass through deep and dark forests and there will be many dangers. They will have to be careful of love as they are of few other things. Love will demand abstinence from all that might prove poisonous to love."

Love will demand courage, perseverance and self-discipline. A moment ago I said that 'love is more than a feeling. It's much more a commitment'. In fact we can go further than this and say that the feelings and emotions associated with love and often mistaken for love, obscure, or at least can obscure the sense of commitment that should be there. It's important, therefore, to look at love, as to what it is, since misunderstanding about it can be the cause of so much heart-ache and sorrow.

In his book, *"True Christian Religion"*, Swedenborg showed that if love is what it should be, there must be three things involved in it. It must first reach out to others. It must, also, have in it the desire to be one with them. And, lastly, there must be within the love a heartfelt desire to make others, or, in marriage, that other person, happy from oneself. (see paragraph 43). Notice, how the emphasis is all on the other person, or the other persons. Love is a giving of oneself for the well being and happiness of another. It's not, and can never be, a matter of what we get, or hope to get for ourselves, from a love relationship. It's a matter of what we can give to another within the framework of such a relationship. If a person marries wanting happiness for himself or herself, it's going to be a very disappointing marriage. That happiness can only really come to them as the result of the effort they make to bring happiness to their partner. "Spiritual love is such" wrote Swedenborg, "that it wishes to give what is its own to another." (*Divine Providence 27*). And, as he wrote in yet another place, "Love consists in having what belongs to oneself belong to someone else; feeling another person's joy as joy in oneself, that is loving." (*Divine Love and Wisdom 47*).

Having heard those definitions of love perhaps, now, you find it easier to understand why love should be spoken of as more than a feeling, indeed, more in terms of a commitment. That's not to say that feelings don't enter into it. Of course they do. The relationship of marriage needs warm and loving feelings. The commitment of love obviously needs warm and loving feelings. But let's not make the mistake of thinking that those warm and loving feelings are themselves love. More than this, let's not make the mistake of thinking, in the absence of those warm and loving feelings (and there will be those absences) that love is no longer present. Our feelings, like our emotions, come and go, rise and fall, blow hot and cold. And they must not be taken to be the measure of the love present in a marriage. And so long as we hold on to the commitment which is such an integral part of love, warm and affirmative feelings, temporarily absent, will return. "True marriage" as one of our ministers once wrote, "is a very flexible, growing process where two people are becoming ever more sensitive to the feelings and needs of the other person." (*Paul Zacharias, "Marriage Realities"*.)

And the more we think about this commitment, which is so much part of love, to the happiness of another person, the more we see how it rules out many of the unfortunate attitudes with which people approach marriage or which come to the

surface in a marriage. If a man really loves his bride or wife, he will, for example, resist the inclination which invariably suggests itself, to dominate or rule her. Conversely, if a woman really loves her bridegroom or husband she will resist the inclination to dominate or rule him.

The greatest mistake that can be made in a marriage is to try to turn the other partner into an extension of oneself. The wife can't bring herself to trust her husband to develop his own individuality and make his own decisions. So she plans, directs, and decides for him. Or it may be the husband who can't bring himself to trust his wife to develop her individuality, so he plans, directs and decides for her. Perhaps one or other of the partners has entered the marriage with the determination to change or reform the other, and by criticism and fault finding he or she gradually gains the ascendancy or drives love out the marriage.

Love is not controlling the other or manipulating the other, using the other, or having the other meekly subservient. It is affirming the other as the precious and all important person he or she is, and, as we saw earlier, it is wanting to bring to that other, every possible happiness. The challenge, of course, lies in sustaining the single minded devotion first felt for the other partner and which promised so much at the beginning. That's the thing, isn't it? Two people promise everything to the other in the early days and are continually thinking how they can bring joy and happiness, the one to the other. But how to keep it up. Yes, indeed that's the problem.

If you feel that of yourself you can't sustain it you are right. But insofar as you call upon the resources and strength the Lord will make available to you, you can. How easily it is overlooked that if a marriage is to develop towards its potential, not two, but three people must be involved, that third Person being the Lord. Where partners are living their lives with a sense of responsibility towards Him and are trying to make His Presence real with themselves they will draw closer in the process and find in their marriage the happiness it is meant to hold.

Back at the end of June at the time of the census, there was an exchange of correspondence in the "Letters to the Editor" page of "The Sydney Morning Herald" about question 17 on the census paper, concerning religion. I kept one of the letters which ended, and I quote, "Lack of religious belief is, of course, no barrier to a caring attitude for the world - indeed, it necessarily directs one's concern wholly towards the

welfare of human beings and the planet we inhabit." The argument there is that religion gets in the way of service to our fellow man. Do you agree or disagree? This is what I'll be looking at in my talk next week.

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