

## **The New Church Newsletter**

**Hurstville Society June 2023**



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## **The New Church Newsletter**

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### **Is the Growth of the New Church Behind Schedule?**

by Rev Todd Beiswenger

New Church Day is right around the corner, so this is the time of year where we all jump around celebrating the stunning growth of the New Church around the world, as witnessed by over-flowing churches and expansion projects around the globe. Right? Yeah, not so much. Most places where expansions have happened, attendance and participation have shrunk! So what's the deal? When I talk to the older generation, they had such great optimism 40 years ago, but nowadays they're left scratching their heads, and it isn't because they have itchy scalps. I think a lot of Swedenborgian optimism came from this particular quote which is part of a 1767 letter written in response to Mr. Beyer:

How soon is a New Church to be expected? Answer:

The Lord is now preparing a new heaven of those who believe in Him and acknowledge Him as the true God of heaven and earth, and likewise look up to Him in their lives, which means the shunning of what is evil and the doing of what is good; for it is from this heaven that the New Jerusalem is to come down (Apoc. 21:2). I see daily spirits and angels descending and ascending to the number of from 10 to 20,000 and being set in order. Gradually, as that heaven is formed, so the New Church commences and increases. The universities in Christendom are now first being instructed, and from them come new priests; for the new Heaven has no influence with the old, which keeps itself too learned in justification by faith alone.

This is four years before the last judgment was complete, but when I've heard others use this quote they emphasize how the Christian universities are now being instructed, implying that it won't take long before they're teaching the rest of the world what's what. Spirits were being moved about as well, so surely things were going to manifest before long. Maybe it'll take a generation or two, because you can't teach old theologians new tricks, but hey, once they've passed on it will grow like a club for free beer on a university campus!

However, this particular "last judgment" wasn't the first "last judgment," rather it was the "fourth and final judgment," so if we take a look at history we can perhaps see that these things don't move quite as quickly as originally thought. Let's take the "third judgment" to start with and look at the growth of the Christian Church. Scholars these days tend to think Jesus was actually born around the year 4BC, and therefore His resurrection would have been around 29AD. The Apostles went out and spread the good news, and it wasn't too long before they were attracting followers. But how many? The book of Acts mentions that there were 120 people in the room when the Pentecost took place. That's not a lot.

There were probably more followers of Jesus who weren't there, but still, it makes me think the total number of Christians at that point was more in the hundreds than thousands. Sure, they didn't have social media to spread the message, but they did have actual witnesses to Jesus' life and resurrection. Where were all those thousands who were miraculously fed by the loaves and fish? What about the Romans who declared, "He really was the Son of God?" You'd think they could have drummed up 120 people by themselves. So even with first hand accounts and experiences of these huge miracles, it didn't create exponential growth.

Things did progress in time though. According to Wikipedia, "Over 40 churches were established by 100, most in Asia Minor and Upper Mesopotamia, such as the seven churches of Asia, and some in Greece and Italy." How many people were in a church? Hard to say, but if there were 20 per church, we're still only talking 800 people. Maybe there were more, but even 100 per church would only yield a total of 4000 people, which is less than the number of Swedenborgians today.

My point being that things started slowly. To my mind, the Christian church didn't really get rolling until 313 AD when Rome declared Christianity the official state religion. Christianity was seemingly an overnight success... after nearly 300 years of existence.

A lot has been written about why Christianity was able to spread. Some argue that Christianity replaced paganism chiefly because it offered a much more attractive doctrine, and because the church leaders addressed human needs better than their rivals. Plus it was a grassroots movement providing hope of a better future in the next life for the lower classes. Others say that Christianity was helped by its promise of a general resurrection of the dead at the end of the world which was compatible with the traditional Greek belief that true immortality depended on the survival of the body. Still others assert that people were strongly attracted to the stories of miracles and healings showing that the one Christian God was more powerful than the many Roman gods.

There was also a phenomenon in the Roman world that we just don't see today, and that is when one person converted, it often meant converting the whole household—for example, if the head of the household was converted, he decided the religion of his wife, children and slaves. But what surprised me as I've studied the growth of Christianity is that people often describe it as "rapid." I don't know about you, but in my mind, I usually don't think of a 300 year process as "rapid!" The reality is that this was only the beginning of the growth of Christianity. Over the next ONE THOUSAND years it would spread through Europe, and history says that the Baltic states were the last to convert. It wasn't until Grand Duke Jogaila (1377-1434) married the Polish Queen Jadwiga in 1386 (and becoming Władysław II Jagiełło) that he was baptized a Roman Catholic Christian, and then a year later he had the Lithuanian people baptized.

It's important to note that "he had" the Lithuanian people baptized. Lots of people in Europe weren't necessarily converted because they believed, but they were converted because the state converted them! This should make us really question how quickly Christianity actually spread to the hearts and minds of the people. That's really our challenge today, isn't it? We don't have any governments creating nations of New Church

people. We have to find people who have the heart and mind for the teachings, and we have to do it one person at a time.

If we look at the “second judgment” which established the Jewish Church, we can see some very similar features to the Christian church. It took about 1200 years from the time Abraham received the promise from God to the time Solomon’s kingdom was established, which is when scholars say that the covenant was fulfilled. You’ve got to think that as they were enslaved by the Egyptians for generations that they had their doubts about their future as God’s people. Like with the Christian church, you weren’t a Jew based on a conversion of the heart and mind, you were Jewish from birth. Which, oddly enough, is basically what the General Church established as their growth model 100 years ago. So much for making all things new.

So let’s get back to Beyer’s question: How soon is a New Church to be expected? It’s been 250 years since the “most recent judgment,” so if we go by the Christian church timeline you could say we’re due for a breakthrough in the next 50-100 years, but by the Jewish church timeline we’re due to be enslaved by the Egyptians for generations. I’ve started to wonder if the answer really lies in observing the “newness” of things. Jesus did say you can’t put new wine in old wineskins, which apparently was over-looked when we went with an old Christian church style service full of Jewish church symbolism and an Episcopal government. However, as we see these old forms dying off, perhaps that’s a sign that the promise of the New Church is about to start being fulfilled.

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## **AI vs Man**

Last month I got an email from my Dad, and while I don’t remember exactly what he said, it was something along the lines of, “Hey, what do you think about this AI stuff?” Now, knowing him as I do, I knew it was one of those questions that he had already formulated his own answer to, but didn’t want to reveal it until I had shown my thinking. Apparently we were on the same wavelength because unbeknownst to him I had just written my 1450 word article for the newsletter about how AI/robots will never be alive, so it made it easy to send that back to him in reply. This is what I got back:

AI can calculate, that’s all. Only man can think. Because...

- Man’s thoughts are driven by his loves/desires. Man’s will is a receptacle of love. His understanding is a receptacle of truth.
- Man’s mind is spiritual and can therefore be a receptacle of spiritual things such as love and wisdom.
- AI is made of material things and cannot receive things spiritual and therefore cannot love or have thoughts, only mimic those things. For example, a machine can say “I love you” but it does not possess the feelings of love. AI can say true things, but only from what it has calculated from the data programmed into it.

- We receive “input” from this world by means of our 5 senses, but how that input is ultimately received and understood comes from influx that flows into us from the spiritual world.
- When influx from the spiritual world meets influx from the natural world, we have our thoughts and our loves. We are then “thinking” and/or “loving.”

I think we both said similar things, but his article was about 1300 fewer words than mine, so he gets points for brevity. I thought it worth sharing as it might be useful to have this simplified version.

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## **Letters to the Editor – The Real Fears of the AI**

The response to last’s months article was interesting. People were more sceptical of AI than I was expecting, though the readership of the newsletter isn’t a bunch of teenage technonerd, so perhaps these responses aren’t so surprising!

Thanks again, Todd, for another enjoyable article in your latest newsletter. Although I read it with a smile, I felt it to be an uncharacteristically optimistic prediction of a 20 hour working week! Myself, somewhat more cynically, I think that it will only lead to greater demand for ever increasing workplace productivity. I seem to recall that the 1950s looked forward to universally greater leisure time and shorter working hours. – *Reader A*

I really liked your article on robots/AI, etc., and the implications for our world – and church. Will AI ever be able to write sermons? I hope not. It has some promising applications but others that should give us concern. I think it was Einstein who said we should not be so much concerned with what can we do but what should we do? (And what should we not?) – *Reader B*

Also, interesting article about ChatGPT. Stuff like that actually makes me glad I’m old and retired, and may not have to deal with it! – *Reader C*

I was intrigued by your lead article in the last Newsletter (*Robots May One Day Rule the World, but They’ll Never Be Alive* - May, 2023) on the subject of artificial intelligence! It is an interesting situation to think about, that’s for sure. My own concern isn’t about the artificially intelligent robots coming ‘alive’; rather what does concerns me, though, is the *fate of humanity* with such aids at our beck and call. I’m worried that, with something to do every last bit of work for us - mental as well as physical - humans will ultimately degrade into a state of slothfulness. Sure, some righteous souls will still enjoy working and helping others, but how long will it be before they become extinct? You may ask, “So what if we become lazy?” To that I retort that the Lord wants us to be USEFUL: His main goal for us is to be happy, which we can only truly do by being useful to others. He teaches us that “People who have charity inside, that is, love for their neighbour . . . look at the enjoyment of pleasure solely in terms of its usefulness. . . . Charity consists in doing — *in being useful*, in other words. If we love our neighbour as ourselves, we do not feel any delight in

charity unless we are being active or useful. As a consequence, the life of charity is a life of usefulness. This is the life found throughout heaven, because the Lord's kingdom, since it is a realm of mutual love, is a realm of useful activity. Accordingly, all the gratification that charity offers acquires its appeal from usefulness. The more marked the usefulness, the greater the appeal. That is why the essential nature and quality of an angel's occupation determines the kind of happiness the Lord gives him or her." (*Secrets of Heaven* 997, *emphasis added*)

You can count me among the people who are nervous about how this whole artificial intelligence thing is going to play out. I may (admittedly) be an old fuddy-dud when it comes to technology, but I think there's more to be concerned about than just the power of it in a natural sense: I worry that humanity's spiritual welfare is on the line. Hopefully I'll be proven wrong! *Reader D*

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### **June Class – Satan Bound & Released After 1000 Years – Revelation 20**

This is the time of year we take some time to study the book of Revelation, and this year I thought it would be interesting to look at a chapter that leaves many Christians puzzled. In the twentieth chapter Satan is bound, but we're told "After that, he must be set free for a short time" (Rev 20:3). Why? Why, if an angel has the power to bind Satan would you ever want to set him free again? Seems like a fair question to me.

In my research I found that Off the Left Eye dedicated a couple hours to unpacking this 15 verse chapter, and in fairness to them, they spent a lot of time covering basic New Church ideas making their presentation appropriate to somebody new to Swedenborg. However, for us I'll present most of the ideas, including short video clips from their show to hopefully make an interesting multi-media class that nobody will sleep through.

Date and time: June 8<sup>th</sup>, 11am. As usual, I'll offer the class via Zoom and YouTube live stream with links sent out via email.

### **Birthdays**

Happy Birthday to **Angela Caldwell** and **Michelle Heldon** (8th), **June Kirsten** (9th) and **Izaak Horner** (17th)

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