

# “It’s a Sin to Bore Kids With the Gospel”

## Understanding the Importance of Christian Renewal Movements

by Earl F. Palmer

When I think about Christian Renewal, two things come to mind: first I think of the church as an institution changed for the better, and secondly I think of Christians joining together to make that happen, as they are being renewed themselves. What happens in this incremental reformation is that the Christian fellowship is changed in a healthy way. It may be that old wounds are healed or begin to be healed, or that doctrinal confusion is challenged theologically and biblically, or that omissions in ministries are proactively engaged in a new way, or refreshed after a lapse of discipleship memory.

But renewal of an organization is not possible unless we the people are changed, because renewal is not the same thing as reorganization. Renewal at its most fundamental level has to do with individual followers of Christ being changed. It is first of all a personal experience. Men and women are caught hold of by a spiritual and intellectual discovery so good and so important, that together with others who feel that same life-changing importance, they give themselves to the mandate of sharing in the renewing task of the church.

The dynamic event of renewal might be portrayed in picture form as follows. First, visualize a model of the Christian Church as a bicycle wheel. The hub would be the Lord of the church Jesus Christ, who alone is the center point of the church, and who draws men and women to himself. In this model, the men and women are spokes drawn to and secured to the wheel’s hub. By the good decision of God’s design, these spokes are also attached

to the rim, and through the rim to one another. The inner rim is made of lightweight aluminum alloy and is designed to hold in place the pneumatic tire through which the wheel encounters the road.

The entire rim assembly is made up of two parts. The metal rim, because of its light weight, is highly vulnerable to damage except for two design factors: first, the pneumatic tire cushions the irregular jolts and impact of the roadway; and second, the balanced tension of the spokes evenly distributes the hang-weight along the upper arc of the wheel from the centered hub. The bicycle wheel works because the weight is never pressed downward toward the roadside of the rim, but is always suspended downward from the upside arc of the wheel toward its support attachment—the hub—which has the strength to bear the tension of the spokes.

In this parable of the church, not unlike St. Paul’s “body” parable of 1 Cor. 12, each part of the wheel has its vital task to do, but no one part of the wheel is burdened with more than it is able. No one spoke or group of spokes can bear the weight of bike and rider against the road surface, but taken together with the other companion spokes, the weight can be distributed from the center point toward the upper arc. The weight never presses downward on that part of the wheel which is absorbing the shocks of

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road contact. That would expect too much strength of the rim. The bicycle wheel is designed for shared and shifting responsibility, and so the essentially fragile rim is able to achieve remarkable durability and efficiency.

In this parable of the pneumatic tire, the rubbery outer rim represents the mission and ministry of the church toward the world, and the aluminum inner rim represents the fellowship of the church that distributes the weight and ties together the Christians. Just as Christian believers have by their faith been united in the Holy Spirit to the hub who is Jesus Christ, they are also united to each other by the Holy Spirit into the fellowship and mission of the church—the inner and outer rim. The power train in a bicycle flows through the hub, then through spokes, and finally through the inner rim to the outer rim toward the road.

How does renewal fit into this picture of the Christian Church? The church needs reformation and renewal movements when a weakness appears on the tire surface, or in the inner rim, or if spokes break loose. Christian Renewal, as it takes shape in the New Testament letters, is orchestrated by the Holy Spirit to enable believers to face up to weaknesses in the rim and spokes. This is in order to strengthen the whole wheel, so that the Christian fellowship may be faithful to its mandate and most of all united to the good and faithful purpose of God, its source and meaning.

This adaptation of the St. Paul's "body of Christ" parable of 1 Corinthians 12 raises three primary questions: 1) How have renewal movements affected the church throughout its history, and how do they do so today? 2) How does the church as an institution positively relate to renewal movements, as the movements develop their own special identity alongside of and within the church? 3) Are there possible dangers that renewal movements may pose to themselves and to the church as a whole?

### **How have renewal movements affected the church throughout its history, and how do they affect it today?**

We who form the Christian Church need renewal as a constant ingredient in our common life because our freedom has been preserved, and is not erased by the Gospel of Jesus Christ. As Karl Barth said, "the Christian Church moves through history in understanding

and in misunderstanding, in obedience and disobedience, in faithfulness and unfaithfulness toward the lofty good that God has entrusted to it." Because we are always at risk of going astray and because we often do, we need regularly to be called back to our living center, to faithfulness in our own discipleship and toward courage in our mission. This need for renewal is evident throughout the history of the church.

There are no New Testament letters that are written apart from the problems of the early church, and therefore every letter is a call to renewed centeredness. The first Ecumenical Council of the church (Acts 15) was called in order to clear the air on mistakes of theology and behavior in Jewish/Gentile relationships, as these problems were gravely affecting the mission of the outer rim, as well as the primary focus of the inner rim on its center. The church's discovery of the all-sufficiency of Jesus Christ for salvation of both Greeks and Jews became at that council meeting of the disciples the clarifying point for the early church in its first renewal challenge. Bishop James' speech at the first council of the church helped to repair what was a hurtful and very dangerous crack in the rim.

In our own century, a gathering of Christians at Barmen, Germany sought to re-establish the wholeness and health of the church in the Germany of the 1930s. The confessing church movement grew out of that historic renewal meeting in Barmen in May 29-31, 1934. Their counsel to the church was contained in the six articles of the Barmen Declaration, which directly affected the practical life decisions and actions of the Christians who signed the document those who wished they had. Later in our century members of the Afrikaans Reformed Church in South Africa wrote a similar renewal document to challenge the wound of apartheid in the South African Church and society. These renewal movements were primarily focused upon the need to affirm centered, Christian faith and life over against errors in theology and practice.

Renewal movements have a vigorous history within Protestant churches. They have emerged within the structures of the church denominations as well as between denominational fellowships, and in some instances these groups have even become the headwaters for new denominations. The Missionary societies of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries offer

some exciting examples of creative renewal movements that permanently changed the face of world Christianity. Missionary societies were formed within denominations and later became structural parts of the denominations. Some fellowships, like the American Bible Society, were formed as inter-church advocacy groups. A large group of mission renewal movements were non-denominational, such as the Student Volunteer Movement, YMCA, Wycliffe Bible Translators, China Inland Missions, (OMF), and Latin American Missions.

These visionary concerns were renewal movements in that they were born when Christians caught a vision and personally addressed weaknesses that they found in the ministries of their own denominational structures and local congregations. Christians joined together to make missions happen, and succeeded in making a decisive impact upon the life and health of church denominations.

Renewal movements create in believers a new awareness of the implications of the Gospel toward our daily behavior and ministry, and they also create a fellowship of like-minded folk, sharing the vision and experiencing together the nourishment of solidarity. In renewal movements the church itself is the primary target of affirmation and the subject of the call to repentance. The fundamental pastoral action is therefore first of all and most of all directed toward the people of faith.

The renewal movements with the greatest impact on the church today, it seems to me, are focused on evangelism and Christian life and discipleship. The youth movement Young Life was started by a Presbyterian layman in Dallas, Texas, who was alarmed by local churches' neglect of evangelistic and caring ministry toward youth. Jim Rayburn started this movement that now numbers a professional staff of over 2000, who carry on this ministry in the United States and in other countries. Young Life is a renewal institution separate from any formal church tie, but a ministry that year-by-year is responsible for welcoming youth to faith in Jesus Christ. I have observed these youth then becoming energizing contributors within established churches as they become members.

InterVarsity Christian Fellowship has a similar story. Its American founder, C. Stacy Woods, together with British student leaders, became concerned that University students in large secular

universities deserved to hear a thoughtful affirmation of evangelical Christian faith. This organization, with its student chapters and triennial Urbana Missionary conference, probably has a greater impact upon American Protestant students than any other University ministry in the United States.

Bible Study Fellowship is a non-denominational Bible study ministry founded by a retired OMF Missionary, Ms. Weatheral Johnson. Bible Study Fellowship began as a result of her discovery of the biblical ignorance of ordinary church folk and her determination to help lay Christians study the Bible for themselves. That organization now conducts Bible study classes in churches throughout the world.

The Stephen Ministry program is another example of a renewal movement that began because of concern about the lack of skillful caring ministries for hurting people within local churches. This movement now plays a key role in the encouragement, listening, and caring ministries of lay people within congregational settings.

Reformation and renewal starts with a vision. Add to this the optimistic conviction that change for the good will happen as individual Christians work together pro-actively, and the result in most instances is that a movement is created. But one principle is basic: there can be no renewal movements without this optimism at the core. Complainers are pessimistic and they withdraw into de-

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fensiveness. Renewalists act in confidence that their united efforts will have a positive effect. We Protestants have a natural ability to start up organizations, which we see in our renewal movements as well as our ability to start denominations. The key atmosphere in Renewal groups is the confidence

that change for the good can happen here and now.

This means that every renewal movement gains its inner strength and endurance not so much from the omission or error perceived in the rim, but from the appreciation of the truth that inspires the vision, combined with the fellowship and support of like-minded visionaries. Jim Rayburn and other friends who shared his vision started Young Life because Jim was convinced it was "a sin to bore kids with the Gospel." That churches in his city were in fact boring youth was to him a crisis, but the crisis alone does not energize a mission like Young Life. What motivated Jim Rayburn and his friends was the conviction that the good news of Jesus Christ was true, and not only true, but also quite the opposite of boring! The positive energy came therefore not from a problem perceived, but from a joyous truth believed and the fellowship the truth created. The gospel is the contagious positive energy that first created and now presently sustains the vision of Young Life. Where local congregations are alive and exciting they also have the same mixture of faith, fellowship and shared mission. It is therefore the joyous confidence in the good news that makes renewal happen, whether within the church, or in an organization, or alongside of the church.

#### **How does the church as a formal institution helpfully relate to these renewal movements?**

This question is not uncomplicated, because some movements are within the church, some are inter-denominational, some are independent from the church structure and therefore non-denominational.

We who make up a denominational church must learn from every renewal advocate, because even those movements that are finally considered to be unhealthy are nevertheless a witness to possible cracks in the rim or within the spokes, and in the most serious cases they bear witness to confusion regarding what is and should be the very center of Christian faith.

As biblical Christians we are mandated to test the advocacy of renewal movements, just as we must learn to test every part of Christian life and fellowship. Within the reformed family of churches this testing is exercised by means of three questions: 1) What is the witness of Holy Scripture, and does a particular renewal vision encourage our faithfulness to the biblical witness to Jesus Christ as the living center of the

church? 2) What is the witness of the confessions of the church throughout the history of Christian experience? Our confessions help us to test if the teaching of this renewal movement is doctrinally centered and balanced as a source of teaching for the church. 3) The test of the fellowship: does this renewal teaching build up the body of Christ and encourage faith, hope and love? Is there an interpersonal, healthy fellowship in the movement? Often it will be an uneasy feeling concerning the interpersonal atmosphere of a movement that will first alert a pastor or lay-person to dangers in the theology or biblical interpretation advocated by the renewalist.

The testing is necessary and always has been, but it seems to me that most renewal movements that grow up from the people of faith are more healthy than dangerous. The church does well therefore, in my view, to err on the side of generosity of spirit toward its renewalist brothers and sisters, rather than on the side of defensiveness and suspicion. My advice to myself and other pastors is to welcome renewal and seek to establish positive and encouraging relationships with the people who are involved in these ministries. I as a pastor need friends in ministry, both within and alongside the formal structure of the church, and they need pastors like me to be their friend, because one of the greatest dangers in any Christian ministry is loneliness and isolation. Loneliness is a very common prelude to cultism, because the common-sense checks and balances of friends is lost.

#### **Are there dangers that renewal movements may pose to themselves and to the church as a whole?**

This is the hardest question. The truth is that there are dangers in any advocacy group, which arise from the shadowy side of the single most exciting fact about renewal movements: the specific, definite and narrow focus which produces its energy and zealous durability. The danger is that this focus can produce self-righteousness and arrogance. When this happens in a believer or a group of believers it produces two destructive results, one theological and the other interpersonal. The theological threat to any renewal movement happens when the renewal movement establishes a new working center for Christian faith around its own point of advocacy. This means that all other themes of Christian

faith and practice are evaluated in terms of one particular point. In this way, what was once a valid and true insight or concern now becomes a false center point. The advocacy was true as an implication of the gospel, but not when it becomes the gospel itself. When this happens, the renewalist has vectored away from the living center of Christian faith and life. This is what happened at Corinth, as a faith-healing renewal movement succeeded in making their specialty the new center for the evaluation of spirituality. On the basis of that new criteria they claimed to be able to judge the spirituality of St. Paul. There was a vegetarian group at Rome doing the same thing, and the list is long throughout the history of Christian faith and life. In some extreme instances this vectoring has resulted in cultism, as special renewal concerns take on such importance that they become not only the basis for evaluating other people, but a new, false focus point of worship itself. The Cause and the leaders who teach it have succeeded in becoming the new center.

The cure for this shadowy side of all renewal movements is first of all the generous light that comes from Holy Scripture, which always points us toward the Gospel of Jesus Christ, and secondly the balancing cure that comes from the good humor and give-and-take of the fellowship of believers who balance the whole.

*Therefore encourage one another and build up each other, as indeed you are doing.*

I Thessalonians 5:11