

The Second Half of Renewal

Towards the end of 1962 I was thinking about a series of talks to be given at a young people's sailing holiday I was leading the following Easter. I was looking at the titles that had been used over the previous few years, when I realised how negative they all were! Then my mind went to a verse in John's Gospel, which I had read many times before, but which now hit me with new force: where Jesus says "I have come that they may have life, and have it abundantly" (10:10 RSV- "to the full" NIV). I realised that my Christian life up to that point consisted of a whole lot of things (most of them probably enjoyable!) which I was not allowed to do. My life was ruled by fear, not by love.

Then in the last few weeks I have been impacted by a verse from Galatians: "The law was ... a tutor in charge of us until Christ should come ..." (3:24 NEB). I have been reminded over again that the dispensation of the law (which we normally interpret as being the Old Testament) has been superseded by the coming of Jesus Christ. So Paul goes on to say "... when we should be justified through faith" - through Jesus, not by our own efforts. Paul criticises the Galatians - who are Christians! - for continuing to live "by law" even though they have been saved through Christ.

What I have realised afresh recently is that many of us are doing the same; and that this affects our understanding of the renewal movement.

Many of us are familiar with the concept of "stages of faith" suggested by James Fowler and others. These observers have built on the New Testament metaphor of moving from "milk" (where we swallow pre-digested food prepared by others) to "meat" (where we are fully involved in the process of chewing and digesting the tougher food). Some have begun to take seriously the fact that many of us get stuck in our Christian development, and wondered why. Alan Jamieson, a Baptist minister from New Zealand, has researched the reasons why some not just get stuck, but leave - stop going to church altogether, without losing faith in Christ¹.

One of the most convincing studies in this field (and quoted with approval by Jamieson) is *The Critical Journey* by Janet Hagberg and Robert Guelich². They define the stages of faith, the first few of which many people pass, as follows:

- The Recognition of God
- The Life of Discipleship
- The Productive Life
- The Journey Inward
- The Journey Outward
- The Life of Love

They have not meant to imply that as we move towards maturity, we progress smoothly from one stage to the next. Indeed we often move "backwards" - particularly when we react negatively to a time of crisis in our lives. However, these writers have examined a number of crucial events, which affect an increasing number of people. These include:

- People get frustrated by the certainties too often put forward by over-busy churches, and worn out by the unrealistic expectations from the leadership; and they gradually stop going
- We experience crises in our lives, which jolt us out of our comfort-zones. Depending on how we choose to react (and we need to recognise that we have a

¹ *A Churchless Faith* SPCK, UK, 2002

² Sheffield Publishing Company, USA, 1989

choice) these crises help us to move forward to another stage, or give us a reason to move off the journey altogether

- Hagberg & Guelich suggest that at the end of Stage 4 - "The Journey Inward" - is what they call "The Wall", which we cannot pass through without being totally transformed (see further below).

The movement from one stage to another involves painful transition. In a recent article³ Jamieson contrasts "Conventional faith expression", "Transitioning", and "Post-conventional faith expression". Here are a few of his descriptions:

Conventional faith expression	Transitioning	Post-conventional faith expression
Focus on a black and white, right and wrong faith	Focus on the greys of faith and life	Focus on all shades of faith and life
Dependence	Independence	Interdependence
Answers accepted	Searching and questioning, doubt and critique	Understanding and relishing of mystery, paradox and wonder
Focus on external authority of leaders, the Bible and my community of faith	Focus on internal authority of self-understanding, experience and self truth	Focus on integration of internal and external authorities of faith
Specific personal examples	Hearing and telling our own stories	Working with metaphor, art and poetry

Jamieson says "this shift of faith from conventional to post-conventional, from a first naivety to a second naivety, from pre-critical to post-critical ... is vitally important in our present context. Why? Because the culture we live within fosters, supports and encourages this shift in our thinking, understanding and living out of our faith".

Richard Rohr, a writer, leader of a Christian community in the USA, simplifies the discussion of "stages of faith" when he spoke recently⁴ of "The two halves of Life". He suggests (my paraphrase) that in the first half of our lives we as Christians are seeking for truth, for certainty, for "a place to stand" - for what he calls "the container". We define clear boundaries between "in" and "out" - we fight for right doctrine, for what we consider is the honour of our Lord Jesus Christ. We erect a personal fortress around us, for our spiritual protection, because our interior relationship with Christ is not strong enough to live without it.

He maintains that this is a necessary stage in our Christian development - but it is a stage. If we are to come to real maturity, he suggests, we need to move to the second stage of life - from "the container" to "the content". Having discovered the reality of forgiveness, of our salvation in Jesus Christ, and the inner security that this brings, we need then to reach out from it into the uncertain, the mysterious, the undefined, in a new process of compassionate discovery.

How can we distinguish between these two stages? Here are some suggestions (which are mine, not Richard Rohr's!):

- Defining ourselves less by doctrine / party / "text" than by relationship / trust.
- Moving from fear as the driver of our discipleship, to love; from guilt, to generosity.
- The external boundaries are lowered, as our interior security grows.
- Our metaphors are less militaristic, and more compassionate. (In Revelation 5:5-6 we see a crucial change in meaning of "The Lion", the one who has triumphed, and has the right to

³ *Spirited Exchanges* (available by post or email, enquire at spiritex@central.org.nz) Issue 36, August/September 2005

⁴ At the *Greenbelt Christian Arts Festival* 2005

open the mystery of the universe. It is as if everyone was expecting the traditional symbol of military might; but instead in verse 6 the "new Lion" is revealed as a Lamb, "with the marks of crucifixion on him".)

- The gospel methodology becomes unconditional love, not aggressive persuasion.
- Our stance is one who serves, not one who demands loyalty.
- In our worship, we must only move to the triumph of the resurrection when we have experienced Christ's crucifixion

I am becoming more and more convinced that in our thinking about renewal, we need to move from the first to the second stages of life. I believe too - and my own experience bears this out - that the transition between the first and second stage involves a total, life-transforming transition which Hagberg and Guelich describe as going through "The Wall", but charismatics describe as being "filled with the Holy Spirit" - not necessarily a once-only experience, but again and again, when we reach the end of ourselves ...

Some key concepts from the New Testament are relevant here:

- "The one who fears is not made perfect in love ... perfect love drives out fear" (1John 4:18 - order reversed!)
- "The law of the Spirit of life set me free from the law of sin and death" (Romans 8:2)
- "Where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom" (2 Corinthians 3:17)
- "The fruit of the Spirit is love ..." (Galatians 5:22)

Life in the Spirit is based, not on negatives, but positives; not on external constraints, but on self-control leading to freedom.

If we take seriously the balance of the New Testament teaching about the Holy Spirit, I suggest we need to consider the following:

- John Wimber (one of the most influential charismatic leaders of the second half of the 20th Century) said "there must be no heroes". He challenged the cult of personality that has been so evident amongst leaders in the renewal movement, but which has led to so much immaturity amongst their disciples, and far too often to an inadequate or disastrous inheritance when they have moved on or died.
- Forgive me if I am being negative or critical, but to what extent are the large homogeneous gatherings of Christians that are increasing in influence in the UK, leading people to maturity? Are they in danger of reinforcing external certainties, which inhibit spiritual exploration?
- When sincere believers leave our churches, do we consider seriously that we might have to change, or do we hope and pray that they will see the light and return (to how things were before)? What have the alternative worship communities, to which many of these "leavers" gravitate, to teach us?
- In the tragic fragmentation of the Anglican Communion (which is taking place in other Christian denominations as well), there is great pressure upon renewal groups to align themselves with one or other "party", defined not by trust but by text (mostly by what we are against rather than what we are for). Where, in this mess, are the bridge-builders? Where is the dialogue taking place - when even to listen to some people is regarded as a sign of compromise, or weakness? Where are we reaching out to those who think differently, rather than sticking with those who think the same?
- We often, and rightly, quote Paul in 2 Corinthians 4:7, that "we have this treasure in jars of clay, to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us". We follow that by identifying with Paul's sufferings (vv.8-9). But in my view we do not often take seriously what he says in verse 10: "We always carry around in our body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be revealed in our body". On a number of occasions recently I have been led to pray for the Holy Spirit to mark people who are serious about their discipleship (and are ready to consider the possibility that they might be called to die

for Jesus Christ) with a cross on their backs - replacing the backbone with steel, and laying a steel crosspiece across the shoulder-blades.

- Where do we see epitomised in the renewal movement the servant attitude of "the Lamb"? Do we over-emphasise power, conquest etc (which have their right place in spiritual warfare teaching) to the exclusion of the vulnerability which we see in the example of Jesus?
- Why is it that in many of the parts of the world where churchgoing is highest, the link between "Sunday" and "Monday" is at best very tenuous, and the concern for human rights, families, justice and fair trade etc are notable by their absence?
- Where are the prophetic voices of today, which challenge the church, and the governments, over fundamental issues of the Gospel - care for the created order (the first command God gave to human kind) and care for the poor (the third commandment!)?
- We often teach that "the gifts of the Holy Spirit grow in the soil of the fruit [of the Spirit]" - but do we take seriously that the gifts are not an end in themselves - their purpose is to bring forth another kind of "fruit" - a mature, Christ-like character (Ephesians 4:12-16)?

Over the last few years we in SOMA have been exploring what I have called "the internal logic of renewal" - what renewal is for, without which it gets stuck in an inward-looking mentality of individualism. This has led us to incorporate in our basic teaching a version of "Community Transformation" - which (based loosely on the research of George Otis⁵) seeks to help people understand why the Gospel flourishes more in one place than another. We have used this teaching in 5 continents, and it clearly relates to people in widely varying situations.

George Otis has studied many communities where this transformation is under way (it is never complete!), and concludes that there are two factors common to all, which he describes as Persevering Leadership and Fervent, United Prayer.

- We urgently need leaders who will stay, being willing to go through the pain barrier for the sake of their people.
- In addition, there is a vital need for intercessors, those who are sufficiently close to God to feel His pain for their community, and weep His tears - tears which water spiritual deserts and make them fertile again (see Psalm 84:6).

It saddens me that many of the movements which claim to follow the renewal leading of the Holy Spirit do not take seriously either community transformation, nor the deep, united intercession which is an essential component of it.

My concern is that we need the courage to move out from our comfortable certainties into the world of genuine questioning, of prophetic and compassionate engagement in the struggles of sincere people to make sense of the mess of their lives, at home, at work (or un-work), and the world at large. This is going to be costly. I believe strongly that we are moving into an era in the life of the Christian Church where persecution is going to become normal: not just in countries governed by fundamentalist Islamic or Hindu governments, but in our own, so-called "Christian" nations, where truth has given way to short-term "spin".

In situations like we face today, the temptation is to retreat into the fortress of unchallengeable conviction. In psychological language it is called "regression", associated with childhood, not maturity. Let us pray for the courage to stand in the centre of this uncertain open space, dependent only upon the vulnerability of our Saviour, the "Lamb".

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27.10.2005

⁵ Illustrated in the series of *Transformation* videos, but set out more helpfully in *Informed Intercession* Renew Books, USA, 1999, especially chapter 2