

# The Last Judgment and the Sexual Revolution

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Americans often idealize the 1950s as a time of good moral values and religious participation. Despite the obvious issues with seeing pre-Civil Rights America that way, this is true in the New Church as well. It is easy for us to forget that, according to the Heavenly Doctrine, the Last Judgment on the Christian Church happened in 1757. This means that although older Americans like to complain about the nation's moral decline, the New Church actually locates the decline much further in the past.

The 1950s were, in fact, a high water mark for religious participation in America. On a typical Sunday morning in the period from 1955-58, almost half of all Americans were attending church – the highest percentage in U.S. history. During the 1950s, nationwide church membership grew at a faster rate than the population, from 57 percent of the U.S. population in 1950 to 63.3 percent in 1960.<sup>1</sup> By contrast in 2020, 47% of Americans said they belonged to a church, synagogue or mosque,<sup>2</sup> and only 22% of Americans reported attending church services regularly.<sup>3</sup>

The optimism of the 1950s, riding the prosperity, unity and national pride of the post-WWII era, gradually gave way to the challenges of the 1960s. While some have suggested that Christianity has experienced a revival and rebirth since the Last Judgment, with the advent of the New Church, this has not been the way that it is usually understood in the General Church. Instead the post-Christian era among the peoples of European origin is more typically described by quotes such as this one:

*“That the Christian church of today is severely devastated and is at its end is not at all apparent to those on earth who have become adamantly devoted to the church's false teachings.” True Christianity 758*

*“Falsities and evils continually grow in the church that has once been perverted and extinguished.” Arcana Coelestia 4503*

Knowing this, a common New Church response to the idea of moral decline since the 1950s is that the only thing that has changed is that what was once hidden is now on display. This can even be described as a positive development, since evils cannot be shunned unless they appear (*Divine Providence 278*).

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<sup>1</sup> “The 1950s – Powerful Years for Religion”, Carol Tucker, June, 1997  
<https://news.usc.edu/25835/The-1950s-Powerful-Years-for-Religion/>

<sup>2</sup> U.S. Church Membership Falls Below Majority for First Time, by Jeffrey M. Jones, March 29, 2021 <https://news.gallup.com/poll/341963/church-membership-falls-below-majority-first-time.aspx>

<sup>3</sup> Church Attendance - Wikipedia

## The sexual revolution

Probably the most common examples of these changes are those associated with what is called “*the sexual revolution*.” Here is a current description from Wikipedia:

*“The sexual revolution, also known as a time of sexual liberation, was a social movement that challenged traditional codes of behavior related to sexuality and interpersonal relationships throughout the United States from the 1960s to the 1980s. Sexual liberation included increased acceptance of sex outside of traditional heterosexual, monogamous relationships (primarily marriage). The normalization of contraception and the pill, public nudity, pornography, premarital sex, homosexuality, masturbation, alternative forms of sexuality, and the legalization of abortion all followed.”* (Sexual Revolution, Wikipedia, 6/26/2021)

To those who have lived through it, this sexual revolution has seemed to be a major moral decline. Yet the Writings describe the eighteenth-century Christian world in surprisingly similar terms:

*“Adulteries are less abhorrent with Christians than with the Gentiles, and even with some barbarous nations, for the reason that at present in the Christian world there is no marriage of good and truth, but a marriage of evil and falsity... From this origin, a desire and favor for adultery from hell flow in; and this is why adulteries are believed in the Christian world to be allowable, and are practiced without shame.”* Apocalypse Explained 1008.2

*“Hells made up of people like this are growing immensely larger at the present day; and what is astounding, such people come mainly from among those within the Church on account of all the guile, trickery, hatred, revenge, and adultery that flourish there more than anywhere else. For in the Church of today guile is reckoned to be cleverness, and adultery to be honorable behavior; and those who think anything different are laughed at. Since this is the situation at the present day within the Church, it is a sign that its last days are at hand.”*  
Arcana Coelestia 6666

The last statement here emphasizes sexual immorality as a sign of the end of the church and a cause of the Last Judgment. This follows from the teachings that conjugal love is “*the fundamental love of all celestial and spiritual loves, and consequently of natural loves*” (Conjugal Love 57), and that “*all the delights of heaven flow from the delights of conjugal love, like sweet waters from a gushing spring*” (Conjugal Love 229). By contrast “*Hatreds of every kind gush forth from the love of adultery (or licentiousness), both against God and against the neighbor, and in general against every good and truth of heaven and the church*” (Apocalypse Explained 993).

From this perspective, the social changes that seem to have come with the sexual revolution are less surprising. Interestingly, accounts of the sexual revolution point out that it has had multiple stages reaching well back into our history. It is often traced back especially to the Enlightenment, which, not coincidentally, was the time of the Last Judgment:

*“History professor Faramerz Dabhoiwala cites the Age of Enlightenment—approximately the 18th century—as a major period of transition in the United Kingdom. During this time, the philosophy of liberalism developed and was popularized, and migration to cities increased opportunities for sex and made enforcement of rules more difficult than in small villages... Overall, toleration increased for heterosexual sex outside marriage, including prostitution, mistresses, and pre-marital sex. Though these acts were still condemned by many as libertine, infidelity became more often a civil matter than a criminal offense receiving capital*

*punishment. The rate of out-of-wedlock births went from about 1% in 1650 to about 25% in 1800, with about 40% of brides being pregnant.” (Sexual Revolution, Wikipedia, 6/26/2021)*

It is hard to know the truth about historical trends like these. Social scientists find evidence for them in old documents and look for their origins in social and economic causes. The Writings, on the other hand, point to the state of the church, with these trends, especially as seen by Swedenborg in the spiritual world, being evidence that “*its last days are at hand*” (*Arcana Coelestia* 6666).

### **The impact of the birth control pill**

Regardless of how we understand the changes in American religion and morality up to that point, the immediate causes of the sexual revolution beginning in the 1960s are fairly clear-cut and widely agreed upon. Simply put, the invention of the birth control pill in 1960 changed everything.

Entire books have been written about the economic and social changes springing from that one invention – from the limitation of family size, to women’s increased involvement in the workplace, to the sexual revolution itself. It only takes a little thought to see how phenomena such as the proliferation of fast-food restaurants, extended shopping hours, organized efforts to improve gender equity, and the increase in the number of people who delay marriage and children, or who never marry, are all related to this invention. And of course from the very day of its invention many people predicted that it would lead to an increase of sexual immorality.

Prior to effective and easily available means of birth control, and also safe methods of abortion and cures for sexually transmitted diseases, the likely consequences of pre-marital and extra-marital sex were substantial. In a span of just a few years the risks changed dramatically.

Exactly how much this new freedom changed behavior is a matter of debate. But there is no question that attitudes have changed. *Arcana Coelestia* 6203 discusses how powerful the forces are that motivate us to justify our behaviors. The passage describes what happens when a person begins to engage in something that has been considered wrong:

*“When this happens he looks around for ideas such as will support the notion that the thing is not an evil, until he becomes thoroughly convinced it is not. At this point he strives so far as he can to get rid of external restraints and to make it allowable and smart, and at length even attractive and honorable...” Arcana Coelestia 6203*

Since the 1960s there have been continuous open challenges to traditional ideas of morality, both outside of the church and within it. Arguments about these challenges have become tiresome refrains familiar to everyone, and opinions quickly became so entrenched that the term “*culture wars*” was invented specifically to describe the struggle.

### **The impact of the sexual revolution on churches**

The sexual revolution has been a remarkably powerful tool for prying people away from religions of every kind. Popular attitudes towards sexuality now contradict religion throughout western society, and these shifting attitudes have strongly impacted church involvement. Interestingly, this is true regardless of denominational stances, with liberal denominations suffering even greater declines than conservative ones.

Passing a religion on to the next generation requires young people who have a degree of innocence, and who are reasonably sober, moral and accepting of the truths of the Word. These

are not uncommon traits in young people, but issues stemming from the sexual revolution continually make that number smaller. Debates over these issues consistently paint traditional morality as harsh and puritanical, and as contradicting love and kindness.

Within the General Church a key effort to support the ideals of conjugal love has been the work of New Church education. Its major goal has been to create an environment within which the Heavenly Doctrine will be accepted and followed, making it possible for the New Church to be passed on to the next generation. The creation and maintenance of that environment is no small task, and many of the factors crucial to success are not under the control of educators. Still, New Church schools have been a great help to parents' efforts to pass on the beliefs and practices of the church – something that often means so much to parents that they are willing to go to great lengths to get it.

A New Church teacher explaining the value of New Church education to new parents described how one responded when he spoke about the emphasis on chastity at the school:

*“Last week I was giving a tour to a family (and spoke about how we approach chastity). What was unique last week was having a mother start openly crying as I went over it.”*

Why was she crying? Chastity is not as common as it might be, and it is a rare thing to find a school that emphasizes resistance to the challenges faced by young people in that arena today. The word “*chastity*” in the Writings is about thinking spiritually about marriage and about abstaining from its physical expression until after marriage.

Conjugal love is a bedrock teaching of the New Church. It is said to be the “*essential atmosphere itself of heaven*” (*Conjugal Love 54*) without which a person’s “*character approaches that of an animal*” (*Conjugal Love 230*). The distinction, as described in the Writings, is not between heterosexuality and its alternatives, but between chastity and its alternatives. The ideals of this love, which is “*celestial, spiritual, holy, pure, and clean beyond every other love*” (*Conjugal Love 64*), are within reach of everyone, whether single or married, and are the very core of the happiness of heaven. Anyone can believe in and aspire to this love. “*For the conjugal union of one man with one wife is the precious jewel of human life and the repository of Christian religion*” (*Conjugal Love 457*).

### **The Last Judgment and the sexual revolution**

The Last Judgment of 1757 signaled the end of the church in the Christian world, with the promise of a New Church, beginning at the same time and announced on June 19<sup>th</sup> 1770, to come to prominence somewhere on earth outside of the Christian world. The sexual revolution since the 1960s does not mark any new spiritual decline. There have in fact been many positive social developments during that time, from the struggle for racial equality, to marked decreases in crime, poverty and hunger not only in this country but worldwide, to the proliferation of freedom of speech and democratic governments throughout the world. In the realm of sexuality the new emphasis on the importance of consent, the attention given to the prevention of abuse and harassment, as well as many aspects of the larger efforts towards gender equity, are all good signs.

Still, fallout from the sexual revolution continues to pose issues for organized religion in the United States and elsewhere, and for the organized New Church in those places. Its continuing narrative requires challenging the status quo, overcoming barriers, and confronting taboos in a

never-ending quest to discover and uproot society's problems. Meanwhile the true solution is ignored by most of us, and apparently will continue to be ignored until the time is right:

*"Surely everyone knows," the angels said, "that the delights involved in marriage love are greater than the delights of any other type of love..."*

*"People do not in fact know this," I said, "and the reason is that they have not turned to the Lord. They have not abstained from the lusts of the flesh..."*

*"I have my doubts," I added, "that people in the world today are willing to believe that this love is intrinsically spiritual and is a result of their religious practice. They are likely to be resistant to this idea because they think of marriage love as something that relates to the body alone. Because the quality of this love depends on our religious practice, it is spiritual among spiritual people, earthly among earthly people, and merely carnal among adulterous people."*  
*True Christianity 847*

Happily, according to the Heavenly Doctrine, this resistance will not last forever:

*"Following His Advent the Lord will revive conjugal love, such as it was among ancient peoples. For conjugal love comes only from the Lord, and it is found in people who are made spiritual by Him through His Word."* *Conjugal Love 81*