



The New Church Newsletter

Hurstville Society December 2023

How the Grinch *Almost* Stole My Christmas

by Rev Todd Beiswenger

It was that time of year again. As per our annual tradition, I bought a Christmas tree from the local Scout Troop in Mortdale. I got there early and got one of the better trees, took it home, cut a couple of centimetres off the bottom and set it into the tree stand that was waiting for it in the living room. But the rest of the day was busy, and so was the next,

and the day after that... so the tree sat there, undecorated, for days. During these few days I noticed that I found myself feeling uninterested. I just didn't care about decorating a tree, or being particularly festive.

This was new territory for me. Typically I'm more tacky and gaudy in my decoration, and a believer that more is always better in the way that Clark Griswald would appreciate. This feeling that I really didn't care about whether we even *had* a tree this year was indeed different. What was I to do?

I thought my dear wife would probably be quite happy to discard all aspects of commercial Christmas and focus strictly on the religious side of things. But I also felt like I needed something more to explain why we weren't going to decorate a tree other than I was just being a grump. It wasn't like I had any high-minded epiphany that made me think, "Ah, this isn't what we should be doing to celebrate the Lord's birth on Earth!" I was just **feeling** like I didn't want to do it and that was only good enough if I wanted to be considered a Scrooge. Bah-humbug!

What happened next is that I went to the office the next day and started doing research for my Christmas Day sermon. I decided that taking a quick cruise through some old New Church Life articles might be a good way to get some inspiration, and one of the first articles I came across was one

from 1913 titled, "Santa Claus and the Christmas Tree." I was thinking, "This might be interesting."

It was. Essentially somebody wrote to New Church Life asking if it was appropriate for New Church people to celebrate Christmas with a Christmas tree, and allow children to believe in Santa Claus. The author wrote, "As there are divided opinions in the Church on these subjects we prefer not to present any views of our own, but will simply give a résumé of the arguments pro and contra, as far as we have heard them stated."

The article goes on to say:

In an account of the Christmas celebration of the Academy Schools in 1888 (published in the LIFE for January, 1889, p. 11), it is reported that "from this service Santa Claus, the traditional saint of the Catholic Church, was banished, as being unworthy of a place in any ceremonial in honor of our Lord. The heathen Christmas tree was also discarded, because, being a tree without roots, it is dead; and with its lifeless branches, adorned with glittering gew-gaws, and hung with fruits that never ripened upon them, it is a correspondent of the dead Church by which it has been adopted. (TCR 451, 185)."

I don't know about you, but I can just hear the Grinch making that statement. Though the Grinch – well, maybe the New Church Grinch – surely would have complained about all the noise, noise, noise that the children make as they are greedily taken over by their materialistic impulses surging from the depths of hell, which turns this holy occasion into one of converting the little ones to the dark side by letting them wallow in the Devil's pleasures.

Yes, I'm being silly, but some people took this seriously, because reading further the article basically tells us that after the above statement, the Christmas tree and Santa Claus were exiled from many New Church homes. Not everybody agreed of course, and by 1913 the author believed that both had slowly returned to being a part of New Church Christmas celebrations. However, it seems that the anti-Christmas tree people were still making their case for its banishment.

As to the Christmas tree, it is an inheritance from heathen times; that it, also, contributes nothing to the thought of the Lord; and that there are statements in the Writings indicating that it has an evil correspondence. It is stated, for instance, that spurious charity "is like fruit on a tree where it has not grown, but has been fastened on with a pin," (TCR 451); and, again, in the same work it is said that the good works which the old theology claims as the fruits of faith

alone, "do indeed hang from that tree, but still they do not cohere with it." (TCR 185)

In fairness, the article in question did offer the pro-Santa and -Christmas Tree arguments as well. Basically it said that the Christmas Tree, before being taken over by the Pagans, was a representation of the tree of life, and therefore we're just reclaiming it. That felt like a stretch to me, to claim that we're putting up a Christmas Tree because it is a representation of the tree of life.

However, what happened is that through some self-compulsion I joined with my family in decorating the tree. When I started, I still felt disinterested, and was churning over this article in my head as I went through the motions. Then I pulled an ornament out of the box... it was a "Herbie the Love Bug" ornament... basically my favorite movie from childhood. I watched that so many times, and it warms my heart to this day just thinking about it. Then there was an ornament of Santa Claus wearing a Hawaiian shirt riding a sea turtle, one that we bought on our trip to Hawaii in 2002. We were just three years into our marriage, and had no kids, so this was a second honeymoon full of great memories... these ornaments weren't just "glittering gew-gaws," but a trip down memory lane.

I kept pulling one ornament after another out of the box, and each one brought forward another good memory of a time gone by. I stepped back, looked at the tree... and noticed... that tree isn't dead. It really *is* the tree of life: the tree of my life! No, the tree of *our* life together.

I don't know when it happened, sometime after putting up the Hawaiian Santa and before stepping back to look at the tree, but the Grinch-in-me had left. Maybe it was just like what happened to Dr Seuss' Grinch, where my heart grew three sizes. All I really know is that, despite what the naysayers would have you believe, the tree really had directed my heart and mind to the things that really matter, and I think that's really what New Church Christmas decorations are – or should be – about.

Christmas Class & Potluck Lunch – December 14th 11am

Unlike Big W, Kmart and every other retail store, we're not really kicking off the Christmas season until December 14th, with a class on "Why the Lord was Born on this Earth." I've given classes before on the timing of the advent, as well as why the Lord was born, but this year I am going to focus on the teachings around why was He born on this world in particular. I think there are some distinctive New Church teachings on this, and what I find particularly interesting

about it is that a lot of the teachings on this topic come from “Earths in the Universe.” Considering that I started 2023 with a presentation at the virtual retreat on the subject of aliens, and I wrote about them in last month’s newsletter, having reference to EU in the final class of the year seems like a nice tie-in to the unintentional theme of the year.

As usual, this will be available via YouTube and Zoom, and we’ll have a potluck lunch afterwards. I hope you can join in!

A January Weekend Retreat – January 20-21

As you likely know, the planned retreat was cancelled, but it has been resurrected in a smaller, shorter format. The original planned theme was "What's the Use!" and it remains a resonant theme, especially in an era where traditional expressions of faith seem to be waning in our rapidly changing culture. As our church communities experience these shifts, many of us might find ourselves grappling with the profound question, "What's the Use?"

Yet, this question, poignant as it may seem, isn't just limited to our collective faith journey. It's also deeply personal. Each one of us, at different moments in our lives, might question the purpose or significance of our thoughts, intentions, or actions. What value do they bring? What impact do they

have? Frankly, some of us may even question our own use in this world.

It is for this reason that the Roseville New Church has decided to hold a 2-day retreat for those who want to engage with this subject. The rough plan is for a weekend gathering (20-21 January 2024) at the Roseville New Church. Formal presentations will be held Saturday and we will all meet for worship and a wrap-up discussion on Sunday.

In a world constantly evolving and redefining its values, how does an institution as venerable as the church retain its significance? How can it remain a beacon of hope, guidance, and solace in today's landscape? We'll embark on this journey of discovery, seeking answers and perhaps finding even more questions, as we explore the enduring relevance of the church in our contemporary world.

More information will be forthcoming in the January issue. For more information please contact **Rev. Howard Thompson** (revhathompson@gmail.com)

Stanwell Tops Camp – January 2025

Some of you may remember it... the year was 2017, it was as simpler time, and frankly, a better time in some ways. We ran a church family camp the first week of January, and we had a

guest presenter in Bishop Brian Keith. Highlights included Julian Duckworth giving a presentation in which, somehow, I ended up on my knees, a game of “Taylor Swift Lyric or Quote from Lamentations?” along with fun on the high ropes and giant swing. Maybe you have some good memories of that camp.

As you might have guessed, I bring it up because there will be camp there again in January 2025, the 2nd-6th which is a Thursday-Monday. It’s a bit shorter than we normally do, but that’s due to some of the feedback we’ve received and also based simply on what was available to us. I know that January 2025 is a long ways away, but the goal is to give everybody a chance who wants to come to have the opportunity to make the date work before our calendars fill up with other opportunities.

I’ve said it before, and I’ll say it again: my experience is that family camp was the highlight of the year for me, and I hope it was and will be for you as well. It’s a great way to hang out with people who share common core values of belief in God, His leading of us, and the need to actively work to be a better version of ourselves. I think this is important to emphasize because the world seems to be promoting a divisive agenda, trying to tell us how we need to get one group of people out of our lives, but these camps show us that we have more in common than not.

Lastly, don't let finances be the barrier. Contact me to discuss.

YouTube & Social Media Update

There's good and bad to report here. Let's start with the bad...

One of the projects I'm working on is creating short videos out of Jonathan Rose's "Spirit and Life Bible Study" videos. When I went on holiday I had created a queue of these to be released every three days while I was gone. However, what I found when I came back is that most of the ones for October failed to actually go live because of the software I used to schedule them. This killed my audience. Since then I've got it to work and upload videos, but the last 30 days I've gotten about 300 views in total. My hope is that if I start uploading future videos via the app, that it might catch the attention of the algorithm and boost the views back up. We'll see.

On the positive side, the scheduling worked perfectly for YouTube, and that channel had just under 10,000 views, which is a huge improvement from the 3,000 or so it was getting just a few months ago. Facebook is also trending up, with 5,500 views in the last 30 days. We'll see if that YouTube number holds as about 4,000 of those views were from one short that did exceptionally well.

On my own videos, I've had my best month yet on YouTube with 17,000 views, compared to the normal 10,000 or so. Instagram is down to around 7,000 views (from about 10,000), Facebook though is up to around 6,500 (from about 3,000), so those two basically even each other out. I'm not sure if the topics I've chosen is what the difference is, or because I've been making better use of ChatGPT to provide optimized descriptions and hashtags for the videos.

Though I've given up on Tiktok, I still got 2,000 views there, even though I haven't posted since August. Maybe I'll start posting there again, but it just felt like the views weren't real since I wasn't seeing much of an increase in followers. Anyway, it still feels like this is a good use of my time, as it is hard to argue with the fact that, all up, these efforts have generated nearly 50,000 views over the past 30 days with not a cent of advertising.

Birthdays

Happy Birthday to **Gai Kennedy** (2nd), **Beryl Laidley** (14th), **Ken Horner** (16th), **Patricia Walsh** (19th), **Kristen Johnson** (29th).

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 become less correct, 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.

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Call or come at any time.