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## The Energies of Church Renewal

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Where does the *power*, the *energy* come from that renews the church?

Only God can genuinely renew the church. Fundamentally, the church is the body of Jesus Christ. It is the Holy Spirit, the same Spirit that raised Jesus Christ from the dead, who alone can renew the church and enable it to be faithful to the Gospel. We know that the power to renew the church comes from God. But how does God's Spirit work to renew the church?

It is useful to look at church renewal as a question of *energy*. How does the church put itself in the place where God's energizing Spirit can flow through it?

One of the most fascinating things about renewal movements in history is the energy, the vital force, which they demonstrate. Early Methodism is a good example. There are also many other examples, including some from here in Korea.

How is this dynamic energy of the Holy Spirit released among a group of disciples? What are the human factors? Why do some congregations fairly burst with spiritual energy while others are like spiritual black holes?

The term "church renewal" has been around for several decades, and like many terms has taken on varied meanings and connotations. I would like to sort out here what church renewal is and isn't in view of my major concern with the renewal of the church around the world. Today I want to explore the nature and meaning of renewal as a recurring but mysterious dynamic in church life, attempting to understand the factors which either energize or deaden a church.

### **Renewal: Diverse Meanings**

The idea of the renewal of God's people goes back, of course, to biblical teachings and metaphors in both testaments. The Old Testament speaks of the renewal of the covenant and contains the magnificent prophecies of renewal and restoration in Isaiah and others of the prophets. The New Testament speaks of the "newness" of God's work in Jesus Christ--indeed, of the new covenant. Even at the end of

Scripture God says, "I am making everything new!" (Rev. 21:5).<sup>1</sup>

A couple of interesting terms occur in Peter's sermon in Acts 3:19-21 which are very suggestive for the biblical meaning and dimensions of renewal. "Repent, then, and turn to God," Peter urges his hearers, "so that your sins may be wiped out, that times of refreshing may come from the Lord, and that he may send the Christ, who has been appointed for you--even Jesus. He must remain in heaven until the time comes for God to restore everything, as he promised long ago through his holy prophets." The term "refreshing" (*anapsuxeos*) derives from the idea of reviving by fresh air, and the idea of "restoration" (*apokatastasis*, here only in the New Testament) suggests a complete restoration or re-establishment. Peter, in other words, proclaims the Good News as bringing an initial renewal which will lead finally to a complete restoration of the created order.

The Apostle Paul speaks of "the washing of rebirth and renewal [*anakainoseos*] by the Holy Spirit" (Titus 3:5), and "the renewing [*anakainosei*] of your mind" (Rom. 12:2). These passages apparently refer more to individual Christian experience than to the corporate aspect suggested by "church renewal." Yet such passages raise the broader question of the biblical basis for church renewal.

In church history the Latin terms *renovatio* and *renovare* have taken on diverse meanings. Theologically the term *renovatio*, "a making new once more," referred to the renewal or restoration of the image of God in the believer following conversion and so was roughly synonymous with sanctification--though the term was also applied to the "cleansing by fire" and making new of all things at the end of time.<sup>2</sup> Obviously both ideas have biblical roots.<sup>3</sup> The idea of renewal, *renovatio*, had currency during the time of Charlemagne (Emperor 800-814), but more in the sense of the renaissance of learning and culture (particularly the Latin language and classics) than in the sense of church renewal. But a number of the reform popes, particularly Gregory I (c. 540-604) and Gregory VII (Hildebrand) (c. 1021-85) were fundamentally concerned about the renewal of the church as they understood it.<sup>4</sup>

Pre-Reformation reform councils spoke of the need for "reformation of the Church in its head and members," and of course the Reformation watchword, *ecclesia reformata semper reformanda* speaks of church renewal--though the second

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<sup>1</sup>All biblical quotations are from the New International Version unless otherwise noted.

<sup>2</sup>Richard A. Muller, *Dictionary of Latin and Greek Theological Terms* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1985), 262-63.

<sup>3</sup>The restoration of the image of God in human experience and the "restitution of all things" (Acts 3:21, KJV) were also key themes for John Wesley. See for example his sermon, "The New Creation."

<sup>4</sup>See Janet L. Nelson, "On the Limits of the Carolingian Renaissance," in Derek Baker, ed., *Renaissance and Renewal in Christian History* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1977), 51-69. Nelson notes, ". . . rebirth and renewal ideas were used fairly often by Carolingian writers in reference to learning and religious culture" (55).

half of the slogan, "always reforming," is too often forgotten. At any period of history the human tendency is to believe that once the church has finally been "reformed" or "renewed" the job is done. Almost immediately then the wineskins begin to harden, constricting the effervescence of the wine.

How can we define church renewal in a way that is relevant to the present? It will be helpful to distinguish both what renewal is and what it is not.

### **What Church Renewal Is**

Like so many terms, "church renewal" has become something of a fad phrase, often stretched and pushed to mean different and perhaps contradictory things. But it does have specific meaning.

Since our concern is *church* renewal, Scripture provides the controlling parameters for what genuine renewal is. The Bible is the book of the church; the Book of the Covenant which shows what it means for God's people to be faithful to the New Covenant in Jesus Christ. Given this touchstone, one can say fairly clearly what church renewal is and is not. And one can distinguish church renewal from other forms of renewal, as well as from sociological, anthropological, psychological, or other forms of analysis which are useful but not finally normative.

Definition. I offer the following definitions: *Church renewal* is the process by which God's Holy Spirit, working through willing and spiritually sensitive believers, restores the church to health and vitality. A *renewed church* is one which operates functionally as the Body of Christ, exhibiting the essential character of the church as described in the New Testament (for example, in such passages as Ephesians 4, 1 Corinthians 12-14, and Romans 12).

Three things may be noticed about these definitions:

1. They assume an *organic* understanding of the church. Virtually all the biblical images of the church picture it as a living organism--as a human body, a plant or tree, or a family, for example. The only exceptions to this are the images of "temple" and "building," but in the New Testament even these are turned into living, organic images (Eph. 2:19-22; 1 Pet. 2:5, where Peter speaks of "living stones"). Biblically, the church is viewed as an organism, not fundamentally as an organization or institution. If the church is an organism, then church renewal must be viewed essentially as an organic process. This is fundamental, but is often overlooked in popular church renewal discussions. Such an organic perspective is a safeguard against seeing renewal essentially as a matter of programs, planning, or structures.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup>I have elsewhere suggested that the Bible sees the church 1) in cosmic-historical perspective, 2) in charismatic rather than institutional terms, and 3) as the community of God's people. See Howard A. Snyder, *The Community of the King* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1977), 56-57.

2. Relatedly, a biblical perspective on renewal assumes a *charismatic* understanding of the church. The church is charismatic in a double sense: first, because it is created by God's grace [*charis*], and second because it lives and ministers through the operation of the *charismata*, the "gifts of grace" which the Holy Spirit provides for the vitality and effective ministry of the Body. Just as the church is born by grace, so it is to live and operate by grace. So church renewal is a matter of the church actually operating functionally as a charismatic organism, regardless of what institutional or structural forms it may take. Again, this is fundamental but often overlooked. One could describe the church biblically as a charismatic community, or as a grace-filled organism animated by the Holy Spirit. This is not a complete or fully adequate definition of the church. But it is an important perspective so far as renewal is concerned, and serves as a safeguard against an over-emphasis on technique, formulas, or institutional approaches to renewal.

3. Finally, a biblical perspective on church renewal sees the church in terms of the *Kingdom of God*. Scripture presents the church as central to God's purpose to manifest God's reign on earth as in heaven. Or, as the Apostle Paul says in somewhat different language, the church is a part of God's "plan" or "economy" "to bring all things in heaven and on earth together under one head, even Christ" (Eph. 4:10; cf. 3:10). In other words, the Bible sees the church in eschatological perspective, but in a way that is directly relevant and shaping for the church's life in the present. When faithful, the church lives "under the pressure of God's future." Jesus said, remarkably, "Do not be afraid, little flock, for your Father delights to give you the kingdom" (Lk. 12:32, my translation). Any biblically faithful accounting of renewal dynamics must keep this perspective in mind. It serves as a safeguard against the dangers of viewing church renewal too narrowly--the danger of being too concerned with "church business" and not enough with "kingdom business." From the Kingdom perspective, church renewal is not an end in itself but is a means toward the reconciliation and transformation of all things, as promised in Scripture. Thus church renewal, biblically understood, is a form of social change and a means toward radical social reconstruction.

### **What Church Renewal Is Not**

These considerations allow us to be clear about what church renewal is not, and hopefully thereby to dispel some confusion.

1. *Church renewal is not mere change or innovation.* It is not simply doing something different. As Visser 't Hooft wrote in *The Renewal of the Church*, "Renewal can be taken to mean mere innovation, the creation of something different for the sake of change or for the sake of adaptation to the most recent historical developments." This is not the church's chief concern, however. Rather, "its point of

reference is the newness of the new age inaugurated by the coming of Christ."<sup>6</sup>

It is easy for pastors or other church leaders to put the label "renewal" on any new plan or initiative that comes along. But too often this is mislabeling. True renewal does produce change, and often innovation, in various areas of church life. And it often does involve human intentionality in making changes, as we see in early Methodism and other great renewals of the past. But renewal, as an organic process prompted by the Holy Spirit, is something deeper than organizational tinkering.

2. On the other hand, *church renewal is not synonymous with spiritual excitement*. It is true, as both John Wesley and Jonathan Edwards insisted, that the operation of the Holy Spirit in and among human beings produces "effects," both spiritual and physical. But many things can stir the emotions. Music, oratory, drama, symbolism, large crowds, and intimate sharing all can have this power. And in fact all these can have their place in renewal, and often do. These elements are often found in renewal movements--but they occur also in military campaigns; in political movements from Nazism to Communism; among pro- and anti-abortion demonstrators. We are speaking here of human social dynamics which can be used for good or ill.

It is better for a church to be spiritually excited than spiritually lethargic or dead. It is easier to direct energy constructively than to produce it initially. But genuine renewal is something deeper.

I would add here that renewal is not just *aesthetics* --doing things with more color, poise, balance, or style. In fact, genuine renewal is often unsettling, especially in the early stages as old patterns (both individual and corporate) are broken up and the church gropes earnestly to discover what radical obedience to the gospel means in the here and now. But as it progresses, true renewal releases creative energies that may flower in many forms, adding a richness and color to the church's life.

3. *Church renewal is not synonymous with institutional success*. Institutional success is usually the fruit of an earlier renewal. Perhaps anthropologist Anthony F. C. Wallace goes too far when he says that all organized religions are "relics of old revitalization movements,"<sup>7</sup> but he has a point. Renewal often brings growth in numbers, finances, and leadership, producing apparent "success" in several senses. One of the greatest problems of renewal, in fact, is how to keep a church spiritually vital, with a deep level of personal discipleship, as the church prospers. Success often leads to decline. This is an inevitable problem, but decline is not an inevitable result of renewal. There are ways to safeguard against the dangers of institutional

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<sup>6</sup>W. A. Visser 't Hooft, *The Renewal of the Church* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1956), 12.

<sup>7</sup>Anthony F. C. Wallace, "Revitalization Movements: Some Theoretical Considerations for Their Comparative Study," *American Anthropologist* 58 (April, 1956), 268.

success, and ways to work for institutional renewal.

4. Relatedly, *church renewal is not the same as numerical growth*. Generally renewal produces growth in numbers, but not inevitably. And of course growth may occur for any number of reasons. Many other factors enter in. In the 1960s in the United States, what looked like renewal in many white suburban congregations looked like disaster in inner city areas, but the explanation was chiefly demographic--the "white flight" of white middle-class families to the suburbs.

The early chapters of the Book of Acts are instructive here. Luke gives us enough statistics to show that the dynamic work of the Holy Spirit was having significant numerical results, but not enough to suggest that they are the really important data. The focus is elsewhere: on community, on the clear preaching of Jesus and the resurrection, on prayer and faithfulness.

We may consider here the case of the United Methodist Church in the United States. Some see the drastic membership decline of United Methodism over the past two decades as a sure sign of spiritual decline. Others argue just the opposite: loss of members may actually be a sign of faithfulness to the gospel. From a church renewal standpoint, however, both claims are suspect. A denomination may decline for many reasons, ranging from demographic changes (for example, urbanization) to structural problems, to doctrinal infidelity. On the other hand, to claim decline as a sign of faithfulness when hundreds of congregations are near spiritual death is absurd. We must look deeper, to the fundamental nature of renewal.

Generally renewal *will* produce numerical growth in the local church, because renewal is life, and life attracts. The church is a living organism that tends to grow and reproduce itself. We should expect that renewal will be accompanied by growth as nominal Christians become lively believers and as new people are converted to Christ. But the balancing truth is the cost of discipleship. Wesley generally considered numerical decline as a sign of spiritual decline, but he also "purged" thousands of Methodists from the rolls when their lives betrayed the gospel. Growth was not an end in itself.

The point is this: our focus should be on the vitality and faithfulness of the church. Generally a vital church will grow, and where growth is lacking we may suspect some problem, some spiritual pathology, is likely present. But the point is vitality, not growth.

In discussing the dynamics of church renewal I find it useful to distinguish five kinds, or dimensions, of renewal: personal, corporate, conceptual, structural, and missiological. Genuine, long-lasting renewal involves all these dimensions, though normally Christians tend to focus on the first two: individual Christian experience and the corporate life of the church community. I have discussed these five

dimensions elsewhere, so only refer to them here.<sup>8</sup> The point is that renewal in all its dimensions should be understood in the dynamic, organic sense described above.

### Renewal Energy

One of the reasons renewal often does not happen when people work and plan for it is that a vital element of *energy* is missing. Good intentions and well-laid plans in themselves have no power to renew. More is needed to release the renewing energy of God's Spirit in the church.

It may be possible, in fact, to identify a range of factors which either energize or de-energize a church; which either impart energy or consume energy.

Some people seem to energize others. Other people drain energy from those around them, giving little in return. We see this in every social group. Some individuals are the "spark plugs" which give direction and energy to the group. Others seem always to need the energy of the group, like defective storage batteries that always need charging. The majority of us are somewhere in between, some more energizing, others less so, or either giving or absorbing energy depending on the circumstances. To some degree these merely reflect personality or temperamental differences, though obviously other factors, including various kinds of pathologies, may enter in.

Something similar is true in the church. The church is a social organism which can be understood in part in terms of energy. Every church operates on the basis of some sort of energy, or it wouldn't exist at all. Yet some churches seem to have only enough energy for survival. Others consume a lot of energy on themselves but seem to have none for ministry to society. Still others become "burnt out" on a wide range of ministry activities and are seemingly unable to draw on that special energy which renews and invigorates the church for its task.

Biblically understood, the ideal is not a hyperactive church which lives at fever pitch, nor an anemic or lethargic one that seems to use up all its energy in mere routine tasks. The ideal is a healthy rhythm, a healthy balance in which energy is high but not hyper, and in which the church healthily lives out its balanced life of worship, community, and witness. This will not mean precisely the same thing in all churches, for congregations vary as much as does human personality. But the New Testament pictures a vital pattern and range of church life which is normative. This is perhaps clearest in passages such as the following: "Speaking the truth in love, we will in all things grow up into him who is the Head, that is, Christ. From him the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work" (Eph. 4:16-17). "God has

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<sup>8</sup>See "Five Dimensions of Renewal," chapter eight in my *Signs of the Spirit: How God Reshapes the Church* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1989), 285-94.

combined the members of the body and has given greater honor to the parts that lacked it, so that there should be no division in the body, but that its parts should have equal concern for each other. If one part suffers, every part suffers with it; if one part is honored, every part rejoices with it. Now you are the body of Christ, and each one of you is a part of it" (1 Cor. 12:24-27).

Scripture and the experience of the church suggest a number of factors which tend to *energize* a church or congregation. We may identify the following, beginning with those which seem most fundamental:

1. The Holy Spirit and the study and teaching of Scripture.
2. The experience of God through Jesus Christ in conversion, sanctification, and ongoing renewal.
3. The power of Christian community.
4. Worship, celebration, and the Eucharist.
5. Conceptual renewal: a new model or vision for the church which is biblically grounded and culturally appropriate.
6. A vision for the reconciliation, justice, and shalom of God's kingdom.
7. The exercise of a range of spiritual gifts in ministry and service.
8. A clear sense of purpose and mission.
9. The church's consciousness of being a ministering community in which each member is truly a minister and a priest.
10. Repentance and obedience to God's Word.
11. Unity in love.
12. Appropriate spiritual disciplines.
13. Healthy physical and emotional lifestyle.
14. Speaking the truth in love.
15. The exercise of discipline in the Body.
16. A balanced, organic Body life.
17. Healings and other miraculous signs of God's Spirit.
18. Appropriate structures.
19. Significant new ministries.

20. Participatory decision-making.

All these tend to energize the church, whether the context is one particular congregation or a broader network of churches. While the heart of renewal is fresh encounter with God, both individually and corporately, the above list suggests how multifaceted renewal may be. And it hints at the varieties of approaches that may be taken to renewal.

If these things tend to energize the church, generally their opposites tend to weaken it. In fact, we may identify a number of factors that tend to de-energize the church, draining its vitality and working against renewal:

1. Satanic or demonic activity.
2. Ignorance of Scripture.
3. A misunderstanding of the nature of the church.
4. Disobedience and sin.
5. A secular worldview.
6. Individualism and isolation.
7. Lack of spiritual growth.
8. Lack of the exercise of spiritual gifts.
9. Failure to equip believers for ministry.
10. Institutionalism.
11. Confused identity.
12. Discord and dissension.
13. Undisciplined living and/or burn-out.
14. Over-programming.
15. Inappropriate or outdated structures.
16. Law-orientation rather than grace-orientation (legalism).
17. Physical frailty, illness and depression.
18. False doctrine.
19. Lack of spiritual disciplines.

## 20. Wealth and materialism.

This list is meant to be illustrative, not exhaustive. Obviously some of these items overlap. The point is that many things tend to energize or de-energize the church, ranging from things we generally think of as "spiritual" to factors we may think of as "material" or "merely human." An organic model allows for no neat division between the material and the spiritual, however, for all dimensions of our life come from God and all affect our life together as sisters and brothers in Christ and as members of the human community.<sup>9</sup>

Every organism and system has a tendency to "run down," to lose energy. In physics we speak of *entropy*, the second law of thermodynamics, which is a measure of disorder in a system. Science tells us that the entropy of the physical universe is increasing as more and more resources are transformed from a usable to an unusable state (mostly heat and waste by-products). Similarly, there is a kind of entropy in the church--a tendency to run down; a need to be periodically re-energized.

If the church were merely a human organism, then renewal would simply be a question of social dynamics. But the church is more than just another social group. As the community of God's people, the church is renewed most fundamentally through the power of the Holy Spirit. It is not trapped within a closed world-system where no new energy can enter. Whenever the church genuinely opens itself up to the energy of the Holy Spirit, God's power brings renewal which is more than simply the result of human effort. We may think of this as *extropy*, the process by which God overcomes our "bondage to decay" (Rom. 8:21), renewing the church by a dynamic which is not simply its own.

### Love as Renewing Energy

The power of the Holy Spirit to renew is, most fundamentally, the power of love. "By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another" (John 13:35). It may be that love, animated by God's Spirit, is the most powerful form of energy in the universe. The wonder is that love seems to have the capacity to create more energy than it consumes. It is fundamentally procreative. We often speak of and affirm love--in our personal lives and in the church--but it takes God's own presence and power to release love, to make us truly loving.

This also is part of the dynamic of church renewal. We may think of love as renewing energy. It seems the process works something like this:

1. Love is fundamentally the *expression*, rather than the absorption, conservation,

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<sup>9</sup>Howard A. Snyder, *Liberating the Church: The Ecology of Church and Kingdom* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1983), 47-49.

or consumption, of energy. Love gives more than it takes.

2. The expression of love brings a reciprocal *receiving* of energy. The one who loves receives love--often from the one loved or from others, but especially from God. God sheds his love on those who love the unlovely, and "we love him because he first loved us" (1 Jn. 4:19).

The wonder of love, then, is that in the expression of love *new* energy is released. This is why a loving church is a powerful church. A church energized by love is a living witness to the inbreaking of God's Spirit in the present, and an inbreaking of the ultimate reality of the Kingdom of God. Here extropy is at work, not just entropy.

From this perspective, the primary virtues of faith, hope, and love take on new meaning. We may say that *love* is the expression of energy in conformity with truth. *Faith* is accessing the energy of God's Spirit in the present by believing and acting on God's promises. And *hope* is accessing the energy of the future in the present.

### **Hope for Renewal**

I have defined church renewal as the process by which God's Spirit, working through willing and spiritually sensitive believers, restores the church to health and vitality, and have suggested that this vitality must be understood fundamentally in biblical terms. When renewal is understood in these terms, I see great hope for broad-scale renewal of the church.

Both the church and society are in fundamental need of renewal. Signs of the lethargy of the church and the disease of the world around us are obvious. In the United States, the social fabric is unraveling on the underside, at the level of children and the family, even as the culture is technologically ever more sophisticated. The same thing could well happen in Korea, Singapore, Hong Kong, and other technologically advanced and materially prosperous nations.

In such a situation church renewal must be about more than just numbers or programs or "success." It must be about the rebuilding of caring community in the church, the home, and in society generally. Renewal that matters will restore both the church and society to health.

This is why a biblical, organic understanding of renewal is so important. In every church we should hope for a reassessment of the fundamental energies for and obstacles to the renewing work of the Holy Spirit. Building a core of willing and spiritually open seekers in church after church can be a key to renewal which is more a movement than a methodology. The churches that will be renewed are those which come to understand the fundamental dynamics of renewal and then allow God's Spirit to work through them in rebuilding the church.

In this sense, renewal is a form of revolution that comes both "from above" and "from below." It is "from above" for its source is God, working through the Spirit and the Word to shape the church into a community that does the works of Jesus in the world. A primary task of church leadership is to discern and facilitate this process. But renewal is also "from below," for it is a matter of what God is doing in and among God's people, creating a dynamic "new social reality" of people equipped as priests, ministers, and servants of the Gospel. Mikhail Gorbachev demonstrated some awareness of this in a purely political sense when he wrote of *perestroika* as a revolution "from below," from the people, as well as from above: "Life convincingly confirms that at sharp turns of history, in revolutionary situations, the people demonstrate a remarkable ability to listen, understand and respond if they are told the truth."<sup>10</sup> This is so in the church as well, and in an even more profound sense. Church renewal which is organic, charismatic, and directed toward the manifestation of God's reign makes all believers co-laborers in the work of transforming the church and the world.

Hope for renewal rests first with the Lord of the Church who says "I am making everything new!"--and then with communities of believers who seek to be God's co-workers (2 Cor. 6:1) in the process of renewing the church and the earth.

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<sup>10</sup>Mikhail Gorbachev, *Perestroika: New Thinking for Our Country and the World* (New York: Harper & Row, 1987, 1988), 43.