

Renewal: exactly what is it about?

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Over recent years, a new term "renewal ministry" has come into use to describe trends in local church life. For some it has been a welcome movement, opening new vistas and producing unheard of church growth. But it has also caused such concern that the Queensland Baptist Union executive issued a statement for the guidance of pastors.

The problem is that talk of renewal, charismatic worship, gifts, body ministry, or signs and wonders can easily produce uncertainty due to a lack of accurate information, or because of the tendency to reject the unfamiliar. Confusion also arises because words mean different things to different people. To some, "charismatic" and "renewal" mean the same as "pentecostal", while to others they all mean something quite different.

The renewal movement affects two main areas of church life - the Sunday services and associated gatherings through the week; and the leadership and organisation of the church. Underlying these is a more basic issue - what we hold to be the nature of the Christian life itself.

Renewalists report that they have become disillusioned with older forms of worship and have brought in a new style in their quest for renewal. They cannot see much, if any, value in the classical approach where the pastor, using whatever help is needed, plans and leads the services each Sunday, employing mainly hymns, pastoral prayers, Scripture readings and expository preaching as the means of bringing the congregation into an enriching communion with God.

Although open to misuse like any other system, at their best these services do not suffer from domination by the leader or by being tied hopelessly to the forms of one particular era. In any case, the effectiveness of a service is not measured by its modernity or by the number of participants, but by the congregation's openness to God, and the recognition that the leader's role is not to dominate but to serve, and to exercise gifts of ministry.

The renewalists have replaced this contemplative style of worship with a more active one that typically majors on chorus singing, "free worship" (where members of the congregation can make direct contribution through prayer and a spoken "word of prophecy"), "body" ministry (in which people express themselves physically in movement, touch, and other forms of action) and preaching - often followed by appeals for salvation, prayer, healing or other ministry.

The services are often long (two hours or so) and are firmly controlled by the leaders who are usually very strong and authoritative figures. Because of their busy agenda and strong emotional content, these services often give the appearance of being more spontaneous and vivid.

Sometimes the overall impact of these services may be somewhat similar to the more exuberant gospel meetings common in earlier days. The ready acceptance of these experiential forms of worship by some evangelical churches is not surprising when it is remembered that, in the past, people have commonly been led to anticipate "receiving a blessing" through their worship and devotional life.

This is in strong contrast with the objective forms of worship used by most Christians throughout the world which emphasise what we have to offer to God rather than what we might receive!

Nevertheless, the new style of service is noticeably different in tone from the older ones. This indicates that new elements are present and different dynamics operating. Sometimes it is just a determination to bring the Word of God home more forcefully and seriously. This is "revival" in a well known sense, and results in a recovery of vital worship and fellowship as lives are changed and people enter once more into the joy of a deeper Christian life and their witness flows into all parts of the community.

In other cases, new principles of outreach and development are applied, based on the "Church Growth" concepts. In many instances, these insights have caused revolutionary changes in ways of organising a church, but at the same time, have brought welcome success as the churches respond to a post-Christian generation and grow at a pace never thought possible before.

In yet other cases, it is nothing more than the impact of a new generation of young Christians who are influenced more by the "body language" of modern education, television variety shows, and the entertainment world, than by an appreciation of the riches of Christian truth! Time will probably bring its own healthy balance in this case, although not without a good training programme, and possibly some avoidable heart-ache!

But other cases are quite different, where the emphasis is upon the use of spiritual gifts in worship, and sometimes upon the more unusual miraculous signs and wonders.

According to the Queensland Baptist Union executive's statement, "Some of the distinguishing marks of Pentecostal and Charismatic Churches are: Baptism by the Holy Spirit as an experience after conversion; speaking in tongues as evidence of that baptism; 'slaying in the Spirit'; the right of every believer to physical healing as part of the atonement; the doctrine of prosperity; emphasis on signs and wonders; authoritative leadership strongly invested in a few individuals".

Charismatics (sometimes known as Neo-Pentecostals) emphasise a secondary ministry of the Spirit in the believer's life, but they usually focus on the empowering of the Spirit and the availability of His gifts (especially tongues, healing and prophecy) to the believer today.

Many churches have been affected by one strand or another of the "renewal" movement, and now happily sing choruses as well as hymns and feel it strange when there is only one person leading the service. But this does not necessarily mean they have done anything more than loosen up a little in the externals of worship, or that they have experienced a measure of spiritual revival. Some churches have adopted the authentic charismatic renewal, with a handful of these becoming more seriously committed to this approach.

On the other hand, some churches have resisted these trends quite strongly for doctrinal and practical reasons. They believe that Scripture shows true renewal does not consist in seeking spiritual gifts and practising charismatic worship, but in a total moral and spiritual regeneration brought about by God in response to repentance and obedience, producing holiness in all areas of life.

Finally, there are others that place no particular emphasis at all upon these matters, but find that the church must be true to its calling by developing a wide-ranging response to God's will and to human need. This includes social responsibility and missionary outreach as much as it does new forms of worship or the use of gifts in worship.

As well as worship, the structures of the church have also been affected. The most obvious developments here are the use of small cellgroups or even semi-independent "house churches" with their own pastors as the primary means of outreach and nurture, and the appointment of elders to take responsibility for church leadership. Commonly, the full-time pastor (often termed

"senior pastor" in contrast with other specialist associate pastors) is also termed an elder. The deacons have responsibility specifically for practical matters such as property and finance.

These arrangements may take a heavy load off the pastor who, in a traditional structure, often works alone and must be a "jack of all trades", even though such a situation is neither ideal nor even biblical. Large churches of any kind require delegation of responsibilities for practical reasons.

But when elders, on specific doctrinal grounds, take on the role of directing the church at the expense of congregational responsibility, then a new situation has arisen. This is easily understood when it is realised that Baptist churches are distinctively an "association" or "fellowship" of believers who meet together for mutual encouragement, common worship and cooperative witness.

Some modern ideas about the church and the Christian faith produce a church which is a highly structured institution, organised to function like a business with authoritative leadership and carefully planned management objectives. The people all have their own proper roles to play within the structure for achieving the corporate target.

To be acceptable under the principle of authority of Scripture as the rule of faith and practice, the adoption of church structures of this kind would need clear and unequivocal Biblical justification, whatever their virtues may be in terms of managerial efficiency and church growth.

Uncertainty about these and other points has arisen in our churches because of a feeling that the differences between churches are more than superficial or cosmetic. There may be a basic incompatibility between these various concepts of the church, leadership, worship, and the Christian faith itself. This explains why the Executive's statement referred to "Baptist distinctives" and the possibility that certain practices adopted by churches may place them outside the Baptist position.

So it is not a question of maintaining tradition for tradition's sake, but of asking basic questions, such as: What is it that gives life to the church? Are the well established ways Biblical and to be retained, or do they need refurbishing? Are there missing elements that have been overlooked? Does the abandonment of the old ways mean the loss of vital elements? Is the new way only a superficial response which will in time show its impoverishment? Does "renewal" have a strong enough basis to cope with the full range of Christian life and witness, including social responsibility, missions, theological reflection and others? What part does personality and temperament have in it all?

Careful consideration of questions such as these are needed before the "renewal movement" can be accepted as God's answer for revival, or rejected as a serious danger to the well-being of the church.

From such a consideration, here could be developed the view that, no matter how much "renewal" may be credited with contributing to a better appreciation of the use of the gifts in worship, there may well be many other ways in which the Spirit is at work in the churches today.