

What is New Church Education? A Model in a Human Form

Kay R. Alden
May 2010

Introduction

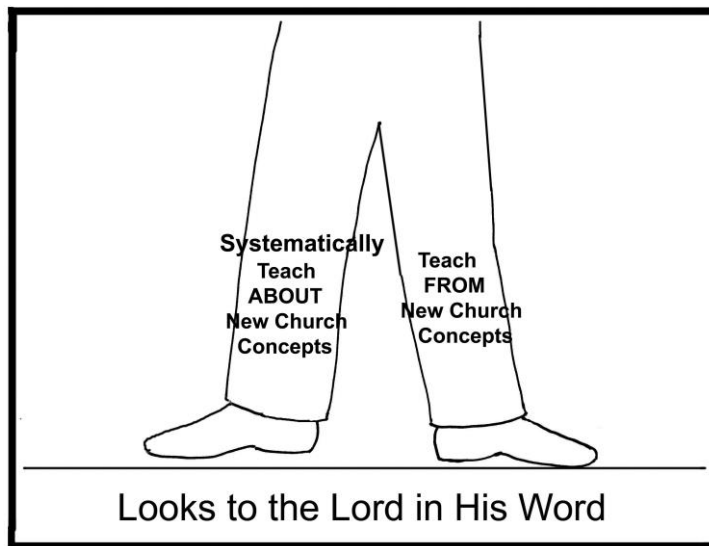
Over the years much has been written about New Church education. Articles and books elaborate on its purpose and philosophy, but as an organization we have yet to define it in a manner that captures the breadth and depth of its many facets. With the encouragement of my colleagues and through my years of experience and study, I have endeavored to build a model that recognizes the principles which unify New Church schools while allowing for the delightful variety in responses to resources, student demographics, and community needs. It is my hope that this model might clarify our mission and help us articulate what we are to anyone inquiring about New Church education.

So what exactly is New Church education? What aspects of New Church education are true for all times, ages, and cultures? What makes a school New Church? What makes someone a New Church teacher? In addressing these questions, I believe this model illustrates three things: 1) The distinctive components of *New Church education* at any level and cultural setting 2) The distinctive qualities of a *New Church teacher* and 3) The distinctive experiences and outcomes of a *New Church student*.

Foundation and “two legs”

Education is a uniquely human endeavor. No other species puts as much time and energy into systematically instructing its young. The added spiritual dimension of New Church education means that it addresses not only the *human* aspects of its students but also the qualities associated with being *truly human* as identified in the Heavenly Doctrine.¹ Interestingly the model serendipitously emerged in the human form and serves as a delightful reminder that New Church education seeks to develop the affections, understanding, and skills associated with being truly human.

To achieve this goal New Church education operates in two primary ways which are different from other schools. We can think of these two vital activities as the two legs on which New Church education stands. The first leg is rather obvious: New Church educators systematically teach **ABOUT New Church**



¹ *Divine Providence* 32, *Arcana Coelestia* 3860, 7424 (cited at end of article)

concepts. This leg illustrates the many ways that New Church teachers *directly* teach truths from the three-fold Word. It represents the instruction associated with worship services, religion classes, and the way New Church concepts are integrated into the content of secular courses such as English, history, art, physical education, and science. Distinctive New Church curriculum provides the framework for this leg, which is easy to see and recognize as being distinctively New Church.

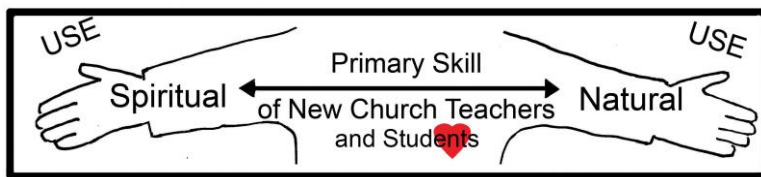
The second leg is perhaps less obvious: New Church educators also teach **FROM New Church concepts.** The extensive teachings in the Heavenly Doctrine about the human mind, stages of development, regeneration, and accommodation help educators make decisions about *how*, *when* and *why* material is taught. Concepts from the Heavenly Doctrine also guide New Church teachers’ choices about discipline, social interactions, community relationships, and service. This “leg” inspires teachers at all levels to protect innocence and develop a conscience. It emphasizes the importance of working with parents in the younger grades and balancing freedom with rational abilities as they mature. Different schools and teachers emphasize different doctrinal concepts. In this way they accommodate to the age and interests of students, teachers, and their community. Such accommodation creates a delightful variety among our schools; but at the same time there is unity in the endeavor to bring doctrinal concepts to life in a meaningful way on the civil, moral, and spiritual planes.

Although this second leg, teaching from New Church concepts, may be less obvious to an outside observer, it may be even more vital to distinctiveness than the first. Certainly our model needs both legs – ABOUT and FROM the Lord’s Word – if it is to stand strong in a truly human form.

Primary skill – two directions

The two “legs” describe the two primary *actions* of New Church teachers, but these activities require specific *skills* in order for them to be done effectively.

The primary skill associated with New Church education is the skill of being able to **connect spiritual ideas with natural ones.** Connecting spiritual ideas to natural ideas works in two directions: spiritual → natural (read the Word and see application to education) and natural → spiritual (read secular literature and identify the spiritual truth from which it springs). The duality of this skill arises from the fact that there are two foundations of truth: the Word and nature.² In my model, I represent these two foundations of truth with the two arms and hands of the human form. As a human being must coordinate his or her hands to accomplish a task, New Church educators need to coordinate these two sources of truth. These sources of truth are not equal. Just as most human beings have a dominant hand, the Heavenly Doctrine



notes that these two foundations of truth are in agreement with each other only when the spiritual perspective dominates.³

² *Spiritual Experience* 5709

³ *Divine Love and Wisdom* 46, *Arcana Coelestia* 4101:4

Spiritual→natural

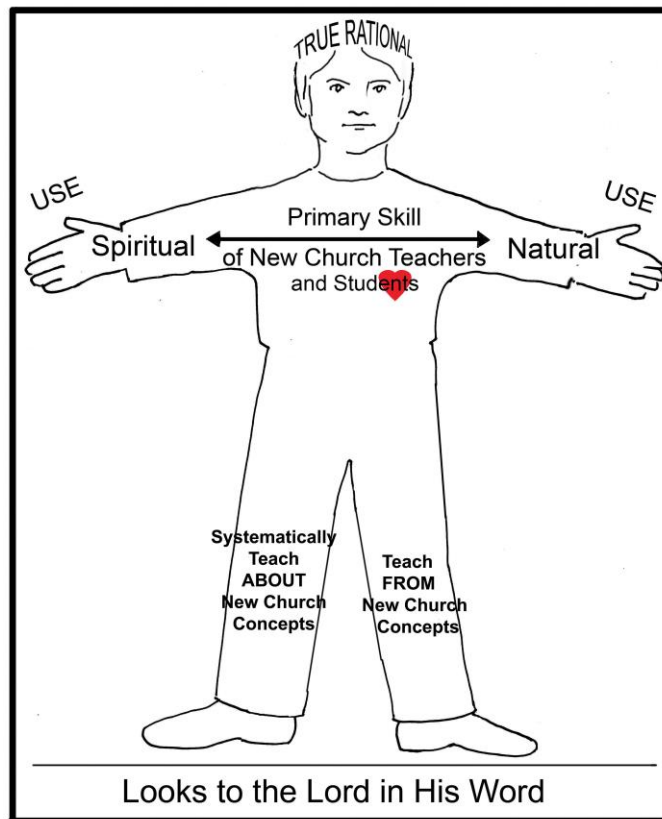
Connecting spiritual ideas to natural ones is an essential skill for New Church teachers. Starting on the one “hand,” New Church teachers study the Word (spiritual) and identify the countless ways that doctrine can be applied in the classroom/school setting (natural). The skill in this direction is essential in developing the pedagogy associated with the second foundational leg mentioned above—teaching FROM New Church concepts.

As teachers we aim to systematically develop this skill in the students as well. Starting at the very earliest age, New Church education asks its students to think on two levels, the natural and the spiritual. For example, we introduce pre-school children to the science of correspondences in a delightful and age-appropriate manner. By the time students are studying at the college level they are rationally exploring ideas in a sphere of freedom. The skill is like a muscle; the more it is used the stronger it gets.

Natural→spiritual

For teachers the reverse direction of natural → spiritual begins when they attend a workshop or read secular educational or subject matter literature. The ideas from these sources often provide vital, useful information to our schools. But before a New Church teacher

implements the practices or delivers the information, she or he prudently identifies the ways practice or information supports New Church educational goals and concepts the Heavenly Doctrine. The in this direction filters knowledge on the natural plane through the lens of spiritual truth. For instance, how does brain-based teaching support New Church concepts? Is constructivism compatible with New Church pedagogy? We contend that if a secular idea is really “good,” the “goodness” actually comes from the spiritual plane. It reflects a spiritual truth.⁴ When evaluating secular information, work of a New Church teacher identify the spiritual truth behind it and act from that principle as well as the pragmatic one.



he
the
in
skill

the
is to

⁴ *Apocalypse Explained* 640

Students are asked to develop the skill in this direction as well. Often New Church teachers pick specific novels to study because the characters wrestle with issues on the civil and moral planes, which can be discussed from a spiritual perspective. A skilled New Church teacher intentionally uses the natural knowledges of the content subject as vessels for spiritual truth. Natural knowledges that are learned in relation to spiritual ones have a different power in the life of a student than natural knowledges that are learned from an earthly perspective only.⁵

The result

The “legs” and “arms” of this model of New Church education describe its essential distinctive elements. Through these element the New Church teacher seeks to develop the rational abilities associated with a spiritually focused human being. The Heavenly Doctrine refers to this as the **true rational** (or the second rational).⁶ A true rational isn’t just an intellectual ability; it springs from a pure heart. At its core is a loving commitment to do the right thing for the right reasons. It involves acknowledging the Lord, understanding and applying His truth, shunning evils as sins, and living a life of charity. A person’s rational ability allows them to regenerate and fulfill their human potential.⁷ Students who experience this kind of education receive the tools they will need to lead useful lives in both the natural and spiritual worlds.

The purpose of creation, according to the Heavenly Doctrine, is a heaven from the human race.⁸ In its broadest sense, New Church education strives to cooperate with the Lord in this work. It views students as the potential angels the Lord created them to be.⁹ Though the students may not always be consciously aware of it, New Church education breathes spiritual life into the natural practices. It is what creates a sphere in our schools, a sphere that affects newcomers and leads them to say: “There is something different happening here! What is it?”

.....
“...a person is truly human by virtue of his or her internal self and the nature of this, not by virtue of his or her external self ; for without the internal the external self is not truly human. If the external self too is to be truly human it must be completely subject to the internal, so completely that it does not act by itself, only from the internal.” *Arcana Coelestia* 7424

“With all human beings, since all of us have been created in the likeness and image of God, ... our first rational too is conceived and born through the influx of our internal self into the life of our external self 's affection for knowledge, but our second rational results from the influx of good and truth from the Lord by way of our internal self. This second rational we receive from the Lord when we are being regenerated, for at that time we sense within our rational what the good and truth of faith are. The internal self with us is above our rational, and is the Lord's.” *Arcana Coelestia* 2093 : 4

⁵ *Doctrine of Sacred Scripture* 54, *True Christian Religion* 24:2, 505:1,3,5

⁶ *Divine Love and Wisdom* 237, 258, 321, *Arcana Coelestia* 2657:2, 20934

⁷ *Arcana Coelestia* 2637, 3286, 4353

⁸ *Divine Providence* 27:2

⁹ *Divine Providence* 322