

THE NEW CHURCH

WHAT IS NEW OR DIFFERENT ABOUT THE NEW CHURCH?

A POSITION PAPER

BY

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UPON THE SECOND ANNIVERSARY OF THE NEW CHURCH

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Several folk have asked me, “Is it possible to get something fairly clear and really concise about what is different or new about The New Church?” Well, I am never sure about what is clear. I often think I am exceedingly clear, only to discover that some people were unable to follow what was being said. (Whether their fault or mine, I always have to assume it is mine.) And concise? Much of Christendom is turning our Faith into something so clear and simple that it is completely stupid and irrelevant. Fast and simple explanations, like fast food, are popular and really bad for us.

Still, I do understand the request, and I consider it worthy of an attempt on my part. For your part, please take each of these comments as more of a hint than a locked-down explanation. And it would be wonderful if you would ponder each one until you understand the ramifications and can rephrase each one in your own words. (If the people of The New Church decide to revise or rewrite all or parts of this paper, that might be wonderful.)

I have put this position paper into thirteen (13) comments, or axioms. (Did not want to end up with 7, 10, or 12.) In each case, you will quickly realize that most churches – most of Christendom in our time – would not teach what The New Church is teaching; they would not agree with it and in fact would dramatically disagree. I mention this because some of you tend to hear and understand what is being preached and discussed in The New Church as if it were the common or standard fare of today’s Christian beliefs and teachings. But this is not the case. You will find little of it anywhere, and all put together you will find it nowhere else.

1) The “second coming” of Christ has already happened. Jesus is not “coming again” in any of the traditional expectations (on the clouds, to close out the present age, etc.). The second coming of Christ is Easter! And Easter is in two parts: the day of resurrection (He Is Risen!) and Pentecost, the coming of his Holy Spirit to personally guide and direct each believer’s life.

The second coming is one of the church’s great misunderstandings. It was not Jesus’ intention to close out life on earth as we know it, and certainly not “soon,” as over two thousand years have now proved. It was Jesus’ intention to establish “the church”: disciple bands of followers who would be faithful to him and to the new Kingdom not of this world, and who would continue to gather all willing souls into his new Kingdom to live out the rest of their lives, generation after generation, in this broken world. Of course, he continually takes us into new and greater realms when we die here, but he is not coming here again except as Holy Spirit. He is not coming here – we are going there!

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2) The Holy Spirit IS the risen Christ. We do understand “The Trinity” as more of a worshipful and poetic construct than as dogma or creed. “God in three persons” is not a biblical concept (not that this rules it out). In any case, Jesus was here on this planet in the flesh before the resurrection, and he is here as the Holy Spirit after the resurrection. To miss this is to miss the whole point and purpose of his coming.

3) “The Fall” is a necessary part of God’s design: the granting of free will. We all have a destiny with God, and none of us are predestined to be automatons or puppets – for good *or* for evil. (This includes Jesus and Judas, by the way.) The fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil is conscious choice. We “wake up” to our individuality, and then we either choose God or choose something else. Along the way, we choose many things besides God: ourselves, another person, an ambition, a cause, fear, hatred, etc. But the hope is that more and more we will “return to God” and choose God. All life is lived between two gardens: the Garden of Eden (“not thy will but mine be done”) and the Garden of Gethsemane (“not my will but thine be done”).

4) The Prime Directive follows item 3 above. God does not break natural laws or principles, and God does not favor favorites. “*He makes his rain to fall on the just and the unjust.*” We abandon superstition and the hope for special miracles. We remember Jesus’ reply to Satan in the wilderness temptations: “*You shall not put the Lord your God to the test.*” Still, God’s influence is very great, and if we align ourselves with God’s presence and love, amazing things happen. But that is consistent with universe law; it is not superstition or wishful thinking.

Most things we consider “the wrath of God” are the consequences of God’s principles of creation at work. The only real “wrath of God” is our sorrow and shame when we experience how much we are loved and forgiven – when we discover grace and mercy where we deserved and expected punishment and judgment. Under all the shields and posturing, we are broken-hearted when we discover ourselves to be unloving and alienated from God.

5) Scripture is not inerrant. In fact, the Bible is full of the errors and perspectives of its writers and of the ages in which they lived. (For example, the world is not flat; many people in Jesus’ time were buried alive; some demons are germs; we all walk among “miracles” every day that would have completely stunned the twelve disciples: automobiles, airplanes, open-heart surgery, light bulbs, computers, and so on. Not all of them are unmixed blessings, of course, but miracles never are.) This means we have to keep thinking, keep alert, keep seeking the truth behind the written words. The Bible is not the Word of God. JESUS is the Word of God: the Word made flesh. (We know this because the Bible tells us so. (John 1))

6) The “virgin birth” is a demonstrable error, an error revealed in the biblical information itself. (I have discussed this information often over the years in sermons and classes, or if you prefer, you can get it from Raymond Brown, one of the most respected biblical scholars of the Roman Catholic church.) And since it is wrong on Monday, it is also wrong on Sunday and at Christmastime – meaning, most clergy know this and will even teach it in classes, in Bible study, or in private, but it is “inconvenient” to upset people on Sunday morning or at Christmastime, so the error is perpetuated generation after generation.

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Some suppose this error is of no consequence. (“You shall perpetuate the lies, and the lies will set you free.” How long will we go on believing that?) But this particular error continues to have far-reaching consequences. It weakens or eradicates the Incarnation, saying that Jesus is not really like us – not really human. It shifts loyalty and focus from Jesus to Mary. It puts emphasis on virginity and miracle that belongs on motherhood and God’s true design. It feminizes the church, not with true feminine virtues but in ways that weaken our commitment, excuse our lack of commitment, and weaken our desire to truly follow Jesus and be his intentional disciples.

7) Hell is not a physical place or a physical punishment. Many generations of Christians have used the fear of hell to try to control people and “save” them. The result is hearts filled with the fear of hell instead of with the love of God. It has been a terrible and costly trade-off. In most of Christendom, hell is symbolism gone wildly astray – from Gehenna (the garbage dump outside Jerusalem) to Dante’s *Inferno*. Hell is real, but as a place of inner anguish that we all know: the fear, loneliness, shame, and sorrow of our separation and alienation and rebellion against God. Countless are the deeds (sins) which follow such separation (sin), and some of us get fixated on them. But the *source* of such deeds is even more important: our distance from God.

8) “Church” is never about bricks and mortar; it is never about earthly institutions. Church is the people of Jesus who gather to worship and study together; to share with each other; to support, learn from, and teach each other; and if the Spirit directs it, to work together. Church is never a place or a building; it is never an organization or a denomination. Church is a group of intentional followers of Jesus: a disciple band, gathered in his name.

9) The biblical record we have of what Jesus did after his resurrection is important to those of us who would follow him. Many Christians honor the Gospels but ignore or pay far less attention to the Book of Acts and the letters of Paul. The Gospels tell us about Jesus before the resurrection. Acts and Paul tell us about Jesus *after* the resurrection. Since that’s when all the rest of us meet him too, it’s sad that a lot of Christendom neglects the post-resurrection story and reveals small awareness of what Jesus’ life here was leading toward.

10) The New Church is not creedal. It is anti-creedal. Creeds lock things down. Creeds assume that humans have the truth figured out and that the good guys believe correctly and the bad guys have it wrong. Creeds try to supplant the Holy Spirit, making the traditions and creeds of the church more authoritative than the influence – in our hearts and minds and prayers – of the Holy Spirit of our resurrected Lord. From our perspective, this is a huge mistake.

Among the worst fruits of creedalism has come a “doctrine” of The Trinity which is neither worshipful nor humble. In its wake has come another of the greatest errors in Christianity: that Jesus is God. Jesus is *not* God! Jesus *came to reconcile us* to God. Jesus would have been horrified at the thought that his followers would equate him with God. Jesus and God were one in purpose and intention, but not in identity. No New Testament writer thought or believed that Jesus was God. This terrible aberration was invented 250 to 400 years later. It is part of an unintentional but diabolical effort to make Jesus divine rather than

human (with assistance from a virgin birth) and thus to remove any genuine attempts on our part to identify with him. This in turn cancels out the Incarnation. It has robbed “the church” – Jesus’ people – of significant dedication, commitment, and true “following” of Jesus by making him too high and distant for personal loyalty and love.

From this tainted perspective, the Holy Spirit has become vague and futurized and, most significantly, is not to be trusted. It has turned the Holy Spirit into merely the subjective whims of prayer and the faithfulness of mere individuals (like Paul, Peter, Luke, Origen, Augustine, and Luther, to name just a few). Therefore we are told we must listen to the priests or the pope or the traditions and creeds of the institutional church.

Institutional Christianity has proven itself to be in error over and over again: the world is flat; burn Copernicus; evolution is nonbiblical; blacks are inferior to whites; God hates gays; God thinks men should dominate women; and on and on. Of course, individuals can make mistakes too, but it is easier to correct individual errors than it is to correct the errors of vast institutions. Even individual errors are not easy to correct if there is no humility or repentance.

11) True prayer is not ordering God around. (Most of the prayers we learn and hear in normal churches are us ordering God around.) Prayer is an attempt on our part to align our lives and our purposes with God in humble obedience and as servants, in the hope that God will be able to support and boost the energy of (a) our efforts to do God’s will and (b) our human connections to those we care about and to flood them with healing power. This explanation is terribly truncated and in such “short form” that few will pick up many of the implications without hours of discussion and pondering, something The New Church welcomes and encourages.

As far as what God will or will not do in response to our prayers, we have said we do not believe that God will break natural laws; however, sometimes spiritual laws outrank natural laws. We do believe that God has enormous influence in Creation. After all, who is the Creator who designed it all?

12) Heaven is not static; it is not a place of perfection. We do not expect harps (well, not *only* harps) or streets of gold. “Rest in peace” is one of the least-intelligent remarks ever associated with heaven, unless we go back to the older and more accurate definition of “peace.” The drama will continue in the next realms. We pick up there where we left off here! Everything we have learned here will have applications in the next realms. This is an assumption on our part, of course, but it is based on our assumption that God is intelligent, purposeful, and intentional. There is rhyme and reason to this “boot camp” we find ourselves in here. Therefore our faith (trust) in eternal life is a constant reminder of the principles and realities we are in training for and under. It changes everything we think about, and it often changes our choices and our awareness of what really matters here. Mostly it changes our awareness of how important the people around us really are.

13) The Holy Spirit of our resurrected Lord is the core and focal point of everything we hope and believe about the practical side of the Christian life. We want to be true and authentic followers – intentional friends and disciples of Jesus. We expect to find constant repentance necessary. We expect to discover new directions, continual growth, and continual change. We never expect to be or to get perfect. Our only hope is God’s mercy,

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grace, and undeserved love. (Is there ever a *deserved* love?) But the reality of any and all of this depends upon daily communication – guidance, strength, correction, inspiration – from the personal relationship between us and the Holy Spirit of Jesus.

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It is interesting to note that nothing said above disputes or takes away from what the first few generations of Christians believed and were so excited about, with the exception of the “second coming.” Jesus warned them of the coming destruction of Jerusalem (something many of them already had inklings about), which happened in 68-70 A.D. But in the minds of the early disciples, it was a future event – something coming – and it was mixed with their apocalyptic expectations, which were essentially shared by all faithful Jews and had been believed with more and more fervor over the previous three hundred years. We sometimes forget that Jesus often tried to enlighten his followers about things they could not fully grasp, and it is helpful to remember that any of their former beliefs which were not fully understood and reworked by Jesus’ teachings would have been carried into the New Testament writings. The belief that because he was the Messiah, Jesus would come again and close out the age within a generation is one of those errors.

The twelve disciples had barely begun in their “Christian beliefs” when Jesus was crucified. The crucifixion and resurrection caused them all to rethink everything they had ever known. We see them growing and changing by leaps and bounds from then on: Pentecost; Peter and Cornelius; carrying the new faith to Gentiles; and on and on. Remember, they had no New Testament yet to “explain everything.” They were *living* their faith in Jesus through his Holy Spirit; the testament came later. Hopefully we are still part of this dynamism and will never again be content to “understand it all,” “lock it all down,” or stop praying to be faithful followers ourselves.

Naturally, if anything said above is true, we can expect the constant need for revision. But what you really need to remember is this: **THE MORE PEOPLE YOU TELL AND THE CLEARER YOU GET, THE MORE YOU WILL DRAW FIRE.**

Personally, I like things peaceful. So far The New Church has had two years of relative peace and quiet, and we certainly have needed them. But this also means most of you are either oblivious or have not decided to get into the game yet. That’s fine with me. I appreciate it. But my hunch is that somewhere in our third year, this will begin to change. Just a little warning. Meanwhile, I hope you will enjoy, maybe even appreciate, this position paper in honor of our second anniversary as The New Church.

Perhaps to celebrate our third anniversary we can have position papers about what we believe about God, how Jesus saves us, the presence of the Holy Spirit, and what our true goals and purposes are. We could also ponder some questions together: Knowing we are Christians, is there anything “the world” can trust us about and trust us for? For that matter, is there anything a *fellow Christian* can trust us for or trust us about because we are fellow Christians?

Until then ...

Peace and Love,

Bruce