



Maranatha

Christian Renewal

by Dennis Wrigley

The Call to Renewal

The Gospel is about change. Christ comes to change men and women and to change society. "Behold I make all things new" is the triumphant declaration of Christ. (Rev. 21.5)

In a dark and dying world we are pointed to "*a new and living way*" (Hebrews 10.20). Addressing God the Psalmist declares "*you renew the face of the earth*" (Psalm 104.30).

The call of the early church was "*put on the new man*". (Eph.4.24) The promise of God is "*I will put a new spirit within you*". (Ezk. 11.19)

The call of Jesus Christ is to a totally new approach to life which contrasts radically with the way of the world. We are warned "*do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind*" (Romans 12.2).

The new and living way offered by Christ involves starting afresh and Jesus says "*no-one can see the Kingdom of God unless he is born again*" (John 3.3).

The Way to Renewal

Many people have a deep rooted fear of change. There is fear of an unknown future and fear is at the root of much resistance to the renewal of faith. Fear cripples us from standing up and being counted, from witnessing to the power of the Gospel and from asking for gifts from God because of the consequences involved.

Movements which are free and open to God's will can easily become rigid and institutionalised. There is a growing recognition of the dangers of staleness and legalism in much institutional religion.

The need for constant rebirth in the life of the Church is becoming increasingly acknowledged. John Henry Newman said "*to live is to change and to be perfect is to have changed often*".

If we proclaim a Gospel of change and renewal we must, therefore, be prepared to accept change and renewal at the very heart of the Church itself. Our Gospel is a Gospel of newness. Jean-Claude Barreau

said "*The message of Jesus is: Man must change now - he must live God's today now.... The startling news is the Kingdom is here and now*".

Sadly J.B. Phillips wrote "*very little in our modern church bears comparison with the spiritual drive and the gay unconquerable courage of the young Church*".

We are today beginning to see the Holy Spirit moving mightily in and among the churches in Britain.

Are We Ready for Renewal?

Do we believe that God is calling His people today to a new way? When we look at the Gospels and see what Jesus did do we feel the need to go and do likewise? When we read the Epistles and see the early church praying, healing, serving, witnessing are we prompted to go forward and do the same? Are we too comfortable with our present ways, unwilling to change? Do we yearn to see God at work in His world - feeding the hungry? Do we ourselves in fact feel a great hunger? The acknowledgement of our needs and the world's needs is a source of mission - the foundation of the Decade of Evangelism.

The Wind of Change

At the very beginning of the Maranatha Community we had a deep conviction that God was calling us to change our ways. We observed that in all the great church traditions there was evidence of a profound call by God for renewal. This was seen in Vatican II. It has also been seen in countless Christian revivals in many parts of the world during recent years. Cardinal Suenens proclaimed "*be of good courage, the power of the Holy Spirit is at work deep within the heart of His church, breathing into it a fresh youthfulness. It is the Spirit who is our living hope for the future*".

The young have responded to the vitality and freshness of Christ's Gospel as experienced at Taizé and many other Christian centres. Brother Roger tells us "*God is preparing for us a new Pentecost which will set every one of us ablaze with the fire of His love. Our part is to run and meet the event which will upset all our human calculations and bring life to our dry bones*". Above all there is

today a profound feeling that God is wanting to breathe new life into His churches.

The process of renewal touches on every part of our experience. Christ brings a newness and freshness to old ways and old institutions.

The Crisis Point

We live in the bloodiest century of human history. In our own country there are signs on all sides of the storm clouds gathering - broken homes, a massive increase in crime, violence and drug addiction, and the emergence of an aggressive atheistic society from which God has been expelled.

If Christians fail to recognise that the Christian faith is currently under more intense and severe attack in this country than for centuries, all our efforts for evangelism will surely fail. If church members ignore the massive decline in the influence of the churches in the United Kingdom during the past seventy years, we will fool ourselves and dishonour God.

As the drift and decline in our churches continues the need for renewal is self-evident and urgent.

Newness

Throughout the world it is seen that the precondition for a renewed, strong and growing church is a praying people. The vitality and freshness of prayer can lead us to affirm "*the Lord's mercies are new every morning: great is your faithfulness*" (Lam. 3.22,23). We can say without hesitation "*inwardly we are being renewed day by day*" (2 Cor. 4.16).

Carlo Carretto, a dear friend of Maranatha, said "*If you asked me how God has revealed himself to me I would reply He reveals himself as newness. God is eternally new. God never repeats himself. When I pray I search for the newness of God*".

The **New Life** for which we yearn in ourselves, our homes, our churches, our communities and our world, can only emerge as a result of the readiness of people to respond to the promptings of God.

Jesus speaks of the **new Covenant** (Luke 22.20) and tells of a **new commandment** He is giving us (John 13.34) and in the Book of Revelation we are given the hope of a **new heaven** and a **new earth** (Rev. 21.1).

The Breath of God

Are we prepared to allow the power of God to be breathed into our lives, our families and our churches?

In the book of Ezekiel we are given the vision of a valley full of dry bones to whom God spoke the words "*I will make breath enter you and you will come to life*" (Ez. 37.5). We are told that they came to life and stood as a vast army and that God said to them "*I will put my Spirit in you and you will live*" (Ez. 37.14). The significance of this for the Church today could not be clearer. God will bring us to life when we allow Him to breathe His Holy Spirit into us.

After the horror of the crucifixion the risen Christ came to His fearful disciples and breathed on them saying "*receive the Holy Spirit*" (John 20.22). When we are so close to the living Christ that we can feel His breath upon our lives we will be renewed in faith and empowered by the Spirit.

Renewal of our faith happens when we have reached an awareness of Christ's healing power within us and heard His call to us to go out in His name to heal others. The renewal movement is fundamentally a healing movement giving hope both to the Church and the world.

The world desperately needs the authentic voice of lives lived in the full light of the Gospel.

It needs to have first-hand evidence of Kingdom people living the Gospel. If we are truly the Body of Christ, loving, caring, forgiving, healing, serving, the world will see Jesus, and not just an institutional church.

Growth and Liberation

The renewal of our faith centres upon our personal encounter with Jesus and our readiness to listen to

Him speaking to us. The process of renewal is one of growth and liberation.

Renewed Christians know that they must "*steadily grow in grace and...steadily come to know more and more of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ*" (2 Peter 3.18).

Renewed Christians experience first-hand real liberation. They are set free from selfishness, pride, greed, bigotry and many of the preconceived notions which hitherto held them back. They experience personally "*the glorious liberty of the children of God*" (Romans 8.28). They affirm the words of Jesus "*you shall know the truth and the truth shall make you free*" (John 8.32).

Renewed Christians are pilgrim people travelling light, living dangerously aware that Christ has proclaimed "*I have come to set the world ablaze*" (Luke 12.49).

The renewed church is the place where things are happening and where there is life. The sign of a dying church is weakness of praise and poverty of teaching. The contrast between those who are 'religious' and those who follow Christ is agonisingly sharp and we are warned about those who are a stumbling block to Christ's Kingdom - "*they will retain the outward conventions of religion, but they will consistently deny its dynamic*" (2 Tim. 3.5).

The church which does not believe in miracles cannot proclaim "Christ is risen". Almost by definition the church which refuses to believe in miracles is a dying church.

A miracle is observable evidence of God at work - radically changing people, attitudes, relationships and situations. When the Spirit of God is released in the churches new gifts are exercised and new fruit is manifest for all to see - "*you shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you*" (Acts 1.8)