

Baptism Presentation

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Introduction

Thank you for the opportunity to give a presentation on Baptism. I know that you have had a presentation on Baptism at the last seminar in Melbourne but I shall be approaching the topic from a different perspective. Let me say at the outset that my interest in this subject is in making the case for re-baptism of anyone having been baptised in the Christian Church and seeking to become a member of the New Church. I've had discussion with some friends in the New Church on this but these discussions were inconclusive. I believe that mutual benefit will come out of further review of the New Church in Australia's current treatment of re-baptism – either that there are some aspects that I'm not aware of or don't understand or that some new thinking on baptism needs to be worked through by all of us.

When I decided to leave the Uniting Church and join the New Church there was no option but to undergo New Church baptism as the gate of entry into the New Church. Had there been an option – and there wasn't an option – I would have still preferred New Church baptism to emphasise a clear break with the past, to underline the taking of a big new step in my spiritual journey.

Some years later I realised that in moving to membership of the New Church in Australia re-baptism is not expected but it is available on request. Furthermore, there was no mention of Baptism on the application for membership form.

1. Rev Bruce Williams Paper on Baptism

I discovered from Rev Bruce Williams' 1976 paper on Baptism that the Committee of Ministers and Leaders of the British Conference of the New Church had in 1967 passed a resolution in relation to the question of re-baptism of ordinands prior to ordination “...*that the (New Church) doctrine did not suggest a demand for rebaptism.*” The question of re-baptism of ordinands or re-baptism generally is clearly the same question and we can agree with Rev Bruce Williams on this.

Bruce Williams went on to note in his paper that the first re-baptisms occurred at the very first worship service of the New Church in England and the world on 31 July 1787. He put this down to “...**understandable zeal and excitement which prevailed in those early days at the discovery of the new doctrines**” The implication is that the re-baptisms weren't really necessary in line with the point of view he develops in the rest of his paper.

When I read these remarks they didn't ring true at all. The Second Coming of the Lord has taken about 17 centuries to occur after His First Coming and as we know, it took the form of a revelation from the Lord through His servant Emanuel Swedenborg. The last book of the Writings, True Christian Religion was completed in 1770 and 17 years later, after Swedenborg had passed on, the first New Church worship service occurred in London in 1787.

2. Start of the external New Church : London 31 July 1787

The early receivers of the Heavenly Doctrines in the UK were most anxious to start the New Church on earth in its ultimate or external form as a separate entity from the Christian Church in a way which was fully in harmony with the teachings of the Word and the Heavenly Doctrines. Prior to the first worship service on 31 July 1787 a unanimously agreed paper setting out general New Church principles emphasised the important role of the two sacraments of baptism and Holy Supper in the life of the New Church. Right from the start of the external form of the organised New Church, *introduction into the New Church was to be solely through "the Spiritual Correspondent, Baptism, performed in that Church."* (Hindmarsh Rise and Progress p 58).

So that was the thinking on baptism right at the beginning of the New Church.

3. Inaugurated by the Lord

The events surrounding the Second Coming Revelation, including the Last Judgment in 1757, are of enormous importance to the whole human race and we know that the New Church itself was inaugurated by the Lord (TCR 667).

Now a number of things flow from the fact that the New Church was inaugurated by the Lord

Number 17 : A new beginning

- (i) Every last detail was under the care of Divine Providence as are all things in the created universe. In fact the number 17 itself denotes a new beginning as we are taught in AC 853.

5 re-baptisms were necessary and orderly

- (ii) Therefore I think we can set aside the idea that the 5 re-baptisms at the first worship service of the New Church in 1787 was some aberration of judgment on the part of the early receivers of the Second Coming revelation gathered around Robert Hindmarsh and John Glen. So we should conclude that the 5 re-baptisms were both necessary and orderly.

Was the early New Church fruitful?

- (iii) Another aspect of the inauguration of the New Church by the Lord in 1787 is that everything that has life in it from the Lord is fruitful and multiplies without limit (AC 43). Did this happen? Was the establishment of the external form of the New Church fruitful? What does history show us here?

The first New Church society in the UK grew substantially and New Church teachings spread far and wide, and to America through one of the early receivers, James Glen, who was present at the beginning. Several New Church societies were formed in the UK and the first Conference of the New Church in the UK occurred on 13 April 1789.

We can see from this dynamic growth the Divine blessing on the principles and practices of the early UK New Church including its 5 re-baptisms and its policy on re-baptism.

Law of the first in a series

- (iv) It is an important teaching of the New Church that in any Divine Work “the essence and quality of the beginning is derived and passes over into the things which follow” (AC 3939). In other words, the beginning reigns in the things which follow (AC 4717, AC 9656.) We are further told that “the first is the all in the products and derivatives, such that if the first be removed the things which follow perish” (AC 9568)

By the law of the first in a series it must therefore be the pattern that the New Church should follow with regard to re-baptism. Any deviation such as making New Church re-baptism optional and only available on request can be seen as disorderly by breaking the law of the first in the series.

Following the pattern of the first worship service then constitutes a reason for re-baptism into the New Church.

4. The distinctiveness of the New Church lies in its newness.

There are 2 aspects to this newness, (a) the old Church has written itself off, and (b) the New Church is really new. Let’s look more closely at each of these aspects and how they impact on the sacrament of baptism.

- (a) The Christian Church has written itself off

We are cautioned in TCR 171 that “In any church, not only all its worship but also all its dogma ultimately go back to that church's faith. You could say, then, that the nature of a church's faith determines the nature of its teachings. It follows that the faith in question, because it is a faith in three gods, has perverted every aspect of the church. Faith is an origin; teachings are derived from it. What is derived receives its essence from its origin.

Let me repeat that, WHAT IS DERIVED RECEIVES ITS ESSENCE FROM ITS ORIGIN. If a stream is polluted at its source then all the water downstream is polluted.

TCR 171 continues, *If you carefully examine the church's individual teachings--for example, on God, the person of Christ, goodwill, repentance, regeneration, free choice, the selection of the chosen people, **the purpose of the sacraments of baptism and the Holy Supper**--you will clearly see that there is a trinity of gods in each one of them. If some teaching does not make the Trinity completely apparent, it still flows from the Trinity the way water flows from a spring.*

So the only conclusion we can draw here is that we need to rebaptise because baptism in the Christian Church is polluted by the trinity of gods falsity. This constitutes another reason for New Church re-baptism.

(b) The New Church is really new

The early receivers themselves say, (Hindmarsh Rise and Progress p 69), that the New Church is distinct from the Old as shown by the declaration of Rev 21:5 “Behold, I make all things New” with regard to the New Church. This declaration ‘*applies not only to the doctrines of the Church but also to its institutions and ordinances of every kind, and ... to that of the Ordination of Ministers whose authority to teach and preach and administer the sacraments must be derived from the Lord alone in His own Church, and not from any Priesthood of a fallen, consummated and finished Church.*

What’s new about New Church baptism?

In the New Church we have a clear understanding of and faith in the True God who is the Lord God Jesus Christ in His glorified Human Body. As we’ve seen, the New Church teaching on baptism has its essence derived from its origin which is faith in the One True God. His Second Coming Revelation also tells us that the spiritual sense of the Word has been revealed for the sake of the New Church inaugurated by the Lord on 31 July 1787 (TCR 667). A clear understanding of the Lord and revelation of the spiritual sense of the Word enables people to know what is involved in and effected by New Church baptism and thereby makes it new.

This spiritual enlightenment is lacking in Christian Church baptism and so the call for newness points to New Church re-baptism.

5. Baptism was commanded by the Lord (TCR 668)

The 4th reason for re-baptism into the New Church is that baptism was commanded by the Lord (TCR 668). Since the New Church is Christian in fact and essence whereas the previous Church was merely Christian in name only (TCR 668) or to put it another way, ‘real Christianity is now (1770) for the first time arising’ (TCR 700) and so the Lord’s command to baptise has new meaning and force and it applies to us.

How are we – the New Church - complying with the Lord’s commandment to baptise or re-baptise if we are tacitly accepting that the Christian Church is doing the baptising for us?

6. Summing Up

So where have we reached in making the case for re-baptism in the New Church? Let me briefly summarise the reasons why we should rebaptise into the New Church, those baptised Christians wanting to join us.

1. The 5 re-baptisms in the first New Church worship service in 1787 were orderly, so by the law of the first in a series where the first is the all in all that follows, it must therefore be the pattern that the New Church should follow. So we need to baptise or re-baptise into the New Church as the case may be.
2. All worship and dogma in the Christian Church, including the sacrament of baptism, is tainted by its core faith in the trinity of gods falsity. This alone makes its baptism unsuitable as the gate of entrance into the New Church.
3. In Rev 21:5 the Lord says with regard to the New Church, ‘Behold I make all things new’. The New Church provides a clear understanding of the Lord and its revelation of the spiritual sense of the Word enables people to know what is involved in and effected by New Church baptism. This is what makes it new. If all things are to be made new, Christian Church baptism fails this test.
4. The 4th reason for re-baptism into the New Church is that the Lord has commanded the Christian Church to baptise. Since the New Church is Christian in fact and essence whereas the previous Church was merely Christian in name only (TCR 668) therefore we – the New Church - are directly commanded to baptise by the Lord as in TCR 668.

7. If rebaptism into the New Church is orderly, is ignoring rebaptism unless it is requested orderly?

The rationale for regarding re-baptism as unnecessary for someone from the Christian Church desiring to join the New Church depends on previous baptism having occurred. Here we are tacitly accepting that the Christian Church has done the baptising for us. For the reasons given earlier, Christian Church baptism is inappropriate for entry into the New Church and so failing to indicate an expectation of either baptism or re-baptism can be seen as disorderly. **Re-baptism ensures that the New Church in Australia does not rely on an inappropriate earlier baptism in a different church.**

If this conclusion is correct, the disorder is on the part of the organised New Church and not on the individual.

8. The organised New Church and the individual

The New Church's role is to provide the means for the individual to enter heaven in the afterlife (TCR 773), so it must give the right signals to people wishing to join the New Church in Australia. The whole thrust of this presentation is that it should indicate in its introductory literature and in its interaction with people contemplating joining the New Church that New Church baptism is the correct way and the only way into the sheep-fold and not some other way, such as reliance on an earlier baptism in a different Church to waive New Church baptism.

All I am urging is a change of mindset on the part of the organised New Church in Australia as to how it presents itself to people coming from the Christian Church and wishing to join the New Church. It seems to me we should be giving them the correct indication through our introductory literature and in our answers to questions on baptism that the gate of entrance into the New Church is through the sacrament of New Church baptism irrespective of a previous baptism in a different Church.

There is of course no question of putting any pressure on the individual with regard to baptism. He or she alone will make their decision whether to proceed to be baptised or not in their own good time.

9. Truth and falsity

The following passage from TCR 759 is self-explanatory and should be borne in mind in reviewing the case I have put for rebaptism :

“Falsity cannot see truth but truth can see falsity, and everyone is so made that he can see and grasp truth on hearing it.

But if he has convinced himself of false doctrines, he cannot bring truth into his understanding so as to lodge there, since it finds no room; and if by chance it does get in, the crowd of falsities gathered together there throw it out as not belonging.”