



The New Church Newsletter

Hurstville Society March 2024

True Love

by Rev Todd Beiswenger

It was last March, near the end of the month, and as I was walking through downtown Sydney. I found myself feeling a bit overwhelmed by the sheer volume of rainbow flags and the promotion of Mardi Gras at seemingly every shop in the city. I was meeting my friend and co-conspirator Rev Howard Thompson for lunch, and he offered me an interesting observation.

It used to be that Mardi Gras was a one-night, maybe a one-day, event where you partied hard because Lent started the next day, and you were going to give up something for the next 40 days. However, Howard's observation was that things have flipped: now we party for a month, and maybe, just maybe, if it isn't too inconvenient or there isn't a birthday party to go to, we'll spend an hour at church.

As I write this, March is only a few days away, and so the month-long party is about to begin. The rainbow flags will fly, and you will be indoctrinated with the message that "love is love," which isn't true. But I won't get into that debate now, instead what I offer you, good reader, is a true love story. I hope it serves as an antidote to the lust that is being sold as love.

We Met, As If By Chance...

By Robert Beiswenger

"It is granted to man to see the Divine Providence in the back and not in the face..." DP 175

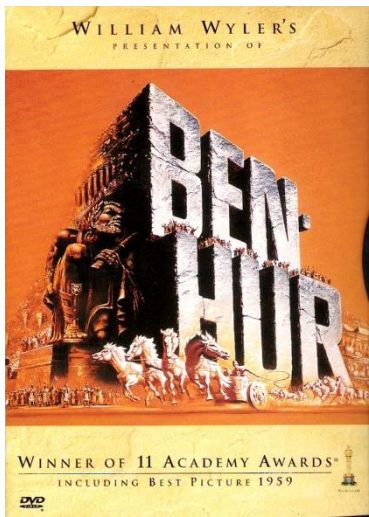
I met Cathy, the girl who would one day be my wife, on a blind date. We were both juniors at Auburn University, and we went to see *Ben Hur*, a lengthy movie starring Charlton Heston in the title role. The story of Ben Hur, who was born a Jew in the same year as the Lord, was subtitled "A Tale of the Christ".



In the movie, Ben Hur learns of the Christ and eventually accepts Him into his life. At the time, we could not foresee the significance of seeing this movie on our first date.

It was almost 33 years later that my wife was lying on a hospital bed in our family room, her health failing from ovarian cancer. Earlier that day, she had gone into a semi-comatose state and the hospice nurse told me that she could probably hear what was going on around her, yet could not communicate. It was uncertain whether or not she would come out of this condition. I positioned myself in a chair next to her bed to keep a watchful eye on her and do whatever I could to provide for her comfort.

Later that night I turned on the television and began “surfing” through the channels to see what was playing that might be enjoyable. To my surprise, *Ben Hur* was playing! Of course, I stopped my surfing and watched it with Cathy by my side. Little did I know that this “date” would be our last one—at least in this world. After the movie ended, I stood by her bed and watched her as she labored to breathe. With sadness in my heart, I told her, “I love you... and I will always love you. But you have suffered long enough, and if you need to let go, I will take good care of the kids, and I will be OK.” After I had said this, she took about three more breaths, and then stopped breathing. Her ordeal was over,



and what I would eventually call a “temporary separation” would be more trying than I could have imagined.

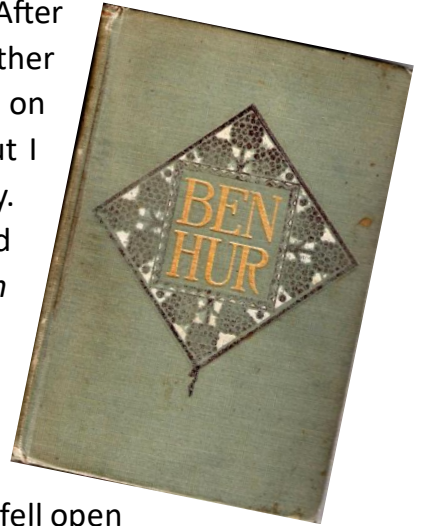
However, I soon realized that seeing *Ben Hur* had been our first date and our last date. As I reflected on our life together—a Catholic guy marrying a Baptist girl and together accepting the Lord in His New Revelation—was a similar “tale of the Christ”. We, too, had “found the Lord” and built a life together in a religious community.

A little more than a year after my wife left this world, Lana, her sister, called me and invited me to join her and her husband at their second home in the mountains of North Carolina. I decided to accept their offer and drove down there from Philadelphia the next day. The first morning I awoke in their home, I said a little prayer asking the Lord to help me through another day and show me the path I needed to follow—what I needed to do—to be with my wife again one day.

Later that morning, Warren, my brother-in-law, suggested that the three of us should take a drive in the countryside for a little sight-seeing. We were soon on our way, enjoying the scenic drive. While on one of the country roads, we passed a wooden home that had been converted into an antique shop. Warren asked Lana if she would like to stop there and see what they had for sale; he had read that it was going out of business, so there might be some bargains. She was surprised that he was willing to turn around and go back to the store; according to her, it was hard to get him to stop even with advance notice, so his stopping and turning around

was very unusual! I just laughed at the friendly jabs they gave each other.

Once in the store, I quickly realized that I had no interest in buying anything, no matter what the price. However, I noticed an area with some books and headed over there to see what might be on sale. I reached high on a shelf for one rather old looking book, but replaced it after a quick glance. After returning it, my hand reached for another book right next to the first one. The title on the spine was faded and unreadable, but I instinctively pulled it off the shelf anyway. Much to my astonishment, in gold lettering on the cover was the title—*Ben Hur*! I was floored to find something like this; I had never even considered looking for this book, and yet here I had come across a 1912, first-edition copy of it! I then proceeded to open the book, and it fell open to the author’s dedication page. When I saw the words, tears quickly flooded my eyes: “*To the wife of my youth, who still abides with me*”.



Ben Hur—it was our first date, the story of our life together, and eventually our last date. And, when I least expected it but needed it most, I found a copy of the book with an inscription that was an answer to my prayer.

“...there is no such thing as mere chance and...what seems to be haphazard, or fortune, is Providence at work...” AC 6493



Beiswengers Moving On

Recently it was announced that I have accepted a call to be the next pastor for the Olivet New Church in Toronto Canada, and I thought this would be a good place to let you in on my thought process.

When I went to theological school, one of my big concerns was, would I really be able to be a minister for the rest of my working life? I would be 36 when I graduated, and so that would leave me with roughly 30 years of doing the job until retirement. At that

point I had been working in a sales job for almost 10 years, and I was tired of it. The prospect of doing something for 30 years was unfathomable, and frankly sounded terrible.

Eventually I came to the realization that I could do three 10-year jobs: ten years as a pastor, ten more as a teacher, and ten more as maybe an administrator. I was less certain about the last ten as I figured I had no chance of really predicting twenty years in the future, but the idea of three 10-year stops made the prospect of being a minister for 30 years much less daunting.

We came to Australia being asked to stay for at least five years, but hoping it would be closer to 10. After a couple of years we committed to staying for 7 as that would have gotten Zach through primary school; then it would time to keep an eye open for a job at ANC or Bryn Athyn College. But, as Bryn Athyn College jobs came open, I didn't apply. We were enjoying our life here too much. As the years passed, suddenly Zach was now in range of completing high school here, and so we decided to stay even longer.

Back in October our plan was to stay for a few more years, because why not? We've made a life for ourselves here, the congregation is great to work for, and Australia is a great place to live. We'd just stay until a teaching job came open again, because it didn't make any sense to make a move into a job that I'd want to move out of if a teaching job came open.

However, throughout our married life, Jenn has always expressed a desire to live near her family at some point, preferably while her mum is still alive. They all live in Toronto. When that job came

open, it was for a July 1 2024 start date, so we didn't think we'd apply because we weren't going to pull Zach out of the high school system here and make him start over somewhere else with only a few months to go.

I ended up approaching the Bishops, saying that I'd be willing to consider moving to Toronto if they would accommodate a January 2025 start. I figured that if they said "no" it would be fine, but at least I tried to give Jenn what she wanted. As much as I didn't and don't really want to leave, I couldn't escape the feeling that it probably was time for me to move on. We've been here almost 12 years now, and it was like my 10-year clock was loudly beeping at me saying, "Time has expired!" Intellectually I know that if you're not growing, you're dying, and there was just this sense that it would be good for me to seek some new challenges and opportunities.

Toronto would provide a different working environment by virtue of the fact that they have a small school that they operate, and they work with a few other congregations to run events together. In addition, they have some people and resources there that I think could help me take my video work to the next level. Of course it would also honour Jenn's long-standing request to be near family. She moved out at the age of 18 to go to Bryn Athyn College, and, aside from a one-year break half-way through her degree and another 2 months during theological school, she has lived outside Canada for the past 31 years.

In the end Olivet was willing to give me a January 2025 start date, but there have been some other things as well that have happened through this process that have made me feel like God Himself has in His Providence orchestrated this to happen. One thing I've learned over the years is that it is foolish to fight Him, and that I'm better off just going along with His plans.

So, despite some nervousness, fear, and general reluctance to move to a place where the cold days vastly outnumber the warm ones, I agreed to accept the call to Olivet. I figure we'll depart here December 2-ish, and take a month to travel to Toronto while our stuff is in transit. Hopefully we can spend Christmas this year with my family. Soon we'll have conversations about a successor for me, but suffice it to say for now that there is a plan. We'll see if it works out.

I am happy that there's as much time as there is before we go, so there's plenty of time to see people and have some last adventures here. I also have some stories and reflections that I'll probably share in this space in the coming months. It's too early to say "good-bye," so I'll save that for another day. You're not rid of me yet!

Ministers Meetings

One of the things that the NCIA Council of Ministers has established is that there is good value for the Australian New Church ministers to meet once a year in a face-to-face format. We do have several Zoom meetings throughout the year, but as you can imagine, the dynamic is very different when we're together in person. There's more time to discuss what we're doing, our successes, and the things that haven't gone well.

For me, I find that it is useful to have the opportunity to really understand the thought processes of the other ministers. One of the challenges of working in Australia as a New Church minister is that there is a real isolation because we're all working alone, and geographically spread all over. Getting together is a good way to pick up best practices from others.

All of this is to say that there will be Council of Ministers meetings held April 7-11 at an AirBnB near Stanwell Tops.

Clean Up Australia Day

'Tis that time of year, once again, when we take a little time and put in a little extra effort to keep our environment clean. **Sunday, March 3rd is Clean Up Australia Day:** you are invited to join us for our annual walk up Hillcrest Avenue, gloves donned and rubbish & recycling bags in hand. Bags and some gloves (feel free to bring your own) will be provided. We'll leave from Baringa at **8:30am** with the intention of returning in time for our 10am worship service. Thanks in advance for your help, however/whenever you choose to provide it!

Honk if You See the Irony

The light turned yellow, just in front of him. He did the right thing and stopped at the crosswalk, even though he could have beaten the red light by accelerating through the intersection.

The tailgating woman behind him was furious and honked her horn, screaming in frustration, as she missed her chance to get through the intersection.

As she was still in mid-rant, she heard a tap on her window and looked up into the face of a very serious police officer. The officer ordered her to exit her car with her hands up. He took her to the police station where she was searched, fingerprinted, photographed and placed in a holding cell.

After a couple of hours, a policeman approached the cell and opened the door. She was escorted back to the booking desk where the arresting officer was waiting with her personal effects.

He said, "I'm very sorry for this mistake. You see, I pulled up behind your car while you were blowing your horn, giving the guy in front of you the finger and cursing at him.

I noticed the 'What Would Jesus Do' bumper sticker, the 'Choose Life' license plate holder, the 'Follow Me to Sunday-School' bumper sticker, and the chrome-plated Christian fish emblem on the trunk, so naturally.....

I assumed you had stolen the car."

Birthdays

Happy Birthday to Debbie Walsh (7th), Margaret Ward (7th),
Graham Horner (12th), Edward Horner (18^t)

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.

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Call or come at any time.