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## The New Church Newsletter

Hurstville Society April 2024

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### **Believe in the Supernatural, but Be Rational**

by Rev Todd Beiswenger

The New Church occupies a strange space. I remember many years ago discussing this with Julian Duckworth. We were promoting the church, and in particular one of our spiritual growth programs, at the Sydney Mind, Body & Spirit Expo. The idea was that we knew that the church had a hard time attracting other Christians because we were too “out there.” Heaven for non-Christians? I don’t think so. The second coming has already happened? Have a nice day.

So the MBS Expo was, we thought, a way to meet people who were also “out there” with their beliefs. However, while we were too “out there” for Christians, we found that the New Church wasn’t “out there” enough for the typical MBS attendee. No belief in reincarnation was usually the big hang up. As a result we noticed that there was a very small audience that we could appeal to: people who were open to new ideas, but not *too* open.

Over the last week or so I’ve been preparing our Easter service, and noticing a similar dynamic as it pertains to how we understand various stories in the Bible. Most New Church people will say that we don’t believe in a literal 6 days of creation, or that the flood in the Noah’s Ark story is to be believed to literally cover every mountain on the planet.

Yet there are plenty of other supernatural events that we do sign off on. Moses’ rod turning into a serpent. Yes. Parting of the Red Sea? Definitely. Elijah calls fire from heaven to incinerate an offering to the Lord? For sure.

But what about when Joshua commands the sun to stop so they can pursue their enemies? Swedenborg basically tells us “Don’t be ridiculous. There would be massive repercussions if the Earth stopped turning.” How about the donkey that speaks to Balaam? No, donkeys can’t talk. It can appear that way, but it’s really an angel speaking through the donkey.

This brings us to Easter. In the Gospel of Matthew we read of some supernatural events following Jesus’ death. It reads:

At that moment the curtain of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom. The earth shook, the rocks split and the tombs broke open. The bodies of many holy people who had died were raised to life. They came out of the tombs after Jesus’

resurrection and went into the holy city and appeared to many people. (Matthew 27:51-53)

Earthquakes are one thing, and the tearing of the temple veil is dramatic, but neither of these are in and of themselves supernatural events. Even if they do have a supernatural origin, they can be easily explained away as coincidence. However, what do we make of the holy people who were raised to life and came out of their tombs? That's not an every-day occurrence. That's supernatural.

In fairness, Ezekiel tells us that this is going to happen: "Thus said the Lord Jehovah, Behold, I will open your graves, and cause you to come up out of your graves..."(Ezekiel 37:11). For people who want to take a more literal interpretation of the Bible, where it says the dead will rise from their graves at the end times, this happening after Jesus' death gives them a lot of support.

But did it really happen? Did people who were dead, and not just dead for a few days - but dead so long that all of their soft tissue would have certainly been completely gone – really rise from grave? It doesn't seem like it. I went hunting around for an answer in the Writings, and we find the following in *Secrets of Heaven* 9229:10, "The 'saints that were dead' appearing there, which happened to some in vision..." Wait. How did it happen? These "holy men" appeared to some "in vision." So the dead didn't literally rise. It just appeared that way, and only to some people. Personally, I find that answer a little disappointing if not altogether unsurprising. It is another one of those "be rational about your belief in the supernatural" moments.

Which leads me to the question of "Why do we need to be rational when it comes to spirituality?" As it turns out, Swedenborg addresses this in *Heaven & Hell*. He starts by stating that in his day, people of the

church thought that nobody enters heaven or hell until the final judgment, and the “soul will then return to its body, and from that union man will again live as man” (HH 312). He then goes on to say:

As this belief is a belief in what is false it involves the mind in darkness, and with those who think about these things from their own intelligence it induces doubt and at length denial, for they say in heart, "How can so vast a heaven, with so many constellations and with the sun and moon, be destroyed and dissipated; and how can the stars which are larger than the earth fall from heaven to the earth; and can bodies eaten up by worms, consumed by corruption, and scattered to all the winds, be gathered together again to their souls; and where in the meantime is the soul, and what is it when deprived of the senses it had in the body?"

With many other like things, which being incomprehensible cannot be believed, and which destroy the belief of many in the life of the soul after death, and their belief in heaven and hell, and with these other matters pertaining to the faith of the church... Therefore lest those who think in this way-as many do who from their worldly wisdom are regarded as erudite and learned-should any longer confound and mislead the simple in faith and heart, and induce infernal darkness respecting God and heaven and eternal life, and all else that depends on these, the interiors of my spirit have been opened by the Lord (HH 312, my emphasis).

Essentially, the Lord wants humanity to have rational beliefs when it comes to spirituality, because if we don't, then the “learned” will jump off the spirituality bandwagon and then lead the “simple” astray. If the learned and the simple lose their faith, who then will be left with

beliefs that will lead them to heaven? Those who have some education, but not too much? I'm joking, but at the same time it feels like there's some truth there too. When I think about the people who I encountered years ago at the MBS Expo, they were not your intellectuals and PhDs, but they weren't people who I would describe as "simple" either.

What I've come to realize is that perhaps it isn't so much that the New Church occupies a strange space, but maybe this is just a sign that there aren't actually a lot of educated, rational people in the world. Or we just don't know how to find them. The fact is that wanting people who have their minds open, but not too open, is really a call for rational people. People whose minds are open enough that they're not sceptical of everything, but not so open that they are going to take on every crazy idea that comes their way. This is what I think was meant by the New Church being a rational spirituality.

So while I think it would be a lot more fun to believe that God really did bring people out of the grave, what really sticks with me is that statement in *Heaven & Hell* that was quoted earlier, saying that when we believe in false ideas that it "involves our minds in darkness." Keep your minds in the light my friends, and stay rational!

### **Hyun Jin Yang Selected as Next Pastor**

One of the things that made it a little easier on me to leave Hurstville, was knowing that somebody else was actually interested in taking over the job. During my discussions about Olivet with Dave Lindrooth, he said the HyunJin Yang was interested in taking over here if I left.

After it was decided that I was leaving, we arranged to have a Zoom call with Dave and in the end passed a vote that was an affirmation for Hyun Jin to be the next pastor. There's still a lot of work to be done with the immigration side of things, so we really don't know how everything is going to shake out. The hope is that they can at least visit while I'm still here, maybe August or September, and then we just have to hope that their visas are approved not too long afterwards.

There's a lot to like about HyunJin and YoungHee. They're friendly, easy to talk with, hard-working, and they will no doubt bring some new energy and ideas – and who knows, maybe some new people - to the church here.

Here's a letter from them:

Dear all members and friends of Hurstville Society,

It was July last year that YoungHee and I were invited over for a month of stay there. We have found it comforting and exciting getting to know of many of you and the church there. And I feel like it was just last month that we were there. And surprise, surprise! I will be working with you and for the church as pastor from December 1, 2024, as you all know. Your support of this is something personally meaningful. Young Hee and I are grateful and feel humble for this new journey.

As soon as our visa is secured and our move is ready, we will be flying there. This is going to be my third time move and stay in a foreign country. In 2012, I left for America for the first time for my college education at Bryn Athyn college, as a transfer student. Graduating from 2015, I came back home, and months later I met my future wife. In the summer of 2018, just few months after our marriage, we found ourselves both boarding on a plane heading for America, now this time for my schooling to be a minister. We came back home in 2022 after

graduation and my ordination, and guess what. Another journey lies ahead that we are looking forward to. :)

We picture that our settlement could be jarring as we will have to pick up a lot of things new. Another good news, though, is that I will be an assistant to Pastor Todd for months to begin with. It might turn up to be not good news for Todd, since I will be almost harassing him with tons of questions!

Again, thank you all for the support. And I only pray that the Lord helps us all along with all things to come ahead.

See you soon!

Sincerely

HyunJin and YoungHee

### **Dealing with the Pastor Shortage**

One of the realities of the General Church these days is that there is a shortage of pastors. This isn't really a surprise, as the GC saw this shortage coming about 20 years ago, which is why they created the "second career minister" recruitment program that people like myself went through. While that was initially successful, it seems that after about 5 years that this well had run dry. It wasn't all bad, enough new pastors were brought into the system that things could continue on.

However, we're now getting to a place where more and more of our pastors have reached retirement age and they're retiring faster than we can replace them. Larger congregations like Glenview, Oak Arbor, Caryndale, Olivet and such who traditionally have had two or three

ministers on staff are now having to get by with one. Smaller congregations in some instances don't have a resident pastor at all.

What's the solution? The GC is now offering three different pathways to becoming a pastor.

1. The traditional, go to the Bryn Athyn theological school for 3 or 4 years.
2. Same as above, but done remotely via Microsoft Teams for those who can't be there in person
3. Stepped Program. This is where things are truly different. If you can't be a full-time student, this setup allows you to work through the material in three, 2-year part time increments. Each step gives the student a Certificate of Divinity, and upon completion of all three they receive the Master of Divinity that the traditional students get.

The GC is still working out some of the details of the stepped program, but the hope is that the student in the stepped program would be able to enter into at least some aspects of the job of pastor before completion of all three steps, which is a departure from current practices. There's still the task of finding people who want to do this program, but I think the idea of requiring a lesser commitment to enter into and try out the actual job makes some sense. I know for me it felt like an enormous commitment to give up my current job, move, and attend three years of theological school while unsure that I would like the job of being a minister or if I would be any good at it. I for one am glad to see the church seeing reality for what it is, and making some steps – no pun intended – to address the problem.



## Rise Above It Recap & Reflection

We just completed our “Rise Above It” spiritual growth program that works through the Ten Commandments and applies their spiritual meaning to our life. This program was chosen partly because I had never done it before, and it was – I think – the second small group program developed by the General Church. To my recollection though, it was the first one that was really promoted around the worldwide church and had a lot of the congregations running it simultaneously.

That said, personally I wasn’t all that enthusiastic about doing this particular program. I really prefer a program that is based on a story, where the development is portrayed in a more relatable, continuous narrative than simply a series of, “Thou shalt not’s.” More than that though, I also was feeling that the topic was just too... basic. Would we really get anything out of this?

I think we did. I know I got more out of it than I was expecting. As we worked in our small group meetings I could notice the look on some people’s faces, that look of self-conviction where they are admitting to themselves “yeah... I do that” as we work with the spiritual meaning of a commandment. Are you murdering people? No. But are you talking bad about somebody else or making them look bad? Yep. It’s no fun to be confronted with our shortcomings, I get that, but there’s a real price to be paid when we keep on violating the commandments even in ignorance. What really struck me was when we were looking at the last commandment, the one about not coveting, and I read this in a sermon by Glenn Alden on the topic...

“But what happens inside of you when you break those commandments? When you intentionally take something that was a blessing to someone else, what dies inside of you? When you forsake

your marriage vows and have an affair, what dies inside of you? When you renounce or ridicule God, or when you give everything else priority over God in your life, what dies inside of you?" These are powerful questions, and really worth contemplating. Just like a bad diet can slowly kill us over time, bad actions can slowly kill our spirit over time."

Right. What is dying inside of you as you do things that you shouldn't? It's a powerful question. With that in mind, here's a summary of the program, and perhaps you too can see an area you could come up higher in... and maybe, just maybe, your spirit will be stronger and healthier as a result.

1. Don't have false gods
  - Don't have things of greater importance than God
2. Don't take the Lord's Name in vain
  - Don't associate God with ordinary things
3. Honour the Sabbath
  - Rest! Your body, mind and soul!
4. Honour Father & Mother
  - Love your church & country
5. Don't Murder
  - Don't speak badly about others
6. Don't Commit Adultery
  - Don't contaminate holy things
7. Don't Steal
  - Don't take undeserved credit
8. Don't bear false witness
  - Don't deceive with evil intent
9. Don't covet neighbor's household
  - Don't crave evil – not their stuff
10. Don't covet anything of your neighbor's
  - Don't crave evil – to control people

## **Spring 2024 Women's Weekend: Hornsby, Nov 15-17**

We're doing it again! Ladies, mark your diaries: you're cordially invited to join other New Church-minded women across Australia and New Zealand for our spring women's weekend. We'll be gathering Nov 15-17 at an Airbnb in Hornsby, NSW and via Zoom. There will be a nice combination of fun and inspiring sessions on offer, including a guest speaker chiming in from the U.S. and once again assembling birth kits for disadvantaged women in developing countries – plus down-time to visit with our sisters and explore the area (and go for a dip in the on-site pool!?). If this interests you and you haven't already signed up, please let Jenn know ([jenn@beiswenger.net](mailto:jenn@beiswenger.net)). The deadline isn't until October, but the sooner we know who's coming, the sooner we can start planning our weekend -- and the sooner we can all get excited!

On the subject of assembling birth kits, we will need to raise \$1000 to pay for the supplies, as in previous years. Since we're planning this well in advance, there's no urgency yet; watch this space for further details! *Thanks in advance for your consideration!*

## **Birthdays**

Happy Birthday to Todd Beiswenger (3rd), Donna Heldon (5th), Dylan Johnson (7th), Riley Evans (11th), Aneira Robson, (14th) Huiling Sun, (20th), Kerry Horner (22nd), David Horner, (25th), Lucy Evans (27th),  
April Hams (28th)

## ***What's "new" about the "New Church"?***

This is a very common question, to be sure. Well, it all started just over 200 years ago... The main branches of the Christian church had shifted their focus on to rituals and beliefs, and one man named Emanuel Swedenborg had written volumes about how Christianity was missing the point. Some readers of Swedenborg realised he was right, and formed a new organisation that would strip away the centuries of politics and tradition and get back to what Christianity was supposed to be about: loving God and loving each other. Everything else could be seen as merely a difference of opinion if those two main principles reigned supreme through this new church.

As a result we believe in a positive Christianity, one where we look to the best in ourselves and others while still holding ourselves accountable to a higher standard and taking responsibility for our lives. Nowadays we're not so much "new" as we are "different". We still keep the name, and yet make every effort to incorporate the ideals that were instrumental in being "new" over two centuries ago.

Editor – Rev Todd Beiswenger

22-24 Dudley St., off Hillcrest Ave. in Penshurst

Tel (02) 9580 1589

Email: [todd@hurstvillenewchurch.com](mailto:todd@hurstvillenewchurch.com)

<http://www.hurstvillenewchurch.com/>

Call or come at any time.