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13. MISSIONS AND THE RENEWAL OF THE CHURCH

Paul G. Hiebert

"LORD, REVIVE THY WORK IN THE MIDST OF THE YEARS" (HAB 3:2)

Any long-range vision for missions must include not only the planting of new churches, but also the renewal of old ones. The former without the latter eventually leads only to lands full of dead and dying churches. The birth of new congregations is no guarantee that they will remain spiritually alive.

Many missionaries and church leaders have tried to establish "steady state" churches—churches that remain forever strong in faith and ministry. But there is no spiritual "steady state," neither in churches nor in individuals. Spiritual life, like all forms of life, is involved in processes of health and illness, of reinvigoration and decay. A church can remain vitally alive only as it periodically experiences times of life renewal. We deal here with one of the sets of processes that affect the life of a church, and, at length, with one of the types of structures for renewal.

INSTITUTIONALIZATION

Christianity is a set of allegiances and beliefs. But it is more. It is a set of relationships. Faith may be an intensely personal matter, but Christianity is also a community of believers, the church, united under the lordship of Christ.

Because the church is a corporate body of human beings, it must take on social forms. Without these forms, there would be no relationships between believers, and no visible congregation. There would also be no transmission of the gospel from one people to another, or from one generation to another, for these, too, require social structures. To be sure, the church cannot be understood solely as a social organization. It is the body of Christ, and the Spirit of God is at work within it. But to the extent that the church is made up of people and congregations in relationship to one another, it will be influenced by the social and cultural dynamics of human institutions. Among these dynamics we here look only at the process of institutionalization and its effect, both positive and negative, on local congregations and other church organizations.

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GENERATIONS IN AN INSTITUTION

Institutions such as churches, mission agencies, and schools undergo changes from the time of their birth to their maturity. These changes can be analyzed by looking at the successive generations of people within a particular institution.

The first generation is made up of the "founding fathers and mothers" who have some things in common. They are drawn together by a vision of something new, for which they have paid a high price. Often they have left some old institutions to join the new movement. Friends and relatives sought to draw them back and, when this failed, cut them off. Moreover, they faced high risk, for there was no assurance that the new organization they founded would survive. Cut off from their old world, they are bound together by strong ties of fellowship and oneness of purpose.

The second generation is made up of the children of the founders, or by the generation that takes over from the founders. Here a major structural change takes place. While the founders paid a high price to leave their old institutions to form the new one, the children grow up within the framework of the new institution and its programs. The cost is not so high, but neither is the commitment. Members of the second generation do grow up amid the excitement, sacrifice, and commitment of a new movement, but they acquire secondhand the vision that motivated their parents.

By the third, fourth, and fifth generations, the new movement has become "the establishment." These generations grow up within the institutional structures. In churches the children go to Sunday school and youth meetings with their friends, then with those friends they make profession of faith and are baptized. In schools and mission agencies, people work their way through the ranks to positions of leadership. For all of them, to remain within the institution is the path of least resistance and cost.

The strength of these generations is their stability and continuity over time. The life of the church like any institution depends upon one generation succeeding another. But the weakness of these successive generations is nominalism. The spiritual vision of the founders is dimmed by the routines of institutional life. What began as a movement has become a bureaucratic organization.

PROCESSES OF INSTITUTIONALIZATION

Over the generations, an institution normally grows and matures. And with maturation come the problems of middle age—a loss of vision and a hardening of the categories. This maturation or institutionalization of human organization is characterized by a number of related processes.

First, informal associations give way to formal social roles. At the beginning of a movement there are few formal roles. There is often no official or salaried custodian, or secretary, or treasurer. Different members volunteer to type correspondence, to handle finances, and to welcome newcomers. As an institution grows, more and more roles are formalized.

Second, *ad hoc* arrangements are replaced by rationally formulated rules and constitutions in which relationships are standardized and generalized. At the outset, many things are handled by casual arrangements. At the last moment the pastor may ask someone to lead the singing or read the Scriptures. Later such arrangements must be made well in advance so that the names can be put into

a bulletin. In time the question arises as to who in fact can appoint the song leader, and the decision becomes part of the growing number of rules by which the church is run. Finally, when these rules become unwieldy and confusing, a constitution is drawn up to organize them into a formal whole. What began in the first generation as a casual arrangement, by the second becomes normative, by the third law, and by the fourth sacred. To change it becomes increasingly difficult.

In part, formal rules and constitutions are functions of size. They are necessary for large institutions to function smoothly. They are also functions of culture. Western cultures with their obsession for uniformity, efficiency, and rationality tend to organize institutions along the lines of bureaucracies in which tasks and relationships are divided and allocated to different people. The result is a mechanical approach to human organization, in which people become standardized parts within a "factory" which has as its goals production and gain. In many parts of the world social organizations are based on kinship and are organic in nature. Tribes, clans, lineages, and families tend to be more particularized or tailored to the individual characteristics of the persons involved. Moreover, they must be inclusive for they cannot reject kinsfolk just because they do not fit into the structure.

Third, charismatic leaders are succeeded by bureaucratic leaders. As Max Weber points out (1968), founders of new movements tend to be dynamic, prophetic leaders who command a following by means of their personal charisma. Such leaders can rarely lead a mature, established institution, for they act too much on personal impulse and outside established procedures. Formalized roles and relationships call for a priest or administrator who is selected by due institutional processes and is identified with the people and the institution. This transition from charismatic founder to bureaucratic leader is crucial for the survival of an institution. If it does not take place, the institution dies. It is for the succeeding leaders to turn the vision of the founder into reality; to do so they must build and administer a complex institution.

The most difficult leadership position to fill is that of successor to the founder, for it is here that the transition must begin. Often it is a position with little honor. Honor goes to the founder whose picture is generally central on the wall of fame. Only as personal knowledge of the founder dies and memories of him or her fade are leaders measured by their own contributions.

Finally, unity based on implicit trust in one another's faith gives way to unity based on explicit affirmation of common creeds and written confessions of faith. In the intimacy of the early gatherings, everyone knows everyone else personally. In such cases, theological differences are bridged by mutual trust. As churches and other institutions grow and become more impersonal, the bond holding members together must be formally defined. Moreover, outsiders want to know what the organization stands for. Consequently there are pressures to make explicit the beliefs and goals of the institution.

BENEFITS OF INSTITUTIONALIZATION

In a number of ways the processes of institutionalization are beneficial for the building of churches. One has been called "redemption and life"; it is found particularly in churches that spring up in poor non-Christian communities. In

many parts of the world Christian converts come from the lower classes of society. First-generation members are generally nonliterate, economically poor, and socially powerless. But many of these early converts send their children to mission or church schools so that second-generation members are school teachers and government clerks. They in turn send their children to college to become doctors, college teachers, and government officials. This rapid rise of Christian communities means that in time even churches planted among the poor become self-supporting and develop their own advanced leadership. The danger, of course, is that in this rapid social rise, the church loses contact with the community from which it came, and can no longer witness effectively to that community.

Another benefit of institutionalization is efficiency. Unformalized social organizations consume a great deal of time and energy simply to maintain themselves. New decisions must constantly be made for each activity, no matter how small. In a sense, institutionalization is for social organizations what habit formation is for individuals. It reduces the effort necessary to operate the institution by clarifying decision-making processes and by routinizing decisions.

A third benefit of institutionalization is the ability to mobilize large numbers of people and resources in order to carry out an otherwise impossible program of missions and ministry.

A final benefit is the theological maturation of the church. New converts, particularly in mission churches, are often theologically naive. Most come from non-Christian backgrounds and have little understanding of the Bible or of a biblical worldview. Their children, raised in the church and often a Christian school, have a much deeper understanding of the Bible and its message. By the third generation, there arise Bible scholars, translators, and theologians who can indigenize the gospel in their own culture far more effectively than can any missionaries. The long-range survival of the church in a land—and its remaining true to the Christian faith through the centuries—depends to a considerable extent upon the emergence of such leaders rooted in a deep understanding of the Scriptures.

DANGERS OF INSTITUTIONALIZATION

Institutionalization also has its dangers. What begins as a means to help the congregation can, in the end, strangle it.

One negative consequence of institutionalization is that the vision is often lost in the process of carrying it out. For example, in order to evangelize a neighboring community, the church forms a committee. To keep committee minutes, a secretary is hired and an office set up. In the end, the secretary, pressured to type letters and make reports, sees little connection between those tasks and the evangelization of the neighborhood.

Another danger is that the focus on goals gives way to a concern for self-maintenance. Churches are started to evangelize and minister to peoples among which no churches exist. But as time passes, more of their resources and efforts are spent on simply maintaining the institutional structures. Young churches often make do with the simplest of facilities in order to focus their efforts on their mission to the world. Older churches spend more and more on sanctuaries and parking lots for themselves and schools for their children. Older mission

agencies and educational institutions tend to spend an increasing proportion of their efforts and budgets on administration.

This shift of priorities from tasks to self-maintenance is due, in part, to the fact that there is no one in the administrative structures or on the committees where decisions are made who represents the world outside and its needs. Decisions are made by the insiders—by those whose cars get muddy in the unpaved lot. The turning-inward process also occurs as the identity of members gets tied up with the organization and their roles within it.

Yet another danger is that flexibility gives way to inflexibility. In the early stages of an institution's life, decisions are made on an *ad hoc* basis. Eventually rules and procedures are created to establish order and to reduce the number of decisions that must be made, but these also reduce flexibility in decision making. Too many exceptions to administrative rules make them useless, so pressures build to insure conformity.

The fourth danger is the shift in focus from people to programs. Young institutions are generally more people oriented. There is a strong emphasis on fellowship, trust, and meeting human needs. As an institution grows, more and more emphasis is placed on building programs and maintaining institutional structures. In a showdown, institutional needs take priority over human needs.

PROCESSES OF RENEWAL

In view of these processes, which seem almost inevitable, is there no hope for institutions? True, there are some benefits, but the evils seem to outweigh them in the long run.

Some say the only hope is to get rid of institutions. Our only hope is to oppose the formation of formal social organizations and to return to a relatively unstructured way of life. Get rid of the establishment with its bureaucratic organization, its rules and procedures, and its dehumanizing power. But, as Peter Berger points out (1973), anti-structural movements have never been successful. For one, they are unable to build stable enduring societies or organize people into communities of common purpose and mutual support. At best such movements survive because they have a symbiotic relationship to a more institutionalized society. For another, they themselves are subject to the subtle forces of institutionalization. The symbols of their rebellion soon become the emblems of their identity, which they impose with institutional harshness upon their members.

The answer to the hardening of institutional categories is not anti-institutionalism, but institutional renewal. Institutions can be regenerated periodically so that their evils are tempered and their ministries enhanced.

Since we are speaking here of the renewal of the church as a human organization, we must make it clear that spiritual renewal is first and foremost the work of God, and this cannot be programmed. There is no "formula" for revival. To seek one is itself idolatry, for formulas make human gods capable of forcing God to do their bidding. But God does work through the spiritual, cultural, social, and psychological processes he created in human beings. As Edwin Orr points out (1975), God responds to sincere prayers. God also uses individuals, human experiences, sermons, songs, books, sacred places, sacred times, and other cultural symbols to move in the lives of people. When we seek

renewal, we need to understand the human processes that can make us open to the possibility of renewal—that can help us to listen so that when God speaks we will hear.

CONVERSION

One pattern of institutional renewal is that of personal conversion. The emphasis in the believers' church upon personal commitment to Christ and to the church after one has reached the age of accountability in a sense recreates in each individual the costliness of leaving an old way of life and the high commitment to a new one that characterized the founders of the church. Ideally, each new generation enters with a fresh vision and new life.

In reality, however, two factors temper this ideal. First, the children are now, in fact, raised as if they were inside the church. Theologically, during their most formative years, they are rarely considered really lost. Institutionally, moreover, they are very much insiders. They attend services and are treated as participants. In the face of widespread acceptance, the meaning of their exclusion from the few technical rights of church membership often escapes them.

The second factor weakening the conversion experience is the institutionalization of conversion itself. Young people are soon expected to experience conversion at certain times in their lives, at certain occasions, and in certain ways. Furthermore, young people often act in imitation of one another. Consequently, conversion itself can become the path of least resistance rather than a costly new beginning. When all are being converted, those who hold back may have to pay a greater price.

NEW BEGINNINGS

Another pattern of renewal is the beginning of a new institution or movement. As bureaucratic inertia and nominalism make a church or denomination appear almost lifeless, there is a strong temptation among those with vital spiritual life to begin anew. The possibility of reviving the old seems almost hopeless.

Their theology does not permit the Catholics to split. Consequently their new beginnings take the form of new movements or orders within the church. For example, the Franciscans, Jesuits, Dominicans, and other Catholic organizations began as renewal movements that led eventually to fully institutionalized orders. The result, again, is a proliferation of bureaucratic structures, each of which must face the question of renewal.

INTERSECTING RENEWAL MOVEMENTS

The best modern example of crosscutting renewal movements is the East African Revival that has been continuing for more than forty years. In it, people interested in spiritual life and the renewal of the church gather in informal meetings for Bible study, prayer, confession and forgiveness of sins, and mutual exhortation. They come from many different churches and denominations. There is little or no formal structuring of the movement. The institutionalized churches raise funds, organize schools, hospitals, and church programs, build church buildings, and hire pastors. The revival groups meet informally, carry out no large organized activity, and maintain no offices or paid personnel. The result is an ongoing renewal of the established churches from within.

The pattern closest to this in Western churches is the emergence of para-

church organizations such as the Christian Business Men's Club, Navigators, InterVarsity Christian Fellowship, Youth for Christ, and Campus Crusade. However, unlike the East African Revival, these movements have led to formal organizations that, in time, have experienced the problems of institutionalization. Moreover, parachurch organizations have drawn personnel and resources from the churches and often created rivalries between the two. Because parachurch movements can limit their membership to those with talent and high spiritual commitment, they attract some of the best Christian leaders. But the church, which cannot turn away the weak, the poor, the uneducated, and the broken outcasts of society, is left weakened by the loss of talents and resources. There is often less excitement and honor in the care of those on the margins of society.

RITUALS OF RENEWAL

A fourth structure for renewal is rituals. Rituals play an important part in all religions. In them people draw apart from the secular routines of everyday life in order to focus their attention on religious matters. Ever since the Reformation, the Protestant churches in the West have tended to look at rituals with a disapproving eye. The rise of secularism (probably due in part to this anti-ritualistic stance) has only reinforced this rejection of ritual. The result has often been to stress corporate fellowship rather than worship of God as the central purpose of Sunday services, and to introduce informal, but not less rigid, ritual forms such as bulletins, special clothes, and implicit spiritual hierarchies.

It may well be that Protestants need to rediscover the importance of multivocal rituals if they wish to counteract the growing secularism of the modern age, for rituals like symbols are languages for speaking of spiritual things. As in the case of institutions, the answer to dead rituals is not no rituals, but living rituals. Such rituals are important in bringing renewal not only to individuals but to institutions as well.

RITUALS OF RENEWAL

Rituals play an important part in all religious life. This is particularly true of nonliterate peoples from whom rituals and myths are the encyclopedias in which religious knowledge is stored. Literate people store such information in books, but nonliterate peoples must do so in forms that can be readily recalled. For this reason, rituals that can be reenacted and stories that can easily be remembered are the primary means by which most people around the world retain and transmit their religious beliefs.

Religious rituals are also important in the expression of religious feelings. As Otto points out (1923), the religious experience is closely tied to a sense of mystery, awe, and fear in the face of the supernatural. Such feelings are important in giving expression and reinforcement to the beliefs we hold most deeply.

Finally, rituals call for personal response, often in some tangible form. To participate in a ritual is to reaffirm one's commitment to the beliefs it enacts.

STRUCTURE OF RITUALS

All rituals share a basic structure: they stand as sacred events in opposition to ordinary, secular life. Everyday life is semichaotic. Unexpected occurrences and accidents interrupt a sequence of events that in itself often lacks order. In the face of this disorder, secular life, left to itself, becomes increasingly meaningless.

RITUALS OF RESTORATION

Rituals can be divided into two types. The first of these, and by far the most common, are rituals of restoration. In these people gather together to restore their faith in the beliefs that order their lives, and rebuild the religious community in which these beliefs find expression.

Rituals of restoration have several basic characteristics. First, they are generally characterized by a high degree of ritual order. For example, the order of Sunday morning services is often fixed and repeated from week to week. The Lord's Prayer is recited again and again (in ordinary life such repetition appears foolish—one does not tell the same joke again and again to the same audience). The songs are generally printed and their melodies and words highly predictable. Even the congregational responses may be spelled out in detail. Only in the sermon do we allow some originality, and even there the content must remain within the normally expected theological framework. This high order restores in the participants a sense of order and meaning in the universe, in their community, and in their own lives.

Second, restorative rituals take place within the state of community. That is, people occupy formal roles and relate in institutionalized ways to one another. For example, in ordinary church services the members act as pastor, deacon, choir leader, and layperson. Many of these distinctions are reinforced by titles, differences in clothing, and special locations in the sanctuary. Role differentiation and hierarchy are evident in the organization of the service. The leader is a priest or head appointed by the institution. As such, he or she represents the people before God. Consequently, restorative rituals reinforce the authority and structures of the establishment.

Third, there is a sharp focus on religious activity and a strong sense of expectation that something will occur. People leave behind the cares of everyday life. Ordinary tasks are forgotten as full attention is given to the service at hand.

Finally, these regenerative rites are generally held in places central to the lives of the people. The church, particularly in villages and towns, is in the middle of the community and carries with it the religious feeling of home—a place where people find security, meaning, and a sense of rest.

RITUALS OF TRANSFORMATION

If restorative rituals are characterized by a high degree of structure, transformative ones are characterized by a high degree of creativity and antistructure. That is, they often reject the normal structure of an institution and seek to create a new one. In so doing, they cut through established ways of doing things and restore a measure of flexibility and personal intimacy to the organization.

Transformational rituals are found in all religions of the world, including Christianity. They include such practices as pilgrimages, camps and retreats, special revival services, festivals, mass rallies, and, in many countries, religious fairs. On the level of the individual and family they also include rites of passage associated with birth, marriage, death, and other transitions of life. In the early and medieval church transitional rituals played an important part in the lives of the people. Only in recent years, and in Western Protestant churches in secular, urban settings, have they lost much of their significance.

In some crucial ways transformative rites are the opposite of restorative

rites. First, they are characterized by what Victor Turner (1969) calls "liminality." This is the state of being in limbo—of being torn out of the familiar settings and relationships in which we live our lives. For instance, the pilgrim leaves familiar territory to travel to a strange place where everything is new. There is a structure, but it is a totally new one characterized by flexibility, creativity, and change rather than the reinforcement of an existing order. The result is an openness to change, for the ties to everyday life that often draw us back into existing structures are broken.

Second, transformational rituals are characterized not by *community* but by *communitas*. This term introduced by Turner (1969) connotes a lack of formal roles and relationships. In other words, in *communitas* there is no rigid social structure and no hierarchy. Participants are all equals. In the presence of God, all human distinctions become meaningless. This sense of *communitas* bonds participants together into a single group and opens them up to change.

There is an exception to this state of *communitas*. For the leaders of the pilgrimage, camp, or festival, the ritual is not a place set apart from their normal lives. It is their place of work. Consequently for them these rituals are their *community*. But leaders of such rites are generally prophets. They are often charismatic leaders who in the role of addressing "the voice of God" to religious institutions and their members often pose a threat to the "priests" who run the establishment.

Communitas is a short-lived state of affairs. One cannot live in it for long without beginning to transform it into community, for *communitas* does not provide for all the requirements of ongoing social life. In time people need doctors, merchants, teachers, and a great variety of other workers to maintain the society. When Peter suggested on the Mount of Transfiguration that they build houses, he had already begun the transformation from an ethereal experience to ordinary life.

Third, rituals of transformation, like those of restoration, are associated with a high sense of focus and of expectation. Outside matters are left behind. In transformational rituals this often includes a geographic separation that makes disengagement from the world complete.

Finally, transformative rites allow for a great deal of creativity. This creativity destroys the old order, but it also builds a new one.

The goal of transformative rites is to bring about change. The combination of liminality, *communitas*, high expectations, and antistructural creativity makes deep and lasting changes possible in short periods of time. Changes in fundamental beliefs are often reinforced by strong emotions and a commitment to act upon the new convictions. These transformations are often spoken of as conversions, rededications, and new commitments.

TRANSFORMATIVE RITUALS AND THE RENEWAL OF THE CHURCH

Transformative rituals were very much a part of Judeo-Christian life until recent times. In the Old Testament the levitical priests scattered throughout the land conducted the normal restorative rituals. However, three times a year all adult males, particularly heads of families who served as family priests, were expected to go to Jerusalem. There they gathered as pilgrims in the great festivals of regeneration. All ordinary social distinctions were broken down as the people

assembled before the Lord. Special music, art, and even dance gave expression to the creativity of these events. It is not surprising, therefore, that the most important events in the life of Christ—his initiation into Jewish adulthood, his death, and his resurrection—took place on such occasions.

Festivals, pilgrimages, and even the Crusades played important roles in the medieval church. The toil of daily life and the routine of local services were broken by special occasions that made the people aware of a greater Christendom, of the world outside, and of the great historical heritage of their faith. The great cathedrals, the pilgrimage sites, and Palestine itself restored to many a sense of the sacred and of God's presence in human history.

Even in frontier America, transformative services played a key part in the religious life of the people. The evangelistic crusades, revival meetings, and mission conferences were annual events on the calendars of many churches.

Today, in Western urban society, our regenerative rites are largely secular—the major sports events, the political rallies, and professional conferences. In churches the revivals and crusades have been replaced by summer camps and weekend retreats. They play an important part in personal renewal, but they have less effect upon the structures of the institutionalized church. Denominational conferences, anniversary celebrations, and festivals such as Easter and Christmas do involve whole churches, but they are often controlled by the priests of the institution. Citywide crusades do break down barriers between denominations and provide Christians with a greater vision of the scope of Christianity as a whole, but they are sporadic and far between.

Restorative rites can renew commitment and vision, but only by reaffirming the institutional structures. It takes transformations and revolutions to break the stranglehold these structures can have in the church. It may well be that churches in the West may need to rediscover the importance of such regenerative rituals if they want to counter the evils of institutionalization and bring new life back into the church.

TRANSFORMATIVE RITUALS AND MISSIONS

What implications does all this have for missions? It is clear that we must strive not only to plant new churches, but to renew constantly the life of the old ones. Dead forms of Christianity are little better than non-Christian religions. Consequently, missions like churches must plan for the hundred-year span and longer.

But there is another reason why missions must take renewal rituals into account. Many of the societies in which missions are found are nonliterate societies that encode their beliefs in religious rituals. Missionaries who come from literate societies that store their beliefs in books often do not realize this and seek to get rid of rituals, dramas, stories, and other folk means for preserving knowledge. The result is that new Christians often have few ways to remember their beliefs. They cannot read the Bible. The preacher may come only on rare occasions. As P. Y. Luke and John B. Carman found (1968:127), the theology of most Indian village Christians is recorded in their songs. This "lyric theology" is memorized and sung in the homes at night, sustaining the people's faith.

The contrast between Protestant services and the people's traditional ceremonies is probably greatest in the areas of transformative rituals. Festivals, religious fairs, pilgrimages, and rites of passage such as birth, initiation, mar-

riage, and death break the drudgery of everyday life, provide excitement, and make life more meaningful. Here modern Christian missionaries have provided the fewest functional substitutes to replace the old ways. Consequently Christianity often appears drab and uninteresting.

Several innovative attempts have been made to change this picture. J. T. Seamands began a Christian religious fair in South India that attracts Christians from a wide area for a week of meetings and excitement. The Korean churches have united to organize nationwide rallies that strengthen the believers and serve as a witness to the people of the growing church in the land.

Church planting and church renewal are the two central tasks of missions. The first without the second leads to widespread nominal Christianity; the second without the first leads to life without a mission. In fact, the two go together. An effective mission to the world often revives the home church, and renewal at home often leads to a new missionary vision.

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