

THE ROLE OF THE HOLY SPIRIT

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More than ever, in the history of the Christian church, we are experiencing forces, through printed pages, and organised crusades, through street preaching, and group evangelism, calling for renewal, even in Christian communities. Many Christians in mainstream churches are leaving their denominations, as a result of the call. Rebaptism, experience of spiritual ecstasy, speaking in tongues, clapping hands while singing and dancing, following the rhythm of the music in songs, are among many of the things emphasised as true signs of spiritual experiences that are very necessary for one to have as a Christian. Moreover, some of the hospital regulations of one's own physical health are incorporated into the theological dogma, as obvious signs indicating renewal; for example, no smoking, or chewing *buai*. It is sad to see Melanesians, who have joined sects, spitting on their culture, in which they have lived for years, and have been moulded. Can we say that we are now witnessing a genuine scene of the renewal experiences?

On the other hand, there are those who criticise such activities, who claim to be Christians, for they have been baptised, either as infants or adults, and who go about their normal church life. It seems that very little attention is paid to the deterioration of certain aspects of their Christianity. For example, Lutherans, in many congregations on Karkar Island, are becoming lazier and lazier in their worship life. As a result, there is no enthusiasm in many individual Christians, when they gather together to worship. Would it sound sensible for us to say that these people really need renewal? If our answer is yes, then does that mean that we have to rebaptise them, or look for a good musician, to provide them with good music, in order to wake them up in their worship? Should they leave their churches, and do everything that we have mentioned above, which is now being emphasised everywhere, and by every means possible, in order to be renewed.

What is renewal then? In the *Oxford Advanced Dictionary*, some of the meanings given to the word "renewal" are: "new, put new life or vigour into, restore enthusiasm, say or do again, replace with the same sort of thing". Some more meanings, found in the *Chambers Twentieth-century Dictionary* are: "to renovate, to transform, revive, to begin again, to repeat, to be made new".

If we are given a choice to select from these meanings, and to pick up what we reckon to be meanings that are relevant to our understanding of our special use of the word, in our context of discussion, I would pick such meanings as, “to put new life, or to be made new”. Another meaning to consider would be, “to transform”. Renewal, in our spirituality, may be better understood with its twofold meanings.

Firstly, it can be used when referring to our baptism as an initial step into Christianity. It is in our baptism that the new has been given to us (Tit 3:5). We can say that, in our baptism, we are being renewed, either as infants, or adults. We believe that the Triune God acts in grace, in our baptism, to renew us, and He makes us a new people (1 Peter 2:10). He saves us from our heathen world, and put us into the light of Christianity.

Secondly, the word “renewal” can be used to describe a change in a person, who is already a confessing Christian. In fact, renewal is used, more in this sense, than the former one. Charismatic movements make a big thing of renewal, in this second sense. More focus is made on the Holy Spirit, and His work, in converting a person. Thus, if you ask, today, of renewal, people would not be thinking about their baptism, but would simply refer to the Pentecostal view of such experiences, with its signs.

I think this twofold understanding gives us an answer to our question of what we mean by renewal. Both views can be accepted as appropriate meanings of the term, as understood in its theological perspective.

We know, from scripture, that it was the Holy Spirit, who established the first church of Jesus Christ in Jerusalem, among those, who attended the feast of Pentecost (Acts 2:42-47). These first Christians formed a small community, in which they engaged themselves in close fellowship with one another. They shared their belongings with one another, and they regularly gathered together for the breaking of bread. They maintained peace and harmony among themselves, for the sake of the gospel. No wonder, from time to time, we find ourselves longing to return to the early church, which first enjoyed zeal and fervency.¹

Too often, when we talk about renewal, we unconsciously wish to have some of these experiences, seen to be taking place in our various churches.

¹ V. C. Pfitzner, *Led by the Spirit*, Adelaide SA: Lutheran Publishing, 1976, p. 9.

When we start imagining about how things were like at the very beginning of the Christian era, we seem to forget that there is never a perfect church. In its first day, as a new people of God, it, and its members, Ananias and Sapphira, who, being tempted, lied to the Holy Spirit.²

It is confusing, today, when talk about renewal leads to one condemning the sacramental and liturgical practices in the tradition of our churches. You might hear them saying something like this: "liturgies and sacraments hinder the Holy Spirit from conducting renewal in our churches". Of course, it is true that, in some of our congregations, coldness is experienced in the worship life of the people, either as individuals, or as a worshipping community. At least, that is the situation I know of in the Lutheran church. To these congregations, renewal means joyous worship, and lively gospel proclamation from the pulpit, etc. However, real spiritual growth can be over-looked, when we contemplate such expectations.³

Faith in the Triune God is a process of growth. We should take a look at parables in the scriptures to understand this particular aspect of our Christianity. Different parables have a specific picture, to illustrate the kingdom of God, which involves our faith, and God's gracious activities in our lives as Christians. Parables, like that of the mustard seed and the growing seed, recorded in Mark 4:26-34, implied the role the Holy Spirit played in growing that faith, which God has cultivated in us, through our baptism. Little notice is taken about the growth of these seeds. There is no sudden result reported about it. Therefore, renewal can be understood as an experience in the whole process of the growth of our Christian faith, brought forth by the Holy Spirit.

It is true that Christian faith is more than intellectual assent to a series of doctrinal propositions, it also means trust, a personal relationship with God, and with Christ, which involves the experience of grace.⁴

In the above quotation, one thing is clear, Christian faith is a process of growth. We can analyse the charismatic view of renewal, which is different from what we have just said. To them, renewal substantiates the truth and reality of

² Ibid.

³ Ibid., p. 11.

⁴ Ibid., p. 21.

faith. More emphasis is made on Christ, found in the personal and private experience, rather than Christ, found in the word.⁵

In the Bible, it is plain that the Holy Spirit is sent to make Christ, and His redemptive work, more clear and real to us. Without Him, the foolishness of God would remain senseless to us, as long as we indulge in our own wisdom (1 Cor 1:25). The Holy Spirit, who is sent by Christ to sustain, and grow, His church, has a role to see that we gain insight, and grow in the knowledge of what God has done for us, through Christ. The Holy Spirit is not sent to talk about Himself. Jesus made this clear in John 16:14 (NIV): “He will bring glory to me by taking from what is mine, and making it known to you.” The doctrine of justification (or how God put man right with Himself) is a phenomenon that is very difficult to accept, because it does not fit with the Melanesian practice of reconciliation. The Holy Spirit is the one, who helps us to grasp the essence of this phenomenon.

Renewal must not be taken as an isolated experience, which is completely cut off from our initial baptism. However, I would not deny, too, that, whenever God sees a need, in relation to our spirituality, He would grant us a jump in our growth, depending on the situation, with which we are confronted. For example, during the Second World War, indigenous evangelists in the Lutheran church in Papua New Guinea, with not much theological education, vehemently preached the gospel to their fellow brothers, who were hiding in caves. Because of the war, this was done in the absence of their Western missionaries, who left prior to the war. That zeal, that strength, that understanding, and that joy in serving, suddenly lifted them up, and shot them out in their own rugged mountains and valleys to proclaim the gospel.⁶ For the Holy Spirit is not limited to formulated systematic procedures. That rarely happens. We must also understand that the Holy Spirit is never manipulated, to fulfil human expectations. He moves and does things according to the divine plan.⁷ Paul was an orderly man (1 Cor 14:33, 40), whose conversion was very dramatic. He was not emotional in his worship, instead he advised Christians to worship in an orderly way.

“Led by the Spirit” means being open to ideas, even if it means something new, or untried. It involves listening, lovingly, to one another, and earnestly

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Dr Kigasung, “Notes on the History of Churches in PNG” (lecture notes), Lae PNG: Martin Luther Seminary, 1994.

⁷ Pftzner, *Led by the Spirit*, p. 20.

seeking truth, too. It also means pinpointing dangerous errors, and accepting correction.⁸ All these take place, in the whole growth process of the church. Renewal means gaining new insight and understanding, as the Holy Spirit paves the way for it, which, in turn, influences our thinking processes, and our activities. Experience of any kind, in the name of the Holy Spirit, must be screened, in the light of sound scriptural doctrines. This is because spiritual experiences, or, more appropriately, contact with the divine, or supernatural, world, through ecstasy, or some other metaphysical experience, are a phenomenon claimed by many cults and religions throughout the world, from ancient to modern times.⁹ Billy Graham, in his little book, *Billy Graham Talks To Teenagers*, wrote that, “The supreme task of the church is not revival, but to preach the gospel to every creature.”

Living and studying in a theological institution for almost six years, and going through various experiences, including the spiritual aspect of them, enables me to respond positively to the question of the possibility of renewal in the theological training campus. Students of theology are in a very risky position of making the study of scripture become knowledge of their mind, rather than their whole being. Martin Luther once said, and I quote: “Theology, for me, was not just mere inscription on the wall, but it engulfed me, and influenced my very being.”¹⁰

We know, from what we read about Joseph Stalin and Charles Darwin, that they were former seminarians, who, in the end, denied the truth of scripture. It is true, of course, that students of theology, and their teachers, are using their mind most often to analyse different schools of thought, in a systematic fashion, rather than letting these thoughts influence them. I think it would be interesting for us to visit each of our theological institutions, and spend at least sufficient amount of time, in order to acquire better knowledge of the everyday life of the particular campus, while paying special attention to the spiritual growth of those who are studying there. Only then can we propose something for them, like: “you need renewal”. In training centres, where strict regulations are monitored, it is awkward to talk about renewal. In such schools, students might be participating more actively in all aspects of campus life, than those students of institutions, which allow freedom. But, if such smart behaviour is forced by the

⁸ Ibid., p. 14.

⁹ Ibid., p. 21.

¹⁰ C. F. Walther, *The Proper Distinction Between Law and Gospel*, St Louis MO: Concordia Publishing, 1981, p. 29.

awaiting disciplinary action, then the picture is not very clear for us, on which to make any comments. Another important thing that we must always take into consideration is the theology of that particular church, which guides and directs all activities on the campus.

Lastly, do we have to make any preparation for renewal to take place? Is renewal a quest for the Spirit? When we recall the conversion of Paul, and the call the disciples received from Jesus, we would see that God's act is not manipulated by any preparation. Paul was confronted suddenly, in God's own time, and place, while the disciples were called, when they had not made any preparations at all. Repentance, in anyone's heart, is only possible by God's grace (Rom 2:4, Tit 3:5, Is 4:31). Charismatic literature makes much of the precondition, which must be made before the Spirit can be received. Acts 1:4 is often used to show the necessity of waiting. Since renewal is the task of the Holy Spirit, we might be thinking in that line of making preparation. We are not commanded to make correct psychological, or spiritual, preparation, as a precondition for the Holy Spirit to come to us.¹¹ Even if we still hold onto the text, and argue our point on it, showing the necessity of waiting, we may put the command, given in it, alongside that, which is found in Matt 28:19. Christ Himself gave the command, and all they did was to follow it, and He Himself acted in it, as He promised, to accomplish His purpose. These disciples, themselves, did not propose any of those ideas. As I said earlier, the Holy Spirit is God's free gift. Thus, His coming cannot be manipulated, induced, or turned on, by what men do. The Holy Spirit is never to be earned. So, renewal is an activity, which He alone will initiate, whenever He sees the need, so that the church may continue to grow and flourish, in spite of sin, with which we live, in this world, while we wait, with hope, for the Lord to return to take His redeemed, and renewed, church away.

Bibliography

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¹¹ Pfizner, *Led by the Spirit*, p. 47.