

William J Abraham: The Logic of Renewal

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Notes by Alison Morgan December 2005

An extremely thorough look at renewal, understood rather broadly as 'fixing the church' (p132); and some conclusions which seem excellent if brief, and not necessarily related to the careful analysis which precedes them. But he certainly takes the concept of renewal far outside the narrowly charismatic, and perhaps this is the main challenge of the book - even if he doesn't really have any clear vision for any outworking of renewal beyond the confines of the church itself. Each chapter explores renewal from 2 contrasting angles by looking at the writing of 2 key people.

1. The logic of renewal

We have developed a whole family of concepts to capture what we might broadly refer to as renewal – including revitalisation, reform, awakening, revival, restoration. Renewal is our contemporary jargon, replacing the language of revival that has been so common in Protestant circles over the last 3 centuries.

'Renewal' defined: making as good as new, putting new life or vigour into, restoring to the original condition. But our concepts of renewal depend on our model of what the church should be like – otherwise we cast renewal in personal terms, as the renewal of the individual (eg Lovelace). *Insofar as we think of the church in this tradition [evangelical], we think of the church as a collection of or voluntary association of suitably renewed or sanctified individuals. We need, however, to break loose from this sort of individualism and begin to think in terms of ecclesial as well as individual or personal renewal. To be sure, we cannot have ecclesial renewal without personal renewal, but there are deep dimensions of renewal that go well beyond what can be captured in discussion of personal or individual renewal.* 3.

Proposals about renewal follow a simple pattern: a description which depicts how the church is sick, a diagnosis as to why, and a prescription for cure. It can go wrong at any of these stages, with seriously negative results.

The side effects of renewal are judgmentalism and schism: the 'renewed' see themselves as better than the unrenewed, and they quickly move to break the church into factions.

There is no necessity for renewal at all stages in the history of the church – sometimes it is dangerous, people chasing the wind and seeking new stimulus, running everywhere to find the new principle/program that will work for them. Renewal is not itself the health of the church but a means to the restoration of health. Assimilation periods are needed too. And there's a danger of wanting to hang onto the power that leadership at a time of renewal can bring.

2. Foundations and food : James Draper and Dennis Bennett

James Draper – rep of Fundamentalists in S Baptist Convention.

Dennis Bennett – rep of charismatics.

Fundamentalists

See the church as in danger not of decline but of apostasy – abandoning the gospel. Decline is the outcome of this. This is because theologians have substituted reason for revelation as the foundation of the church's faith. 4 problems:

- ✦ application of historical approaches to the scriptures (form, redaction, genre criticism)
- ✦ existential philosophy which gives higher authority to experience than to revelation
- ✦ a science which denies possibility of divine intervention, in favour of universal laws
- ✦ comparative religion, which reduces Christianity to a culturally relative faith.

Result of these is to shift concern from revelation to rationalism.

The prescription is to sort out the issue of authority – doctrine of scripture.

Charismatics

The solution for charismatics is not the recovery of a particular doctrine of scripture, but the recovery of a fresh encounter with the Holy Spirit – focussing on the individual, and using the metaphors of hunger and dryness. Bennett had an experience of the HS which changed his life; culminated in book *9 o'clock in the morning* (1970).

Critique of Fundamentalism:

1. The Fundamentalist approach is flawed, in that it takes the methodology of the Enlightenment (the attempt to find formally approved foundations) and applies it to a situation caused by the Enlightenment. Hence, contemporary

Fundamentalists are thoroughly modern creatures committed to the same intellectual aspirations as their secular enemies. Odd to argue we can get beyond the Enlightenment by accepting its basic premises and modes of operation!

2. Its doctrine of Scripture is also flawed – it depends on a doctrine of divine dictation, or on confusing divine inspiration with divine speaking and related speech acts of God.
3. And finally, to include the inerrancy of scripture as the linchpin of a new creed for the church involves a profound reorientation of the church's heritage and vision – a shift from soteriology to epistemology.

Critique of charismatic movement:

If there is a key to renewal, it is to be found here; the foundation of the church's life is to be found by exploring to the full the riches of God made incarnate in Jesus Christ through the agency of the HS here and now. The canons of the church (scripture, creed, liturgy et al) provide the context for such an exploration. All renewal must begin and end in meeting and receiving from the living God; the church and her traditions just provide the context where this can happen. All the synoptics insist Christ came not just to die and rise again, but to baptise the people of God in the HS.

3. A tale of 2 bishops : Newbiggin and Spong

Newbiggin

Had been accustomed in 60s to speak of England as a secular society; came to realise that it was a pagan society – no room remains empty for long, and if God is driven out, other gods come trooping in. *England is a pagan society and the development of a truly missionary encounter with this very tough form of paganism is the greatest intellectual and practical task facing the church.*

The problems:

1. decline
2. disunity between denominations
3. breach between those who see selves as evangelical and those who see selves as ecumenical

The cause lies in the Enlightenment and the rise of knowledge that exalted doubt over faith, reason over superstition, critical method over commitment to revelation. Also the split between facts (ascertained by science and universally believed) and values (everything else, and a matter of private opinion). The Enlightenment effectively created a new conception of person: 'persons are to be understood as autonomous individuals who best fulfil their destiny by rejecting dogma, tradition, and authority, and by exercising reason as suitably informed by scientific experts'.

The Church has.. accepted regulation to the private sphere in a culture whose public vision is controlled by a totally different vision of reality. Result – it's lost the power to address a radical challenge to that vision.

The problem with the Enlightenment is that it bought the impossible notion that there could be any knowledge without faith. The opposite is true – all knowledge ultimately rests on faith.

Spong

Why Christianity must change or die.

We live in exile from the worldview in which the creed was formed; ie the problem the church has is intellectual. We must now develop an appropriate discourse that will capture our contemporary experience of ultimate reality in a way that is in keeping with the intellectual and moral presuppositions of our time. Spong's strategy is to work through the themes of the creed, discarding the worn and dated, keeping the experience which lies at their base, reaching for a new way to articulate our faith today. The outcome:

1. Theism is dead – we can no longer understand God as a supernatural Being
2. Jesus can't therefore be his incarnate Son
3. story of creation and fall is preDarwin mythology
4. virgin birth is biologically impossible
5. miracle stories of NT are not credible in a post-Newtonian world
6. substitutionary atonement is barbarian idea based on primitive concepts of God
7. resurrection can't be physical
8. ascension assumes a 3 tiered universe
9. scripture carries no objective writ that will govern our ethical behaviour for all time
10. prayer cannot be a request to a theistic deity to act in human history in a particular way
11. the hope of life after death must be separated from notions of reward and punishment
12. all humans bear God's image and must be accepted – there can be no discrimination

Critique

Newbigin and Spong both think that the fundamental problem is intellectual in nature; like the Fundamentalists they are in search of an adequate epistemology of theology, the idea being that if we can get our theory of knowledge and the doctrine we derive from it right, we will be well on the way to renewal. But neither the gospel nor the intellectual content of Christian faith are a theory of knowledge. They are constituted by the good news that God has entered the world to heal it through the work of his Son in the power of the HS. Newbigin and Spong both believe the heavy lifting in renewal concerns the credibility of the gospel.

We now have schisms:

- ✚ East and West
- ✚ Protestant and Catholic
- ✚ Orthodox and post-orthodox forms of Christianity.

4. Tensions in Rome : Ruether and Ratzinger

Each tries to work out a response to Vatican 2.

Ruether

Diagnosis: the RC church has become frozen in a network of institutional structures; it's no longer a community but a hierarchy, and churches have become 'drab, dull, mediocre sacramental service stations'. She reads Vatican 2 as supplying an agenda for radical change, which then failed to be delivered.

Solution: should be at once institutional (modelled on the Free Church tradition, with Catholics forming para-institutional organizations which will foster a renewal agenda), pastoral (becoming a place of healing, friendship, nurture) and theological (reconceiving church as community). She sees the charismatic community which was the early church gradually becoming hierarchical and bureaucratic; Jesus did not intend to found a church with a hierarchical government based on that of the Roman empire. She looks instead to a believers' church where distinctions between clergy and laity are abolished.

[she's really after reform rather than renewal]

Ratzinger

The problem: a crisis of ecclesial consciousness. Vision of church: founded on Jesus, who gathered the people of God and drew them to God, uniting them in the eucharist into one Body. The 12 apostles represent the 12 peoples of God, and a 13th is added which is Rome (in Acts). Peter becomes primate, as Rock, and the Catholic church is founded.

Critique

The rift between Newbigin and Spong is replayed between Ruether and Ratzinger. They hold competing historical visions of the origins and development of the church. For Ruether the problems are institutional not epistemological, and the foundation of the Christian faith is experience. For Ratzinger the issue is authority.

5. Dying for renewal : Martin Luther King and Archbishop Romero

Schemes of renewal often reflect a particular diagnosis in which cultural, political and other factors play a crucial role. The problems of the church are seen as related to the problems in the culture, and v.v.

King, like Wesley, saw renewal as affecting not just the church but also the nation. Initial problem was racial segregation.

The gospel at its best deals with the whole man, not only his soul but his body, not only his spiritual well-being, but his material well-being. Any religion that professes to be concerned about the souls of men and is not concerned about the slums that damn them, the economic conditions that strangle them and the social conditions that cripple them is a spiritually moribund religion awaiting burial.

The problem he saw was moral; injustice. The solution is spiritual and theological: the church must implement the gospel by a costly discipline of nonviolent action.

Romero

Also stumbled into renewal through injustice, corruption and terrorism, in this case of El Salvador in the 1970s. His solution was to implement Vatican 2.

1. the purpose of the church is to make obvious the energy of the death and resurrection of Jesus, in its service to the world
2. the tradition of the church is not a museum of souvenirs to be protected but a tradition of hope, especially for the poor

3. this can be done through base ecclesial communities of Bible study, prayer and contextual reflection on action and ministry – the vital cells of the church
4. and the challenging of injustice in society

King combined pacifism with aggressive protest – successful because his opponents had to acknowledge the justice of his cause.

Base communities were/are indispensable in the renewal of the church.

6. Trojan horses from Paris : Schmemmann and Bilezikian

There has been a reluctance to write about renewal in the E Orthodox tradition:

- ✚ renewal has been institutionalised twice within the tradition, in the monasteries and in Lent
- ✚ leaders sense the dangers of excess – erosion of treasures of the fiat, judgementalism, division
- ✚ pervasive spiritual ethos which says renewal should be left to God

Schmemmann wrote in Russian, concerning the liturgical crisis in the celebration of the eucharist: a loss of the encounter with God which used to take place there. Consequences – increase in individualism; communion now seen as place for consolation; some parts of liturgy have been identified as more sacred than others; a false symbolism makes it seem symbolic not real; the split between clergy and laity has widened; the iconostasis has become a wall which separates the two.

The solution is eucharistic renewal.

Bilezikian starts from the same problem of liturgical crisis, in this case the irrelevance of conventional worship for a youth group led by Bill Hybels. The answer lies in the slogan ‘only community is forever’. The Trinity is the original community, man is welcomed in, the fall breaks it, the creation of the people of Israel is its recreation, the coming of the redeemer is its centrepiece, the heavenly city its fulfilment.

The remedy is small groups, with a social vision and every member ministry in which the HS equips and empowers each believer. Clear teaching about spiritual gifts is needed.

Both Schmemmann and Bilezikian share the presenting problem, which is the loss of ecclesial consciousness in worship; but their solutions are radically different. Schmemmann asks too much from liturgy, Bilezikian leaves it too far behind. Willow Creek desanctifies time and ruins the first day of the week as the church’s agreed time for universal celebration – a theology designed to express the oneness of the divine Trinity ends by destroying the common work of liturgy. Bilezikian effectively opts for old-fashioned congregationalism.

7. Postmodernity, or death by one’s own hand – Cupitt and Norman

Don Cupitt

‘Sea of faith’ – metaphor borrowed from poem by Matthew Arnold. Cupitt believes that institutional/official Christianity is in decline, but this just means the end of ecclesiastical Christianity, not the end of Jesus’ message of the kingdom of God – the end of the network of scripture, creeds, rituals and priests which overlaid the kingdom message. Church had defeated kingdom, and the breakthrough against church came with Nietzsche’s declaration that God was dead. Postmodernity allows the resurgence of kingdom faith. The kingdom is of this world, a new ethic, a new relationship to life, post-ecclesiastical and post-dogmatic.

Ecclesiastical religion

The Beyond
 God transcendent/unknown
 Religion mediated by scriptures, creeds, priests
 Dogmatic faith
 Rank, hierarchy
 One particular tradition and vocab
 Much is unseen, dark, beyond our ken
 Pluralism
 Sacred and profane kept separate

Kingdom religion

The here and now
 Immanent
 Religion is immediate, intuitive
 Religion visionary and beliefless
 Egalitarian
 Ecumenical, catholic, panethnic
 Everything seen, open
 World of one equal music
 No distinction sacred/profane

Cupitt thinks Spong is woolly and vague, and offers one more version of liberal Protestantism. Why bother with the church? It makes a good backdrop against which to explain kingdom religion. It’s the theatre for the play.

Edward Norman

Surveys same ground of postmodernity and comes to different conclusions (*Secularism*, Continuum 2002).

1. The culture is more monolithic than it pretends; *universal education, electronic communication (especially television), the computer revolution, the rise of new and articulate social myths, have dispatched effective diversity: a single culture, existing in different levels and reflecting the survival of class consciousness, has come to inhabit both rural and urban, the more and the less socially homogenous.*
2. The new culture lacks depth, promises illusory emancipation, is devoted to conspicuous consumption, avoids reality, is incurably romantic and ministers to human vanity.
3. It is incompatible with the Christian faith; it is the embodiment of a soft and creeping version of secular humanism.

The question: how to deal with this competing vision of the order of things? Norman's view is that we have welcomed the enemy within our own borders and aided/abetted the internal secularisation of the church's life. Eg: church schools have the same secular approach to faith that state schools have; cathedrals have been allowed to become tourist and concert venues (science is about reality, religion is about emotions, and so religious experience lies in personal sensation and aesthetic appreciation); and academic theology is in the hands of liberals.

The solution: a retrieval of the vision of the church as the body of Christ spread out through time and equipped with the authority to identify truth and error: revelation, vocation. We have built a bridge to the secular culture out of the secondary elements of the church's life; we need to recover our intellectual nerve and back away from the superficial arguments of revisionists. In particular we need to recover an authoritative teaching office.

Cupitt is an atheist, Norman an Anglo-Catholic. If they are to be taken seriously we must acknowledge that the crisis of renewal has been overtaken by a crisis in renewal itself. Do we need to cut our losses and abandon the church, starting all over again in the power of the Holy Spirit, or do we need to face the awkward truth that there are no prospects for effective renewal other than a long slow haul?

8. Quaking in the ruins: Wagner and Reno

Peter Wagner. Studied church growth and noticed that the ones which grew were those which outwardly featured the immediate present-day supernatural ministry of the HS. He concluded that a combination of technical and spiritual principles holds the key to the future of the church. He also believes that these new developments signal the end of renewal efforts in traditional forms of Christianity: *especially since the 60s, denominational 'renewal movements' have proliferated in almost every traditional denomination. They have sensed a call of God to remain in their denominations in order to pray for and work for renewal. None that I have been aware of have been successful. The denominational leaders, true to their ideal of pluralism, have tolerated them, but the problems of control, power, and particularly management of financial resources have caused them to domesticate the renewal movements, a skill at which they are competent. What renewal might have taken place is largely cosmetic.*

For Wagner, the blueprint for church growth is found in Ephesians, with the 2 fundamental principles of unity + gifts = growth.

The features of the new 'churchquake' are:

1. an apostolic reformation which combines outreach with present day apostolic ministries
2. transition from bureaucratic to personal authority, legal to relational structure, control to coordination, rational to charismatic leadership
3. releasing members of the local congregation to do the ministry of the church
4. focus on future not past (driven by a vision not a heritage)
5. contemporary worship styles
6. new prayer forms
7. generous giving
8. commitment to outreach including to poor and disadvantaged communities
9. orientation to supernatural power of the HS

R R Reno

Wagner ignores the mainstream and focusses on the new churches, which is where he sees the action. Reno paints the ruin of the mainstream, but refuses to leave it. 'We must keep our noses close to the ill-smelling disaster of modern Christianity, articulate about its failures, but training ourselves to dwell in enduring forms of apostolic language and practice.' We need to start again, to learn the catechism, memorise scripture, repeat the ancient liturgies.

9. Renewal and the quest for intellectual integrity

Easy for discussions of renewal to turn into whining about the church; 'the lament and the jeremiad are a culturally favoured form of discourse in the modern church'... But in recent years we have seen an extraordinary sense of evangelism develop; and renewal never has been comprehensive, but always patchy, partial, scattered, disorganized, and volatile, and it has rarely lasted more than a couple of generations.

Every major branch of Christianity has now entered a period of intense self-analysis and self-searching. But perspectives vary.

Areas of agreement, often about disagreement:

- ✚ we agree about rejection of racism and concern for justice; Romero and King have won the day
- ✚ renewal has exposed a deep fault in contemporary Christianity, and we face a third schism, orthodox vs revisionist, as a response to our postmodern culture. Revisionist are Ruether, Spong, Cupitt; orthodox are Newbigin, Ratzinger, Schmemmann, Norman, Reno.
- ✚ Disagreement on the place of institutions in the life of faith
- ✚ Disagreement on how to read the history of W culture, and how to respond to the changes
- ✚ We are unsure what to do with the emergence of Pentecostalism as a living, volatile, worldwide form of Christianity; it makes theism a live option
- ✚ The literature on renewal tends to cast the issues in intellectual terms; and yet we are not healed and saved by philosophy but by the living God.

Abraham's 'alternative vision of renewal' [but not very alternative, actually]:

The key to the renewal of the church is the varied outworking of the HS, the Lord and Giver of Life. We can express this provocatively by saying that the church is from beginning to end a charismatic community, a community brought into existence, equipped, guided, and sustained by the HS.p158

Jesus instituted the church, the HS constituted it. Jesus worked through the power of the Spirit. At Pentecost the Spirit came on those who followed and believed. From the beginning there were the gifts and the fruits of the Spirit, and a variety of charismatic experiences in the life of the church – conviction of sin, righteousness, judgement. There were also charismatic offices in the early church – deacons/elders, apostles/prophets/evangelists/pastors/teachers. Eventually bishops and overseers. These apostolic traditions were themselves inspired by the HS. The scriptures were written, designated, ordered.

Charismatics have drawn attention to the critical significance of the working of the HS in the life of the church; but the window they have opened is inadequate on its own. Many have relied on some favoured aspect of the working of the HS as a labour-saving device, and broad swathes of tradition have been rejected as merely human and dispensable. The sacraments have been ignored. The history of the church has been dismissed, the intellect dismissed. All these things involve a one-sided emphasis on this or that aspect of the working of God at the expense of all that God has done and promises to do for his people. *The fundamental grammar of renewal is to abandon such narrowness, acknowledge the extraordinary generosity of God, and ask for a fresh outpouring of mercy and grace on the length and breadth, the height and depth of the church... As the HS blows afresh like the wind.. we can be sure that we will always get more than we anticipated. We will be in error, therefore, if we try and freeze the work of the Spirit into the channels and forms with which that work was initially associated. It is better to relax and be open to the fullness, ingenuity, and complexity of the life of the HS in the church. We must have for our treasure what is old and what is new. 163.*

We don't have to agree about epistemology; this itself is a product of the Enlightenment. The debate will be ongoing. But meanwhile we need a wider immersion in the work of the HS; the church must be set free to retrieve all that the HS makes possible through the full canonical heritage of the church. It's not a quick fix, but a long-haul, persistent, cross-generational renewal.

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