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The Renewal of the Church

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I AM SURE IT WILL not be necessary to deal extensively with the *reasons why we need a spiritual renewal of our churches*. In a Dutch doctoral thesis I read the following illustration:

The future of God in the Netherlands evokes the image of a camping-ground in the autumn. In the green pasture there are still a few tents, on the edge there are a few immovable site caravans. Here and there is a car with a foreign number plate. There is a lonely boy carrying a rucksack and looking for the Manager. The latter gives him a searching glance and asks: For how long?¹

It is a splendid but also a shocking picture. There are still a few tents, a few churches, but they do not mean much anymore; they are only 'tents'. There are a few immovable site caravans,

a few old-fashioned chapels that did not move along with the times. There are a few cars with foreign number plates, a few sects that came from across the Atlantic Ocean or from the Far East. There is a lonely boy with a rucksack, the image of young people who are still looking for God (the Manager—with a Capital M!), but he has little faith in their search and therefore asks: 'For how long?'.

I believe this picture of Holland applies to other western European countries as well. In West Germany church attendance has dropped from 7% in 1968 to 4% in 1983. Among young people it has even dropped from 9% to 2%! In the big cities it is still worse: not even 1%. Since 1970 some two million people have officially broken with the EKD (the Evangelical Church in Germany). In Great Britain, in the seventies, a million people stopped going to the church. In the same period a thousand church buildings were closed and the number of clergymen dropped by 2500. In the last thirty years the Free Churches lost 700,000 members.

Particularly alarming is the fact that so many young people drop out. The churches seem to be completely losing

1 Paul Schnabel, *Tussen Stigma en charisma. Nieuwe religieuze bewegingen en geestelijke volksgezondheid*, 1982, 186.

This article is re-published from our issue of Volume 13:1 (January 1989), 66-86. At the time, the author, Dr. Klaas Runia (1926-2006), was the President of the Fellowship of European Evangelical Theologians (FEET) and was ministering in Holland. He was Professor of Systematic Theology at the Reformed Theological College, Geelong Australia (1956-71) and Professor of Practical Theology at Kampen Theological University, Netherlands (1971-92). While some of the material in this article may be dated, the general thrust is timeless.

their grip on their future members. And this dropping out of the young people does not happen only in families that are on the edge of the church, but also in families that are actively participating in church life. There is hardly any church family nowadays that does not experience the sad fact that one or more children do not show any interest in the church and in the Christian faith. Apparently secularization is not only a threatening force attacking the church from the outside, but it is also active inside our families and churches.

On the top of all this we observe the fact that many churches are weakened by the phenomenon of pluralism. There is no longer a united witness. In fact, the churches often seem to be quite uncertain about their own message. From the pulpits the people who still come to church hear contradictory messages, not to speak of the conflicting views propounded by the theologians. In many local churches there are very few, if any, signs of true spiritual life.

This is a sombre picture indeed, but it is the picture of *western Europe*. Of course, it is not the picture of the total church as it is spread all over the world. There are continents where the church is growing by leaps and bounds. This is particularly true of the church in some African and Asian countries. But however comforting and encouraging this may be, it does not alter the fact that we here in western Europe are experiencing a strong decline in church attendance and church membership. Moreover, there is little reason to think that this decline is only temporary.

It is simply impossible to compare our situation with that in other continents. While in the other continents people experience the gospel as some-

thing entirely new, we are facing the fact that in western Europe people are abandoning Christianity because they see it as something totally antiquated and therefore useless. While in Africa and in Asia people are more or less in a pre-Christian situation, we are moving towards a *post-Christian situation*,² with all its terrible consequences. One of them is that people who have gone 'through' Christianity seem to have become immune to the message of the gospel. They are like persons who have had a smallpox vaccination. After they have received a tiny bit of vaccine they have developed sufficient antibodies to be immune to a real 'attack'.

It is obvious that this sad situation cannot be changed by a few simple tricks or structural alterations. What is necessary for the churches in western Europe is a *complete spiritual renewal*. They really have to be made 'new' again.

I A Suggestion From The Sixties

But how can this happen? What should we do? Some twenty years ago many church leaders thought they knew the answer. In his booklet *The Humiliation of the Church*, published in 1967, Albert Van den Heuvel, then Director of the Youth Department of the World Council of Churches, mentioned quite a number of *renewal theologians*, such as Bonhoeffer, Visser 't Hooft, Rahner, Kueng, Kraemer, Ebeling, Weber, Congar, MacLeod, Gollwitzer, Hoekendijk, Newbigin, Margull and many others.

2 Cf. Alan D. Gilbert, *The Making of Post-Christian Britain*, 1980.

He further mentioned quite a few names of theologians and sociologists who stressed the need for the church to relate to society; such as Wickham, Wendland, Simanowski, Gibson, Winter, and Peter Berger.³

All these people, in one way or another, stressed the necessity of a 'total' renewal of church and theology. They were all convinced that the present structures of the church are altogether outdated. According to Ernest Southcott, what we need is not a renewal of the wallpaper of the church, but of the walls themselves! Van der Heuvel himself says: 'Perhaps first of all everything must be razed to the ground so that something new may be built from the rubbish.' But what is the blueprint of the new building? It must be a church that is directed towards the world. 'Society (the world) is rediscovered in renewal theology as a laboratory of God, in which he carries out his experiments. Pagans are the bearers of the promise, and within the circle of the renewers there are open eyes and open ears for what Christ says to them through the world.'

Within their own churches they often feel ill at ease. They rebel against the dogged complacency they find there. They are often also bad churchgoers. Even though most of them still attend, they feel like the kitchen chef of Louis XIV, who had to eat dry bread in the Bastille. They believe that the church and its people are far too 'inner-directed' and do not know the despairing feeling of the spiritual void, a silent God, and the breakdown of a personal morality.

What we have to learn again is that Jesus never became a Christian; he became a man. Therefore we are not called to become Christians and we are not called to create Christians. Our calling is to help people to become people. The church has to take on the 'form of a slave' and to get away from its 'morphological fundamentalism'—that is, the fundamentalism of one particular outdated structure which is regarded as ultimate and final. Rather, we should let the world have its own forms and fill these forms with the content of the gospel.

For this reason, sociology is not just helpful but essential for the church. To put it in the words of Hans Storck: 'The church can be really present and function in a culture only if she synchronizes her calendar with the calendar of that society.' Or, in the words of one of the documents of the WCC in those very same years: if the church is to have a future, it must be the 'church for others' or 'the church for the world'.

II Wrong Diagnosis

It cannot be denied that these views of the so-called renewal theologians have really helped the church to get a better view of itself. It is a fact that in the past the church has often been too inner-directed, and it was salutary for the church to be reminded of its responsibility for the world. And yet we must also say that this theology of the sixties and seventies has not brought about a true renewal of the church. The decline of the church has not been stopped by it. On the contrary, the churches that followed the guidelines given by the renewal theologians, and devoted much of their time and energy

3 Gilbert, *Post-Christian Britain*, 48, 183.

to the matters of the world, have suffered more from this decline than the churches that continued to concentrate on the preaching of the gospel itself.

Why was this so? Because the calendar or the agenda of the world first of all deals with political, social and economical matters, which do not belong to the primary task of the church. I do not mean to say that the gospel itself has nothing to do with politics or economics. On the contrary, as a man who belongs to the church of which Abraham Kuyper was also a member, I believe that the whole world belongs to Christ and that we have to serve him also in our political, social and economic life. But this is the task of the individual believers rather than of the institutional church. The latter has its own, very special task: to be a community of believers who come together for worship, for instruction in the Christian faith, for mutual pastoral care, and whose first task towards the world is the spreading of the gospel through missionary and diaconal service.

Undoubtedly, the church is part of the world. It is one of the many organizations that we find in this world. Its structures are, just as in the case of all human organizations, worldly structures that can clearly be discerned. They are also open to criticism and in constant need of renovation. But the church is also more than just a human organization with worldly structures. It is also the body of Christ, the people of God. We should never forget that the church has its place in the Christian confession of faith and that in that confession we say: 'I believe in a holy, catholic and apostolic church.'

In its deepest essence the church is an object of faith. It has its origin

not here on earth but in heaven. As the Heidelberg Catechism says concerning the holy catholic church:

I believe that, from the beginning to the end of the world, and from among the whole human race, the son of God, by his Spirit and his Word, gathers, protects and preserves for himself, in the unity of the true faith, a congregation chosen for eternal life.

And that this article of faith is not a mere abstraction appears from what immediately follows: 'Moreover, I believe that I am and forever will remain a living member of it' (Lord's Day 21).

III Church And Spirit

The church, however, is not only an article of faith, but it also has its place in the *third article* of the Apostle's Creed. This means that in dealing with the church we find ourselves in the sphere of action of the *Holy Spirit*. Of course we have always known this and yet we are confronted by the fact that especially in Protestant theology the relationship between the Spirit and church has often been a neglected aspect.

Usually the main emphasis was on the work of the Spirit in the individual believer.⁴ I remember that, when a few years ago I was asked to give a paper on 'the Holy Spirit and the church',⁵ I

⁴ Cf. Hendrikus Berkhof, *Christian Faith* (Michigan: Eerdmans, 1979), 322, 340ff. Berkhof mentions some exceptions, such as John Owen, Abraham Kuyper and Paul Althaus.

⁵ Klaas Runia, 'The Holy Spirit and the Church' in *The Holy Spirit down to Earth* (RES Publications, Grand Rapids, 1977), 29.

checked a great number of theological works on this topic and soon discovered how poor the harvest was. And yet we cannot understand the reality of the church if we do not constantly see its relationship to, and dependence upon, the Spirit. Rightly it has been said: 'Without the *pneuma* there is no *soma*'.⁶

The church owes not only its coming into existence to the Spirit, but also (and no less) its continued existence. Otto Weber has pointed out that in the New Testament 'body' and 'Spirit' are almost synonymous concepts (cf. 1 Cor. 12:13; 10:3, 4; Eph. 2:16, 18; 4:4).⁷ This does not at all mean that the church therefore 'has' the Spirit. The Spirit is nobody's property, neither the individual believer, nor any congregation or denomination. As David Watson puts it:

There is no guaranteed bestowal of the Spirit at baptism, confirmation or ordination.... The Spirit will not be tied to the church, nor to any ecclesiastical office within the church.... The church which tries to tie the Spirit to its institutionalized forms, to its traditional patterns, or to its doctrinal statements, will quickly find itself moribund and powerless. True spiritual life and freedom will come only insofar as the church submits to the Spirit, listens to the Spirit and obeys the Spirit. At every stage we must learn to hear what the Spirit is saying

to the churches, even if that word sometimes is a word of rebuke, or a warning of judgment. God gives the Spirit to those who obey him.⁸

The last expression is taken from Acts 5:32 and is very important for our understanding of the Spirit and his work. On the one hand, it clearly says that *God gives the Spirit*. No one can dispose of the Spirit. No one can 'grab' the Spirit and force him to act. On the other hand, we also see that we ourselves are 'involved' in this giving of the Spirit, for he is given to *those who obey him*.

Precisely at this point we encounter the essential difference between the work of Christ and that of the Spirit. In Christ's work we are involved only as objects. He does everything, we do nothing. He does everything for us, but also without us. Paul makes this quite clear in Rom. 5:8f.: Christ died for us while we were *still sinners*. Yes, we were *still enemies* of God, we were reconciled to God by the death of his Son. In the work of the Spirit, the relationship is quite different. Although the initiative is and remains always his, he at the same time and from the very beginning *involves us actively* in his work and uses us in his service. He wants and expects us to work together with him. For this reason Paul can speak of himself and his helpers as co-workers with God (1 Cor. 3:9; 1 Thess. 3:2; cf. Col. 4:11).

6 Rene Padilla, 'The Kingdom of God and the Church', in *Theological Fraternity Bulletin*, No. 1 and 2, 1976, 7.

7 Cf. O. Weber, *Versammelte Gemeinde*, 1975, 24f.

8 David Watson, *I believe in the Church* (London: Hodder & Stoughton 1978), 166-67. Cf. also Peter Kuzmič, 'The Church and the Kingdom of God', in *The Church, God's Agent for Change*, edited by Bruce I. Nicholls (Exeter: Paternoster, 1986), 71ff.

This does not mean a pneumatological synergism, a division of labour between the Spirit and us, something like 50–50 (or, if that is too much honour for us, 90–10; or, if we are still more humble, 99–1). No it is quite different. On the one hand, we must say that the Spirit does everything, the full 100%. And yet the sum total is not 200% but 100%, for he works in and through us. He employs us with all that we are and have. He never uses us as robots but always as living people who are in his service. We find this pneumatological mystery well expressed in Paul's words in Phil. 2:12 and 13—'Work out your own salvation with fear and trembling, for God is at work in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure'. Here we have the 'twice the 100%' which nevertheless remains one single 100%, and the secret lies in the little word 'for'.

All this is of great importance for our subject: it means that when we speak of the renewal of the church, we do not only speak about the work of the Spirit, but at the same time also about our own task!

IV Structures And Renewal

This task first of all involves our own personal renewal. I do mention this first because I believe that there is a certain chronological order in *personal renewal* of the church. Sometimes one hears people saying that the members of the congregation must *first* be renewed personally and that only *after* that can we begin to think about the renewal of the church. I believe this is a mistake and that it is based on a wrong dilemma. A similar dilemma one often encounters with regard to

the change of social structures. Quite often the argument runs as follows: 'if people would change, the structures would improve automatically'. I totally disagree with this argument.

In the first place, nothing happens 'automatically' in the realm of social and economic structures. They are far too strong and too tough. Secondly, wrong structures often imprison people and therefore obstruct personal renewal. A company with dishonest practices often has a corrupting influence on its employees. In a different and yet similar way a church with antiquated, formalistic and authoritarian structures may have a negative impact on the personal renewal of its members. Likewise, a modern church that has a strongly bureaucratic centre, staffed by theological or social professionals who are constantly trying to 'brainwash' the local congregations and their members, may impede the spiritual renewal of its members.

What we really need is a *combination of personal and congregational renewal*. For its renewal the congregation needs renewed people, but in order to attain personal renewal the members also need a renewed congregation.

V Constant Renewal

From Scripture it is perfectly clear that personal renewal is a permanent need. To become a Christian may be a once-for-all event, but having become a Christian one is in constant need of ongoing renewal. Paul writes to believers in Rome, who were Christians already: 'Do not be conformed to this world but be transformed [N.B. the present tense! It is a constant process] by the renewal of your mind, that you may

prove what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect' (12:2; cf. 2 Cor. 4:16).

This renewal means a new orientation, due to which the 'power of critical judgment' (Greek: *nous*) is able to test and discern what is the will of God. But this, naturally, has consequences for the whole way of life. To the Colossians Paul writes that they 'have put off the old nature with its practices and put on the new nature' (3:9, 10). This undoubtedly refers to their baptism in the name of Christ. But it is not just a once-in-a-life experience, for the apostle immediately adds that this new nature 'is being renewed [N.B. again the present tense!] in knowledge after the image of its creator'.

The source of this renewal is the *gospel of Jesus Christ*; that which once was proclaimed by the prophets and the apostles and now is being proclaimed in the Sunday services. This gospel alone can renew us from day to day. The power of renewal does not reside in us. In his letter Peter quotes the following words from Isaiah 40: 'All flesh is like grass and all its glory like the flower of grass. The grass withers and the flower falls, but the words of the Lord abide forever'; and then he immediately adds: 'That word is the good news which was preached to you' (1 Peter 1:24, 25).

The secret power of this proclamation is the *Holy Spirit*, who causes this word of the gospel to penetrate into the heart and to permeate our whole existence. The Gospel of John calls this a 'new' birth or a birth 'from above' (3:3). Without the presence and activity of the Spirit nothing will happen, even if we go to church twice every Sunday and read the Bible daily. The

Spirit must open our ears and our heart to the gospel, and he must do this time and again.

In the New Testament personal renewal is not only a once-for-all event (this is undoubtedly true of the initial act of renewal as in John 3:3 and 5; Eph. 2:4, 5; 1 John 2:29; 3:9; 4:7; 5:1.4.18—in these cases the aorist or the perfect is being used), but it is also a life-long process (cf. Romans 12:2; 2 Cor. 4:16; Col. 3:10; Tit. 3:5). In the spiritual realm we can never live off the interest of the capital we once acquired. Every day we have to go to the bank of the Holy Spirit to receive renewing grace from his riches.

The same is true of the *congregation*. It, too, is in constant need of renewing grace. No more than the individual believer does it have a capital hidden somewhere in a secret vault in the church. Sometimes we may make this mistaken assumption. We see our nice church, we look at our smoothly running organization and at all the people that belong to it and all the activities that are going on, and we conclude that we have a living church. Or we pride ourselves on the orderly way in which things are going in our church. We have a 'good' minister who conducts the worship service in a very nice and dignified way, who is a talented preacher, who is a good pastor.

What more could one ask? And so we smugly look down upon other congregations where things are not as good as in our parish. But is it really so good? Is our congregation really alive? James I. Packer says in his book, *Keep in Step with the Spirit*, that many churches today are orderly simply because they are asleep, and with some he fears it is the sleep of death. It is no

commendable thing to be orderly in a cemetery!⁹

VI The Renewal Of The Congregation

But how does a congregation come to real life? It is striking that the *New Testament* does not say much of the renewal of the congregation. I think this is due to the fact that most authors address congregations that are still in a *missionary* situation. For this reason the main emphasis in the New Testament letters is on the *building up* of the congregation. It is only in later parts of the New Testament that we read about the *renewal* of the congregation.

In these cases we have to do with older, sometimes second generation congregations, which already have to be warned against the slackening of their faith and love. We find such warnings, for instance, in the seven letters of the exalted Christ to the churches in Asia Minor (Rev. 2 and 3), in the letter to the Hebrews, the letter of Jude, the second letter of Peter, and also in the last letters of Paul, the so-called Pastoral Epistles.

It is noteworthy that all these letters are always addressed to the *presbyteroi*. Luther grasped the essence of the New Testament view of the congregation very well when he spoke of the 'priesthood of all believers'. The same is true of the (Reformed) Heidelberg Catechism that first speaks of the threefold office of Jesus Christ and then immediately continues with the

threefold office of the Christian (Lord's day 12).

The New Testament does not know the phenomenon of a 'pastor's church'. In such a church 'the spiritual gifts of the laity have [usually] atrophied, while the responsibilities of ministers and administrators have hypertrophied'.¹⁰ We may even go so far as to say that the so-called 'pastor's church' has a deadly effect on the congregation.¹¹ The congregation can come to renewal only when it begins to realize that it is itself responsible for its own spiritual life and therefore also for its own renewal.

In the New Testament this renewal is always linked with the *Spirit*. All letters to the seven congregations in Asia Minor close with the words: 'He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches'. This expression is the more striking, when we realize that Jesus Christ himself, so to speak, dictates the letters. And yet at the close of each letter he refers to the Spirit as *speaking* to the congregation.

A twofold truth is revealed here: in the first place, the exalted Christ does all his work through the Spirit; and secondly, the congregation can hear and come to renewal only through the very same Spirit.

¹⁰ Richard F. Lovelace, *Dynamics of Spiritual Life* (Downers Grove: IVP, 1979), 17.

¹¹ Johannes Berewinkel, 'Ausbildung und zurüstung von Gemeindemitarbeitern', in Theodor Schober and Hans Thimme (Hrsg.), *Gemeinde in diakonischer und missionarischer Verantwortung*, 1979, 129—'Eine sogenannte Pastorenkirche wirt fuer die Gemeinde toedlich'.

⁹ James I Packer, *Keep in Step with the Spirit* (Downers Grove: IVP, 1984), 249.

VII God's Work And Ours

But *how* does renewal happen? And what happens in such a renewal? As to the *how* we must always realize that the renewal of the church is *God's work*. Visser't Hooft, who made a thorough study of what both the Old and New Testaments say about renewal, states unequivocally that all the Scriptures teach us 'that the renewal of the Church means first of all the creative work of God among his people, the victories won by the new *aion* over the old *aion*. The church does not renew itself: it is the object of God's renewal.'

'Be ye renewed' does not mean: 'Get busy and find some different and better method of Christian action.' It means: 'Expose yourself to the life-giving work of God. Pray that he may make the dry bones come to life. Expect great things from him. And get ready to do what he commands.'¹² Visser 't Hooft calls this a very 'practical truth'. For it implies that renewal does not begin with solemn declarations and decisions of synods or conferences or committees, but with 'an encounter of God and men, in which God takes hold of the situation and empowers them to serve as his instruments of renewal'.¹³

Must we then simply wait till God takes action? Visser 't Hooft says: Yes, indeed. But he immediately adds: 'Our waiting must be waiting in the biblical sense'. That is, 'as the eyes of servants look unto the hand of their masters and as the eyes of a maiden unto the hands of the mistress, *so* our eyes wait upon

the Lord our God' (Ps. 132:2). Again we see that from the very beginning *we ourselves are involved*.

It is from this perspective of our own involvement that I want to mention the following things we ought to do.

1. First of all we must *repent*. This is not a particularly popular word in our day. For many people, even in the church, it evokes all kinds of negative feelings. And yet we cannot avoid it. Renewal, both personal and congregational, always begins with repentance of our sinful past. It is striking that the letters to the seven churches of Asia Minor mention the verb 'to repent' eight times! The Greek word used is *metanoein*.

This is not a merely intellectual change of mind or of ideas, but indicates a real 'turning around' of the whole person.¹⁴ It means that we repent of our own self-opinionated ideas, our own self-willed works, our own self-righteousness; and that we return to the heart of the gospel, to our first love (Rev. 2:4), to our first works (Rev. 2:5), when we were still ablaze for the Lord, expecting everything from him and willing to give ourselves completely to him.

2. All this is possible only when we become a *praying* congregation. Prayer is the secret of a congregation that is alive. In the Acts of the Apostles we read again how much and how earnestly the early church was engaged in prayer. In ch. 1, after the ascension of the Lord his followers devote them-

¹² W. A. Visser 't Hooft, *The Renewal of the Church* (London: SCM, 1956), 90–91.

¹³ Visser 't Hooft, *The Renewal of the Church*, 91.

¹⁴ Cf. 'Conversion', by J. Goetzmann, in *The International Dictionary of New Testament Theology*, edited by Colin Brown (Exeter: Paternoster, 1975) 1:358.

selves with one accord to prayer (v. 14). In ch. 2, with the outpouring of the Spirit the new congregation devotes itself to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers (v. 42). In ch. 4, when they are persecuted they engage in prayer, and 'when they had prayed, the place in which they were gathered together was shaken; and they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke the word of God with boldness' (v. 31). Peter and John pray for the new converts in Samaria that they may receive the Holy Spirit (v. 15).

In ch. 12, when Peter is imprisoned the congregation prays for him (vv. 5, 12). In ch. 13, when Barnabas and Saul are commissioned for mission work, the congregation fasts and prays (v. 3). In ch. 15, while in prison Paul and Silas pray and sing hymns to God (v. 25). In ch. 20, when Paul takes leave of the elders of Ephesus, he kneels down and prays with them all (v. 36). In ch. 21, the same happens at Tyre, where they pray on the beach (v. 5). A congregation that seeks renewal must be a praying congregation.

3. The *worship service* is of paramount importance for the renewal of the congregation. Unfortunately, too often people go to church out of habit and tradition. They do go, but actually expect little and consequently receive little too. Quite often there is a lack of preparation. The worshippers do not prepare themselves through personal prayer, nor do they pray for the minister who has to proclaim the word of God and lead the congregation in the prayers. How then can they expect anything worthwhile to happen in their worship? For such is possible only if and when both the congregation and

the minister are fired by the Spirit.

4. Only then will the congregation also hear *preaching* that is charged with the power of the Spirit. The history of the Christian church makes it quite clear that such preaching is at the heart of every revival. The 16th century Reformation, which perhaps was the greatest revival of all times, was due to the rediscovery of the gospel of free grace by an obscure monk, who taught the Bible in one of the small universities of Germany.

When this discovery was shared by others, a wave of new preaching swept over western Europe and in thousands of cities and villages a renewal of the church took place. The same is true of the greatest revivals of the 18th and 19th centuries: preaching in the power of the Spirit was the driving force behind them. Dr. Martin Lloyd-Jones more than once remarked: 'Great preachers produce great listeners and great congregations.'

In his book, *The Renewal of the Church*, W. A. Visser 't Hooft writes: 'Every true renewal of the Church is based on the hearing anew of the Word of God as it comes to us in the Bible.'¹⁵ Why? 'Because the Bible is the authentic record of the only radically new event that has ever taken place in this world.' If we seek to renew the church by taking our lead from some new religious or cultural development or some new technique, we remain in fact 'within the closed circle of the old world'.

If we turn to some period of our own past, such as the 16th century Reformation or 17th century Pietism,

¹⁵ Goetzmann, 'Conversion', 91f.

we are not yet 'directly in touch with the source'. We can get into touch with the new world only if we submit ourselves to the judgment and inspiration of God's revelation in Jesus Christ, and this revelation is given to us through the Scriptures. In true preaching which is based on these Scriptures and is made into the living Word of God by the Spirit we are put in direct touch with this source. Rest assured that renewal will take place when the Word is preached, as Paul puts it, 'in demonstration of the Spirit and power' (1 Cor. 2:4).

5. A congregation that is made alive by this kind of preaching will also become a true *fellowship*. It will no longer be a random collection of unrelated individuals, but it will be a *koinonia* in which there is a place for all: for the older ones and the young, for those who are healthy and those who are sick and handicapped, for families but also for single and lonely people. In such a fellowship the members will care for each other and actively assist each other in their mutual needs. They will suffer together and rejoice together and, when the need arises, even admonish each other (cf. 1 Cor. 12:12–26).

6. Such a congregation will again become a 'charismatic' congregation and pay attention to the *gifts of the Holy Spirit*. According to the New Testament, each believer receives one or more *charismata* from the Spirit (cf. Rom. 12:6, 8; 1 Cor. 12:28–31; Eph. 4:17; 1 Peter 4:10, 11). The problem in many congregations is that the members do not even know that they have received gifts, nor do they know how to use them. If we seek the renewal of the congregation one of our first tasks may well be to look for these gifts (mind

you, not first of all in ourselves but in others!) and encourage others to make use of them for the building up of the congregation.

The statement of the 1983 Wheaton Conference on 'The Nature and Mission of the Church in the World' says: 'Each believer has gifts given by the Lord that form a pattern which marks out our identity as individuals and our form of service in the body of Christ and in the world.... The Lord's gifts are discerned in use.' Since we are new creatures in Jesus Christ, even our 'natural' gifts are renewed by the Spirit. Gifts are discovered, developed and recognized in a task-centred setting.

7. Next to the *charismata* that are given to all believers, there are also the *offices* of the church. This is not the place to discuss the intricate relationship between *charismata* and office in the New Testament.¹⁶ I agree with Ronald Fung when he says:

The existence of some kind of specialized ministry, or more specifically of church officers, is attested for the primitive church in Jerusalem, for all the Pauline churches with the [possible] exception of Corinth, and for some of the churches in the General Epistles (1 Peter, James).¹⁷

I also agree with his view that *charisma* and office need each other and that there should always be a healthy tension between them. But what is of paramount importance in our present

¹⁶ cf. for instance Ronald Y. K. Fung, 'Function or Office?—A survey of the New Testament Evidence', in *Evangelical Review of Theology*, Vol. 8 (April 1984); Ulrich Brockhaus, *Charisma und Amt*, 1975.

¹⁷ Fung, 'Function or Office', 36.

discussion is the great need for the spiritual renewal of the office-bearers themselves.

The exercise of an office is not just a matter of natural capacity, even though such a capacity may well be used by the Spirit. According to the New Testament the office-bearer should be a man or a woman 'full of the Spirit and of wisdom' (Acts. 6:3). We should always remember that the office also belongs to the sphere of action of the Spirit and can function effectively only when the office-bearer himself is continually open to the working of the Spirit, and therefore is being renewed continually by the Spirit.

8. The last aspect to be mentioned here is the renewal of *theology*. Even though the congregation does not depend on theology for its existence—the congregation was in existence long before there was any official theology—it cannot be denied that the congregation is often deeply influenced by the prevailing theology. If this theology goes its own self-willed, unscriptural ways, it will lead the congregation into a spiritual desert. If it is healthy, because it is both scriptural and contextual, it can be a real asset for the renewal of the congregation.

On purpose I speak not only of the need for scripturalness but also for contextuality. God's revelation as it speaks through the scriptures always addresses us in our own particular historical and cultural situation and wants to be understood within the context of that situation. A renewed theology will not simply repeat what has been already said by former generations—such a pure repetition may well be the reason why so many orthodox churches are so little alive—but such

a theology will listen with 'new' ears because of the 'new' situation. It will undoubtedly hear the 'old' gospel, but it will also discover that this 'old' gospel has a 'new' relevance, and when this relevance becomes manifest in preaching, the congregation will again be captivated by the gospel and be led on the way to renewal.

VIII Structural Change

Does such renewal also mean that the *structures* of the congregation must be thoroughly altered? My answer is: this may well be necessary. On purpose I put it so cautiously, because too often one encounters the idea that the congregation will be renewed, if only we renew the structures. I disagree totally with this idea. Such a structural automatism is entirely foreign to the New Testament. It is out of harmony with the Spirit and his work. Moreover, a new structure that is imposed on a congregation usually fails to take hold in the congregation. Most often such action causes violent reaction with little accomplished.¹⁸ We should not, however, go into the opposite direction either, and assume that spiritual renewal and structural change are two totally unrelated things. This, too, is an oversimplification. Spiritual renewal means that things begin to move in a congregation and this movement certainly also includes its traditional structures.

We see this quite clearly in the Reformation of the 16th. century. When

¹⁸ Ronald Beyer, 'A Communion of Priests', in *The Reformed Review*, Vol. 22 (May, 1969), No. 4, 17. The whole issue is devoted to the theme of 'The Renewal of the Church'.

Luther rediscovers the gracious nature of God's righteousness and publishes it in his first short writings, he himself does not think for a moment of changing the structures of the church. But this change becomes unavoidable. The place and the function of the office-bearer simply has to change. The priest has to go and the minister of the Word has to take his place. In fact, the whole hierarchical structure of the church can no longer be retained and has to be replaced by a much more democratic structure. Something similar happened in the case of Methodism.

We should not be surprised by this. The Spirit is also the Lord of structures of the church. He is not bound to traditional, antiquated patterns, but simply renews them according to his own will. It is possible that, when he starts the work of renewal in our congregation, he will push us on to new forms of congregational life, which are better suited to the new spiritual life and also the new task.

IX The Purpose Of Renewal

For we must not forget that spiritual renewal has a purpose that goes far beyond the renewal of our personal spiritual life. The purpose of renewal is that the congregation becomes what it ought to be, namely, a *missionary* and *diaconal* congregation.

The Christian congregation has a twofold task: first of all, as the first-fruits of God's creation it should praise him in the liturgy and serve him by its sanctified life. Secondly, it is called to participate in the *missio* of Jesus Christ in this world. All four Gospels inform us that after his resurrection Christ commissioned his church to go out

into the world and to disciple all nations (Matt. 28:19; Mark 16:15; Luke 24; 47; John 20:21); and the Book of Acts begins with this very same commission, not as a matter of words only, but including the deed.

In this respect, too, the congregation has to follow the example of its Lord. He not only preached the gospel of the Kingdom, but also demonstrated it by liberating deeds. Likewise he charged his twelve apostles 'to preach and to have authority to cast out demons' (Mark 3:14, 15). Some thirty years later the apostle Paul speaks of what Christ has done through him, namely, 'to win obedience from the Gentiles, by *word and deed*, by the powers of signs and wonders, *by the power of the Holy Spirit*' (Rom. 15:18).

This combination of word and deed, of the missionary and diaconal activity of the congregation, also explains the tremendous expansion of the early church. The Dutch theologian Dr. J. Van Oort said: "Someone" spoke "somewhere" with "someone else".... The Christian faith was propagated from mouth to mouth, from home to home, from city to city, from province to province. After 110 AD Pliny stated that "this monstrous faith spread like a contagious disease".

But it was not just a matter of words alone. The English church-historian Henry Chadwick writes about the early church, that 'the practical application of charity was probably the most potent single cause of Christian success. The pagan comment, "See how these Christians love one another" (reported by Tertullian) was not irony. Christian charity expressed itself in care for the poor, for widows and orphans, in visits to brethren in prison or condemned to

the living death in the mines, and in social action in time of calamity such as famine, earthquake, pestilence, or war'.¹⁹

Spiritual renewal of the congregation will undoubtedly issue in new missionary and diaconal activities. I dare say that this is bound to happen. The Spirit for whose coming we pray when we seek the renewal of the congregation is the 'Spirit of mission'. As Hendrikus Berkhof puts it:

The Spirit forms the unity of the christological and the eschatological pole of God's saving work. He is the expansion of the divine saving presence over the earth. He is the way from the One to the many, from the middle to the end of the times, from the centre to the ends of the earth.²⁰

And in this world-embracing activity he wants to use us. In John 15 Jesus says that not only the Spirit will bear witness to him, but 'you are also witnesses' (vv. 26, 27). Here we encounter the same reciprocity which we mentioned before. Within the sphere of action of the Spirit we may be active too. But we remain—to our comfort and humiliation—always dependent upon the initiative of the Spirit. On another occasion Jesus said to his disciples: 'Do not be anxious how you are to speak or what you are to say; for what you are to say will be given to you in that hour; for it is not you who speak, but the Spirit

of your Father speaking through you' (Matt. 10:19, 20).

X The Denomination

So far we have dealt largely with the local congregation. This is, I believe, the correct starting point. When the New Testament speaks of the church it usually means the local church. Paul writes that church life takes place at the local level, and when we speak about the renewal of the church we should indeed first of all think of the congregation *in loco*. But the local church is usually also part of a *denomination*. Is there any ground to expect the renewal of an entire denomination? I find this a difficult question to answer.

As we all know, the New Testament does not know the phenomenon of the denominational church. The word *ekklesia* refers either to the local church or to the universal church (especially in Ephesians and Colossians). Denominations are the result of history, and usually the fruit of a schism that occurred in a certain church. Although in some historical situations such a schism may be almost unavoidable and even may be an act of obedience to the Lord of the church, I cannot get away from the feeling that he Spirit cares much less for our beloved denominations than we do.

I am also afraid even that he finds it hard to renew an entire denomination! For unfortunately denominations are often dominated by all kinds of bureaucratic structures, which tend to oppose every attempt at change. This is true, not only of churches of the catholic type, with their hierarchical structures, but also of many Protestant

19 Henry Chadwick, *The Early Church* (Harmondsworth, Middlesex, UK: Penguin, 1967), 56. Cf. my article 'The Church's Mission Today—The Unity of its Task', in *International Reformed Bulletin*, No. 51, Fall 1972, 2–14.

20 Hendrikus Berkhof, *The Doctrine of the Holy Spirit* (London: Epworth, 1964), 35.

churches, proud of their 'low' ecclesiology. Visser 't Hooft points out that 'many Reformation churches defend their specific systems of organization or their ecclesiastical customs with a zeal that ought to be reserved for the defence of the faith itself'.²¹

And yet we should not lose courage. When the winds of the Spirit begin to blow, even the most solid structures cannot withstand them. When people and congregations within the denomination are touched by the renewing power of the Spirit, the denomination undoubtedly will notice the change and may open up to these new winds. When renewed people begin to work within these bureaucratic structures, even these structures may begin to serve the cause of the Spirit.

A good example is the Second Vatican Council. Prior to Pope John Paul XXIII's announcement of a new ecumenical council no one would have believed that any real change was still possible in the R.C. Church. After the first Vatican Council in 1870, with its declaration of the infallibility of the Pope when he speaks *ex cathedra* concerning matters of faith and morals, the structure of the R.C. church seemed hardened, so that most Protestants believed that renewal had become impossible. And yet it did happen. New winds of change, undoubtedly caused by the movement of the Spirit, began to blow and new doors were opened. It is equally amazing to see how the so-called charismatic renewal has been more prominent in the R.C. Church than in most of the Protestant churches. Even denominations are not a lost

cause, as far as the Spirit is concerned.

This is not to deny, however, that most of the larger denominations today are in such a spiritual state that renewal seems *well nigh impossible*. The greatest problem perhaps is the *plurality* or, even worse, the *pluralism* that is dominant in them. The message of the church, both in its preaching to its own members and in its speaking to the world, has become so blurred that people both in and outside the church hardly know what the message of the church is. If the denomination is to be renewed it is first of all necessary for it to submit again to the Word of God and to learn how to communicate this Word in all its clarity. As Visser 't Hooft puts it:

It is in listening to the Word of God in the Scriptures that the Church discovers again and again what God's design is and what its own place is in that design. Where else can it find out about the total plan of God and come to know what particular mission he has assigned to the Church? Where else can it come to realize the full contents of its own life and come to understand its own past and its own future?²²

We may add: Where else can it find the criterion for true renewal? Where else can it find the renewal itself?

XI The Ecumenical Movement

But even denominations are not the last word. As a result of the missionary movement of the 19th century the modern *ecumenical movement* came into be-

21 Berkhof, *Holy Spirit*, 111.

22 Berkhof, *Holy Spirit*, 93.

ing, issuing in 1948 in the World Council of Churches. To some evangelicals the WCC may be the least promising object of renewal. Some evangelicals regard it even as the prime example of apostasy and as the temple of the antichrist. I have no desire to enter into a discussion of the WCC and to offer a defence of it. As a matter of fact I share many of the misgivings and criticisms that are voiced in evangelical circles. And yet it cannot be denied that the modern ecumenical movement, notably in the form of the WCC, has brought to light essential aspects of the biblical teaching concerning the unity and renewal of the church.

Unity and renewal are closely related in the New Testament. Paul speaks to the Ephesians of the unity of the Spirit and goes on to mention the sevenfold character of this unity: 'There is only one Body and one Spirit, as you were called to the one hope that belongs to your call; one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of us all, who is above us all and through all and in all'. And then he immediately adds: 'Grace was given to each of us according to the measure of God's gift.' Indeed, unity and renewal belong together.

But for the ecumenical movement just as for the local church and the denomination, it holds true that renewal is possible only when there is a return to, and obedience to, the *Word of God*. Already in the Old Testament we read that the people will be gathered from among the nations when they return to the Lord their God and obey his Voice (Deut. 30:2). Later on Nehemiah appeals to this word of Moses when the people are in exile (1:8, 9) and the Lord himself says through his prophet

Ezekiel that the unity of the people under the coming of messianic king will be a unity in following the ordinances and observing the statutes of the Lord (37:24).

In the New Testament we find the high priestly prayer of Jesus himself in which he asks his Father: 'Sanctify them all in the truth; thy word is truth' (John 17:16). The apostle Paul calls the church of the living God 'the pillar and bulwark of the truth' (1 Tim. 3:15). It is one of the greatest weaknesses of the WCC that it has never stressed this aspect. It has never warned against those teachings that are in conflict with its own basis. I cannot recall ever having seen a statement of the WCC or any National Council speaking out against the new liberalism.²³ On the contrary, the WCC has always been very open to the latest theological fashions, including nearly every genitive theology under the sun.²⁴

XII Conclusion

True renewal is born of the union of *Word and Spirit*. Both are indispensable for true renewal. The Word tells us what the gospel is about. It tells us of God's mighty acts of redemption in both the history of Israel and that of Jesus and his church. It tells us of God's eternal plan of salvation and his will to unite in Jesus Christ all things in heaven and in earth (Eph. 1:10). But the activity of the Spirit is necessary as well. The human heart, left to its own devices, refuses to accept this gospel of renewal. This stubborn heart has to

²³ Cf. my books, *Reformation today*, 1968, 67 and *De Wereldraad in Discussie*, 1978, 19ff.

²⁴ See my *Wereldraad in Discussie*, 34ff.

be opened by the regenerating power of the Spirit.

The canons of Dort describe this regenerating work as a supernatural work, most powerful and at the same time most delightful, astonishing, mysterious and ineffable; not inferior in efficacy to creation and the resurrection from the dead (III–IV,12). People thus touched by the Spirit ‘actually believe and their will thus renewed is not only actuated and influenced by the will of God but in consequence of this influence becomes itself active’. This is true renewal indeed.

This same renewal will take place in the church when Word and Spirit become active in her. For such a renewal of the church we also need both the preaching of the gospel in all its fullness and a resurrection of the dead. One cannot help thinking here of Ezekiel 37 where we hear the Lord saying to his prophet that he has to prophesy to the dead bones in the valley (symbol of the people of Israel who are in exile and have lost all hope), so that they may live again. And indeed bones come together, bone to its bone, and there are sinews on them, and flesh and skin. But the bones are still without life. Then the prophet is commanded to prophesy again and call the breath, the *ruach*, from the four winds, ‘and the *ruach* came into them and they lived and they stood upon their feet, an exceedingly great host’ (v. 10).

This prophetic picture is not, as often has been suggested, a prophecy of the eschatological resurrection of the dead,²⁵ but it speaks of the *spiritual re-*

birth of Israel. It is striking to note that this rebirth takes place in two stages (as in the case of the creation of the first man, according to Gen. 2:7). During the first stage their bones are addressed and then something wonderful does happen indeed: they become bodies again. But they are not yet alive. This happens only when the ‘*ruach*’, the Spirit, comes. Preaching alone is not enough. The Spirit must add his power to the preached word so that hearts of stone are made alive and people stand (spiritually) upon their feet.

When this happens another picture of Ezekiel becomes reality. I am thinking of the picture in Ezekiel 47, the picture of the new river of paradise that rises from the spring in the temple. It is a remarkable picture. It starts as a trickle coming from the temple. But soon the trickle grows into a brook. At first this brook is only ankle-deep, but in just over a mile it is a wide and deep river which can be crossed only by swimmers.

And then a second miracle happens. The river flows in the direction of the deep landscape of the Dead Sea region and it transforms it completely: the stagnant waters of the Dead Sea become fresh and swarm with fish (vv. 8, 9), and trees flourish on its banks, bearing new fruit every month (v. 12). Renewal often starts on a very small scale, but owing to the Spirit it has its own inherent, multiplying power. It produces new fruit in a landscape that so far was dead. And this fruit is not only for food, but also for healing.

Undoubtedly this picture is of an eschatological nature. It points, far beyond the return of Israel from the exile, to the total renewal of the earth. The river of paradise and the marvel-

²⁵ Cf. John B. Taylor, *Ezekiel* (London: Tynedale, 1969), 236; Walther Eichrodt, *Ezekiel* (London: SCM, 1970), 509.

lous effects brought by it signify the transformation of this world into the garden of paradise.²⁶ But it is at the same time also a picture of every act of renewal which the Lord brings about in his church.

It always originates in the 'temple', in the act of reconciliation by Jesus

Christ; it starts from a small beginning but then grows into a wide and deep river; eventually it penetrates even into the barren world around the church. On the banks of the river of God's renewing grace there grow all kinds of trees, which produce fresh fruit, giving food and healing to all who come to this river. The renewal of the church is a blessing not only for the church itself, but also for the world around it.

26 Eichrodt, *Ezekiel*, 585.

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