

NEW, RENEWED, AND RENEWING

“Institutions exist for the painless extinction of the ideas which gave them birth.” Some of you probably assumed I would not be able to stay away from this quotation for very long. I was browsing in the library of a Quaker Retreat Center (Woolman Hill) in Massachusetts many years ago when I came across this comment. Though it is a Quaker perspective, it seems more clear and more true the longer I ponder it. It makes me smile and weep and nod my head, all at the same time.

Of course, I think first of the institutional church. But I suspect it applies to all institutions: from marriage and family life, to companies and corporations in the business world, to political parties and countries everywhere on the globe. And the trend or outcome of this principle is devastating to contemplate. If this is true (and I believe it is), what is our hope? To be sure, our hope is not in this world. Our hope is in the Kingdom of God. But we live here for quite a long time, from our perspective. Christianity not only believes in Heaven and waits patiently for the close of this age as it comes to each one of us; Christianity also teaches us to work for the Kingdom of God – as the Holy Spirit gives us light and guidance – through all the years that we are here. Though we do not expect any final victory here, we do work and strive with diligence to be faithful for as long as we *are* here. And from time to time, we do long and hope that our efforts will bear fruit for the Kingdom, both in the here and now *and* in the Kingdom coming.

So we do get married here. We do belong to and work for the faith family we call a “church” while we are here. We do practice love when and where we can. We do seek the “calling” of the Holy Spirit, that we may devote our efforts toward whatever ends and purposes the Spirit draws us into while we are here on earth. Jesus was the Messiah who lived and labored in Palestine. Paul became an Apostle to the Gentiles, forming Disciple Bands throughout Turkey, Greece, and beyond. And Moses went back to Egypt to confront the Pharaoh and insist that he let the Hebrew slaves go free. We know this world is not our true home, and we sit a little loose to all our successes and failures while we are here. But we still strive with earnest devotion, and with as much patient endurance as we can muster, toward whatever ends seem consistent with what we are convinced is the will and purpose of God for us. So we continue to pray, as we were taught to

pray: “*Thy will be done, on earth as it is in Heaven.*” And we really do want to be part of that.

Therefore, when it becomes clear to us that “*institutions exist for the painless extinction of the ideas which gave them birth,*” this both reminds us of where we are and warns us of what we are up against. If that is the principle which is operating all around us, what can we do? How can we proceed without losing all hope? The “key” – not the solution, as if we were looking for some “final solution” in this temporal and broken world – the *key* is found (among other places) in the sermon title. We cannot keep our institutions from evolving toward the extinction of the very ideas and truths that caused us to create them, but there is one principle that we can set against this slow death. We cannot manage it with wisdom or diligence or human efforts unaided, but, with the help of the Holy Spirit, we *can* stay alert and willing enough to live for the principle that works against the extinction principle: RENEWAL. That is, if we keep refreshing our loyalty and allegiance to the truth which draws us and which caused us to form the institutions in the first place, then we discover endless new dimensions to what inspired us in the first place.

Marriage is an institution. Family life is an institution. Have any of us ever seen a marriage that ended up extinguishing the love it started out to honor and uphold? The dying embers are all over the landscape. Almost everywhere we look, we see the remains of what were once relationships filled with passion, delight, high hopes, and beautiful aspirations. How long does it take them to go dead or break apart if there is no renewal? I suppose and suspect that the principle begins to operate from the moment we say “I do.” Of course, nobody notices at first. And if the love is sweet and the bond is strong, it is easy for us humans to start assuming that everything will go on being wonderful forever. But that never happens in this world. There is no love relationship anywhere on earth that stays strong and continues on without continual renewal.

Often with a new relationship we try to ignore the first indications that we need to pay closer attention. The first disappointment; the first serious disagreement; the first time it becomes clear that we have different expectations, different values that do not really match, or other relationships that do not fit into the new love we have found – well, maybe if we ignore these early warnings, the problem will just go away. Maybe if we do not face them or talk about them, we can move past the discomfort before it disturbs our peace. And so, for

most of us, at least at first, we do not seek true renewal. We do not want to change and grow. We do not seek new perspectives, new attitudes and approaches, or new disciplines or commitments that can reform and rebuild the bonds into an even greater love than what we started out with.

Am I still talking about marriage and family life? Or are we also talking about the church, business partnerships, and maybe a country that we used to love and would be willing to die for?

“Institutions exist for the painless extinction of the ideas which gave them birth.” We are either constantly renewing our commitments and our bonds, or the frameworks we have designed to hold everything together are getting old and stale and betraying the very truths we once thought were so beautiful and compelling.

Naturally I see such principles at work most clearly in the area of religion. Abraham was a major turning point in the history of religion. He encountered a “new God” – at least a God unlike any he had been raised to believe in. This God communicated with him, made promises to him, and asked him to leave everything behind and strike out on a journey into the unknown – where he would be the Father of a new people and a new religion. Abraham did not know if this was the *only* God, but it did not matter. It was a very dramatic and personally meaningful God. Abraham could not stay with what he knew, or thought he knew. He had to respond to this God or lose him. It meant turning away from everything familiar in Ur and heading off on a wild-goose chase into an unknown land called Canaan.

But how did it go from there to slavery in Egypt? Patriarchs, twelve sons forming twelve tribes, considerable prosperity – was that not enough? But slowly it turned from dynamism to a quest for mere survival. Nobody knew how to get to renewal, until the situation was so desperate that it had become a matter of life and death. Oh yes, that is familiar too. Even then, many were saying it was better to perish than to go with the Deliverance– that is, with Moses. Clearly Moses was no “bed of roses.” The only way to follow Moses was to take your life in your hands and risk everything. The very concept of God had changed too. For the first time, humans were dealing with a God who was beyond nature – outside of nature. This was no mere crocodile or water buffalo; this was not just a manifestation of the sun or the moon. This God had created everything and was *beyond* everything ever created. This God wanted to establish a people in a land where

they would represent him and live for him – in ways he was setting before them – for all the world to see.

We could go on. We could keep tracking the ways in which renewal transformed the institutions of religion until the very concepts of religion itself were transformed, renewed, made new, given new life – down through Jesus, and His church, and even unto our present day. All religion – all life in the church – is in constant and continual renewal, or the institutions of religion are themselves extinguishing the very life they were created to serve and sustain. “Give Me That Old-Time Religion” is perhaps the most foolish and faithless hymn ever written. And by the way, it was not good enough for Peter or for Paul and it certainly was not good enough for Jesus, nor was it good enough for any of their friends. Why do we call it a *New Testament*? A *New Covenant*? Jesus was the most dynamic agent of spiritual change and renewal our world has ever seen.

History is fascinating, and maybe someday we will have time to explore it together in greater detail. But we are also alive today. Therefore we are faced with our own issues of renewal. The church is dying in many places all around us. It is dying wherever there is insufficient renewal, insufficient realignment, insufficient recommitment to new awareness of the truths it has always proclaimed.

I want to talk now about three aspects of the principle of renewal in our own time. I do not imagine that we can renew the church by our own wisdom or by our own efforts alone. The Holy Spirit is always the source of *true* renewal. But we *can* get ready. We can get willing. Just like Advent before Christmas. Just like John the Baptist crying, “Repent! Get the roads ready.” Just like the Babylonian Captivity, when pockets of Jews, carried into a foreign land and culture, started praying and studying their scriptures far more diligently than they had done when they were back home, and soon began to discover new depths of faith and faithfulness. Then suddenly, seemingly out of nowhere, the Persians conquered the Babylonians, and Cyrus, the King of Persia, supported the return of the Jews (who wanted to go) back to Palestine.

I.) AN *ECCLESIA* – NOT AN AUDIENCE.

My first comment is that we need to move with focus and intention toward being an *ecclesia*, a faith family – not an audience. An *ecclesia* – a church – is a gathering of people: a faith family made up of people who believe in and want to follow Jesus. Not followers of the Bible. The Bible is a wondrous tool, and it is the only significant pool of information we have regarding Jesus' life on earth and His subsequent presence among us as Holy Spirit. But Jesus did not write the Bible – not even one page of it. This had to be a conscious and intentional choice on His part. We know Jesus was quite capable of reading and writing. He left it up to His friends and followers to tell the world about Him. A dangerous decision, but then Jesus was no stranger to danger or to taking great risks.

In any case, the Bible must be pondered and interpreted afresh in every new generation. That is its only hope of not being reduced to a dead relic of some ancient past. The Spirit still speaks through the Bible, but only because we listen to what it portrays and do not lock it down to some fixed book of inerrant answers to a list of petty questions. Hence, if you participate in a Disciple Band that is studying the Bible here in this church, you are engaged with fellow Christians who seek the guidance of the Holy Spirit, and who do not think that they (or anyone else) have all the answers. If you go to a different kind of church and attend a Bible Study class, the purpose of the class is to teach you what the leader of the class already knows to be the truth, and the leader will give you the right answers. Some people find that comforting. If you find that comforting, you will not like it here.

In my view, American churches have moved more and more from being the *ecclesia* to being an audience. I don't think this was consciously intentional. It simply matches the values and approaches of our society. That is, "it works" – from a certain perspective. If you focus on numbers; if you focus on outward success; if you measure results by membership rolls and the size of the budget – then you end up building an audience rather than a faith community. And fairly quickly the focus changes *toward* entertainment and *away from* forming the relationships and the learning and the sharing necessary to a faith community – to an *ecclesia* that truly wants to follow Jesus.

It is no secret that churches in American are greatly influenced by the culture and the values of the society all around us. I know and appreciate the people of this church more than many of you know.

The prayerfulness and the desire to be faithful to Jesus are far greater here than in most of the liberal churches I have known. Yet hardly a day goes by when someone does not ask me, in one way or another: “How can we be more successful? What are our goals in 2016? How can we attract more members in such-and-such an age group?” And on and on.

I am not suggesting that this is evil. I am only suggesting that having this perspective and this focus is destroying churches. Some of our best “role models” ended up building audiences instead of churches. They became famous, not because they were encouraging small bands of faithful followers who were seeking and living the Christian Life together, but because of the crowds they attracted – the audience they gathered. An audience is not the same thing as two or three (or more) gathered in His Name.

An audience is made up of observers – not participants. You can go to a great sports arena and one hundred thousand people can be watching what’s going on down on the field. But the *participants* are a tiny percentage of the people who are gathered there. The participants are actually playing the game. Well, clearly, if you are not playing the game, you are not part of the *ecclesia*. The fact that so many people bought a ticket to get in, and that this supports the players and coaches and team owners, does not change the reality. For the audience, it is only a spectator sport. And Jesus did not come or teach or die or rise again to create spectators. Jesus came to invite all of us into a New Life. If we are creating audiences instead of true churches, we are neither faithful nor calling others into faithfulness.

II.) A FAITH FAMILY – NOT A BUSINESS ORGANIZATION.

You will, perhaps, think this is the same point – and it *is* related. But I want to set it before you anyway.

A faith family is a fellowship of prayer. Only, we are not just “saying prayers” as most of the culture around us conceives of prayer. Our purpose is to be obedient to the guidance of the Holy Spirit. This is what it means to us to “follow Jesus.” Clearly Jesus is no longer among us as a human being. Jesus is resurrected, and He is PRESENT with us as the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit IS our Risen Lord.

To be sure, and I think all of us would quickly agree, it is the bane and the blessing of our fellowship that discerning what the Holy Spirit is saying to us – what the Holy Spirit is asking of us – is the challenge

and the delight and a very scary part of our WAY of Life. “How do we know *for sure*?” We don’t. We take our best shot. It’s called FAITH, not FACT. The Spirit usually whispers and seldom shouts. The Spirit will never ever override our free will. It is our major complaint against God. Why does God not step in – reward all the good people and punish all the bad people – so that life can be much better here? How can a good God stand by and watch all the evil and mayhem going on? That’s the first and primary objection of every agnostic and atheist.

Nuts to mercy and patience and forgiveness and grace. What we need is a God who will stop the evil – not patiently wait for us to outgrow it, to see and truly understand where it is leading us and repent: turn to a different WAY. It is the most bothersome thing about Christianity. Why should we love our enemies, when clearly we need to smite them? Why did Jesus go to the Cross, when clearly He should have called down legions of angels to flatten Pilate and Herod and the Sanhedrin and everyone else in the Roman Empire who was opposing Him? Did He not understand the American Way? It galls us. It does not make any sense to our normal, natural ways of thinking or reacting. And especially not until we know *ourselves* to be the ones who need the mercy, the forgiveness, and the grace. Have you ever prayed, like I do, “There is no justice ... thank God”?

In any case, the Spirit always waits to be sure that we are ready and willing to accept the guidance. If it is forced – if our obedience is coming from any level of fear or coercion or hope for outer gain – then the whole process of our growth and redemption will be corrupted, contradicted, and undone. We hate it – until we love it. But everywhere we turn, this precept and principle is shot through the entire story of Jesus, framing everything we know about His life and death and resurrection.

So the church, though usually incorporated to survive in our society, can never be a corporation trying to come up with marketing techniques to impress the stockholders with growth statistics. I say this knowing full well that this is exactly the way many churches are operating in our time.

I hope you will not feel scolded, but will merely laugh with me; after all, we are all children of our time. In any case, lately six or seven of you have come to me saying (loosely translated): “Okay, now that you have persuaded us to pray and now that we have agreed to pray, will you please tell us what we are going to hear when we do pray?”

And you say such things with straight faces. Some of you are even annoyed when I do not try to answer such questions.

Of course, the underlying question is: What are our goals and purposes going to be in 2016? Right back to the American approaches and assumptions about how to be successful in this life. But you see, the question assumes that we are going to make up our goals and purposes *ourselves*, instead of waiting and watching for *the Holy Spirit* to lead and guide us.

The answer is: We want to achieve humility and accomplish obedience. But that sort of answer does not satisfy or feel right to most of the people who ask those kinds of questions. So I am trying to set before you the possibility that it is not our answers which are wrong. The problem is that those kinds of questions are not appropriate to our WAY of Life.

When I was a Pastor on Mercer Island some years ago, a disgruntled man left the church after struggling to get his own way for several years. One of our Deacons came to me about three months later, beaming. "I have talked to Charlie several times since he left the church," this Deacon said to me. "And he has finally agreed to come back to church. Isn't that wonderful?!"

"Did you get permission from the Spirit to make this effort to get Charlie back into the church?" I asked. [no] "Did Charlie agree to work with us instead of against us?" I wanted to know. [no] "Then how do you know that the Spirit wasn't trying to get Charlie into a different place where he could be happier and more effective?" I asked. It had never crossed this Deacon's mind, he admitted. So Charlie came back for two more years, and it was miserable for him and difficult for us. He was against almost everything we were trying to do, and that cost lots of us huge amounts of effort and energy for almost no gain.

But everybody knows that getting everybody we can into the church is the right and proper thing to do. Isn't that right? Everybody knows that. Only, I don't know that. I thought we were trying to live under the *Spirit's* wisdom and guidance – not just make up mindless rules to make ourselves feel good. But here was a Deacon of the church making personal choices that had a huge impact on the life of the church, and it never even crossed his mind to ask for permission or guidance from the Holy Spirit.

III.) WE ARE FOLLOWERS OF JESUS. NONE OF US ARE JUST NAMES ON A MEMBERSHIP LIST.

Do any of us imagine that a person can truly “repent” – truly turn life and purpose over to the influence of the Holy Spirit, day by day, for months on end – and go on living for the same reasons and goals they had before changing to this New WAY of Life? Such a disregard and disrespect for our Risen Lord seems amazing to me.

So what is the core and principle of our prayers? “Okay Lord, if You make it clear enough in my mind that I even think I know what You are asking, then I will obey – I will do it.” That’s the deal.

Half of my prayer time, sometimes more, is still spent wrestling with this willingness – checking this desire on my part to be faithful enough to go to my prayers in the first place. In my experience, if I do not go into prayer with this willingness in place, not much will happen. God is not going to waste his time or his breath if I am not willing to do what God asks. So I end up talking to myself. Have you ever had that happen? It is a trust issue, of course. If I do not trust Jesus to be wiser and more loving and more in tune with God than I am, then I cannot truly pray. Even so, it is not easy for us humans to trust anything or anyone more than we trust ourselves, especially if we are dealing with real-life choices and decisions.

It’s all very nice to have theories and principles about how we *should* behave. Things like “The Golden Rule” and “love your neighbor” are great precepts and no doubt worthy of our meditations. But they are generalities and are essentially useless when it comes to what we need to do in real situations with real people. “Did YOU even send this person to me – or me to them – in the first place, Lord? It’s not like they are the only person there is to care about in the entire landscape of my life. If You don’t help me to know Your Will, I cannot follow You, cannot obey, cannot be Your servant or disciple. But if You *did* send them, then You are probably going to want more from me – expect more of me – than I understand how to give. If You don’t help me to know Your Will, I cannot follow You, cannot obey, cannot be Your servant or disciple. Please Lord, this New Life You have invited us into: it is more than I can comprehend or keep up with – *unless* You are with me and are willing to guide me all the way.”

“Institutions exist for the painless extinction of the ideas which gave them birth.” The idea that gave birth to our institution was that we could have New Life in Christ Jesus – that we could be actual and true followers of our Lord. But if we are not constantly in renewal, we lose everything that matters about who we are and why we are here.

We read a tiny portion of a great passage from the tail end of the New Testament. Someday maybe we will be in a Disciple Band together where we can try to understand together the imagery of John as he tries to portray where we are heading. Meanwhile, I just wanted you to hear one sentence: *“Behold, I am making all things new.”*

Did you hear some future tense? It is not there. Do we imagine that the Christian church has a mandate to wait for some future age before we try to get faithful – before we get to try on the New Life or get into the game? Do we think that Christian truth is all locked down and stale and static, like most churches try to claim most of the time?

God is *always* making all things new. If we have it all figured out, we know for sure that we are wrong. The passage does not say “I will make” or “I might make” or “If you are very good, perhaps as a reward I will make some things good again.” *“Behold, I am making all things new.”* God is always a God of new vistas, of renewal, of new possibilities, of Life unfolding. Creation is not over; it is barely begun. And that is why the dynamism of the presence of the Holy Spirit of our Risen Lord is so central to our whole New WAY of Life.