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'Be Transformed by the Renewing of your Mind'

1. Introduction

Therefore, I urge you, brothers, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God--this is your spiritual act of worship. Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is -- his good, pleasing and perfect will. Rom 12:1-2 (NIV)

Paul here puts together the two concepts of the body and the mind, and calls the Romans to the offering of one and the renewing of the other. In Charismatic Christian worship and life we quite often refer to the first. But how frequently do we emphasise 'the renewing of the mind'? Yet it is through this act, says Paul, that the transformation of Christians happens.¹

Within the spectrum of gifts identified by Paul in Ephesians 4:11-12, 'teachers' are clearly important (see also 1 Cor 12:28). Teachers in the early church were called to assist in the renewing of minds, prising them away from the dominant thought patterns of society and showing new ways of seeing the world as the arena of God's activity. In doing this they were doing theology, but a theology which was not divorced from the questions of everyday Christian life in the Spirit; rather, it was formed by those questions. That is why the 'pastors and teachers' of Ephesians 4:11 are so difficult to disentangle.

For me, as perhaps for many, part of the appeal of John Wimber's approach to Christian faith was his adoption of George Eldon Ladd's 'Kingdom theology' with its stress on inaugurated eschatology.² Yet while Ladd gave a theological basis to the 'signs and wonders' movement, Wimber did not explore in any depth *how* God might act: he simply asserted the New Testament pattern that God did so.³ Wimber emphasised a disjunction between a non-miraculous 'Western' world-view and encourage people to adopt a 'naturally supernatural-biblical' one instead. Since much of his thought was based on an 'either-or' conflict model, it did not really help in making the transition from the Western world-view in which we live to one where biblical affirmations about the power of God could be understood. Wimber's emphasis on *returning* to a biblical world-view tended to ignore the challenge to proclaim the gospel afresh through dialogue with contemporary culture.

Wimber's approach shows in microcosm a major reason why the Charismatic renewal movement has not had much impact on Western society as a whole. Few have undertaken the teaching task of helping to make the transition from one world-view to

another, or seeing how a renewed world-view might play its part within the process of cultural change which is often labelled 'post-modern'.⁴ In doing this it has followed the path of most Christian revival and renewal movements since the late nineteenth century.⁵

Chris Russell, outgoing editor of *Skepsis*, commented in a previous issue:

Much talk of revival both excites me and makes me incredibly worried. I think it all comes down to God's action and presence in the world – how does God work and in what kind of ways? Much crude revival talk can lead to extraordinary ideas about the kind of God we worship.⁶

As an example of working through Paul's challenge to 'be transformed by the renewing of your mind', I propose in the rest of this article to look at the action of God and how it might be understood today. First by identifying an understanding of the action of God, then going on to use that understanding in dialogue with the New Testament, and finally drawing some practical conclusions for the 'renewing of the mind'.

2. The Action of God

When Camelot launched the National Lottery in Britain it used an advertising campaign in which a big finger descended from the sky proclaiming, 'It could be you'. The basic assumptions in this picture were (a) that the world is fundamentally independent of God, and (b) that God may touch the world, but in a way that is irrational and beyond explanation.

Immanuel Kant has been blamed for many things in his time, but perhaps not before for being the copywriter for Camelot! Yet the Camelot picture of God, the stuff of popular folk religion, has its philosophical basis in the work of Kant. His distinction between *phenomena* (the stuff of knowledge which could be examined with the tools of science) and *noumena* (the stuff of belief and therefore outside rational scientific examination) leads directly to an image of the world as a closed system, independent of God. Kant himself believed that it was necessary to 'deny [scientific] knowledge to make room for faith.'⁷ His work had a major effect on theology, both enabling it to survive the age of scientific reason which followed the Enlightenment, but also undermining traditional Christian understandings of God's action in the world, an understanding preserved in the liturgy and the reading of scripture, but rarely in the pulpit or the mind. Kant proposed a theology which dealt with a realm which by definition had no genuine interaction with the world as we experience it, a theology perhaps most enthusiastically embraced by Rudolf Bultmann.

If post-Kantian theology deals with issues divorced from what actually happens, it is small wonder that many in the West turned their backs on it. Yet many people continue to have moments when they feel God at work. Therefore the result is an uneasy compromise, a double-think situation: a picture of the world which mostly runs happily

without God, yet into which he sometimes intrudes for no apparent good reason. This view is not logically coherent, of course, but that does not stop people from living by it as a worldview.

For those who see God's action as interventionist in this way, a moral dilemma is created. Don Cupitt gives a good anecdotal example of this, as he remembers an experience as a hospital chaplain in Salford in the early 1960s. After writing of two cases, one of a woman with a disabled child, and one of a young man dying of cancer, he reports the following:

One night there was a man who had a brain tumour and was not expected to live. An operation had just been performed and he lay unconscious, surrounded by relatives. At their request I prayed with them and stayed some time. Two nights later he had made a remarkable recovery, and was indeed eventually discharged. The relatives all thought there had been a miracle and crowded round me alarmingly. I was confounded. 'Thank the doctors. Thank God! Forget me, forget miracles,' I said, and did not mention the matter to my colleagues.⁸

It is clear that Cupitt was driven by his scientific understanding of how the world works ('The world is a continuous natural process'⁹) to reject the possibility of a miracle in this case – and therefore the possibility that there had been any special action of God involved. To accept that God had acted in this case would raise the question of why he had failed to do so in the other two cases, although it would seem that in those cases there were not relatives on hand to compel Cupitt to pray. Nevertheless, enough of us have prayed for healing where it has not been given to sympathise with Cupitt's dilemma.

The world is full of events such as floods, tornadoes, earthquakes and volcanoes which tend to be treated as 'freaks' of nature (or, in insurance language, 'Acts of God!'). Yet what is really meant by this is simply that we do not understand them: they do not conform to our predictive patterns of the world. We quickly shift from an epistemological statement (that something is unexplained) to an ontological one (that it is unexplainable). But to characterise such events as 'freaks' is not really fair. The scientist and theologian, John Polkinghorne, points out that if you had never seen water boil, its behaviour in a kettle at 100° C would appear wholly freakish and bizarre. For at that point the gradual and predictable rise in temperature of the water, which is directly related to the heat source applied to it, suddenly stops. Some of the liquid assumes a quite different state, and becomes the gas we call steam. When you make a cup of tea you expect this change and accept it as normal and wholly predictable. Yet what happens is that while the laws of physics remain the same, their consequences radically alter in the changed state beyond 100° C. Within the new regime, different events occur, which, if you didn't boil a kettle every day, you would not predict. So-called 'freaks of nature' may therefore simply be manifestations of what scientists term a 'phase change'.

'Miracles', normally treated also as freakish events, may fall into this category too, suggests Polkinghorne: they are a manifestation of a 'new regime'. He goes on to suggest that it is not at all strange, in the light of this scientific thinking, to consider that 'If it is true...that God was present in Christ in a way that he has not been present in any other person, then Jesus represented the presence of a new regime in the world. It is at least a coherent possibility that that new regime was accompanied by a new phenomenon.'¹⁰ This 'new regime' surrounding Jesus is what the gospels call the kingdom of God. If this is the case, how might we understand that 'new regime' which Jesus brought into being and which opens the possibility of understanding the action of God?

3. The 'New Regime'

Polkinghorne identifies the action of God with Jesus. But the New Testament goes much further than this: its writers make it clear that Jesus' work went on after his departure from the world, through the Holy Spirit. The 'new regime' of the kingdom continued and was manifested in similar 'signs and wonders', as the early chapters of Acts demonstrate. But in the later chapters of Acts the situation seems to have changed. Just as in Nazareth Jesus could do no miracle (Matthew 13:58, cf. Matthew 27:40-42), so the climate seems different in the story of Paul's arrest and subsequent journey to Rome. There is not the same sense of the imminence of the kingdom which characterises the stories of the Jerusalem church (Acts 1-9) or Paul's own ministry in Ephesus (Acts 19). Using Polkinghorne's suggestion of the 'phase change' it looks from the New Testament as if such a change was not restricted to Jesus' own ministry: it could be seen in other places and at other times. But nor was it a uniform feature of Jesus' ministry: in some places he could do no miracle. This 'new regime' seems to have been present, but not uniformly so.

The gospels also describe opposition to Jesus' announcement of the kingdom of God. It is clear that he operates in an atmosphere of conflict. But this atmosphere is not 'just' a spiritual one: the opposition he faces has clear social and political manifestations, as much recent work on the historical Jesus has shown.¹¹ Similarly the early church in Jerusalem faces opposition from the religious and political establishments, while in Ephesus after a period of powerful ministry, opposition emerges in the form of the silversmiths whose trade is threatened.

I would suggest that in these situations what we see is a three-way tension between God, human beings, and the opposition to the kingdom which usually has a concrete social and political reality.¹² The autonomous role which this reality has corresponds to the language of the 'powers' which Paul frequently uses (e.g. Rom 8:38-9; 1 Cor 2:8, 15:24-6; Eph 1:19-21, 2:1-2, 6:12; Col 1:16, 2:15). These powers are not held to be intrinsically evil by Paul, but to have been created for good and turned to evil by the fallen nature of the world.¹³ Although the precise way in which the 'powers' might

correspond to political, economic and social factors requires a good deal of further attention,¹⁴ it is a helpful way in which to develop the understanding of God's action in the world. Divine action might be seen, therefore, as part of a three-way tension between humans, the powers, and God. Where God is able to rule, there is the kingdom; but there are more factors involved than simply whether God wants to work.

If a role is given to the 'powers' as concrete phenomena, then the role and importance of the cross in coming of the kingdom also comes more clearly into focus. Paul in Colossians 2:14b-15 speaks of how Jesus on the cross 'disarmed the rulers and authorities and made a public example of them, triumphing over them in it.' Here and elsewhere Paul sees the cross as the decisive battleground between the forces of good and evil, but there is an ambiguity in his treatment of the issue, for the cross is described as a definite victory over the powers in this passage, while in others (e.g. 1Cor 15:24-27a) their subjection lies in the future. In Walter Wink's exposition, Paul's doctrine of the defeat of the powers is seen to be an eschatological truth: the defeat of the powers was accomplished by Christ on the cross, but God's ultimate victory will not be shown beyond doubt until the end of time.¹⁵

To return to Polkinghorne's image of the boiling kettle, what we see in the in-breaking of the kingdom of God is a phase change in reality which can be resisted by other factors. Jesus himself was not always an agent of the 'new regime' as Matthew 13:58 demonstrates: sometimes the spiritual atmosphere, made up of a complex conjunction of factors, was not right for him.

4. Conclusions

This is only a very brief sketch of how 'charismatic theology' might be done. We began with a practical question: how does God work and in what kinds of ways? An examination of the issue and attention to how people currently visualise it led on to dialogue with the New Testament witness, resulting in a proposal for an understanding of the action of God within a three-way tension.

To conclude I want to suggest some implications, two relating to the model proposed above and two relating the 'renewing of the mind'.

- If the 'powers' have a concrete social or political manifestation, then spiritual warfare will include standing against them in equally concrete ways, as well as in prayer. What are the implications in the town or city where you live? What are the steps needed to confront the powers? On a wider scale, I have become involved in the Jubilee 2000 campaign as a consequence of this thinking.

- Do not become discouraged if the spiritual atmosphere does not seem to be conducive to the growth of the kingdom of God where you are. To use Polkinghorne's analogy, the temperature may not be right yet.
- Renewal groups need to spend time in reflection as well as in sharing experiences and stories. 'Renewing the mind' means evaluating those experiences.
- Charismatic renewal will become just another phase if minds are not renewed. Perhaps it is already in danger of doing so. If we want to see society transformed, we need a theology that makes sense in contemporary categories, but which does not lose touch with the impulse of the Spirit. This is a key task for teachers in the local church. I hope that *Skepsis* can contribute to this.

¹ cf. C.E.B.Cranfield *Romans: A Shorter Commentary* (Edinburgh 1985) pp.296-7.

² For the link see J.Wimber *The Dynamics of Spiritual Growth* (London 1990) p.169.

³ See M.Percy *Words, Wonders and Power* (London 1996) pp.27-8 on this. Percy's book is largely a sociological critique of 'signs and wonders' and does not attempt to deal constructively with the theological issues.

⁴ Though there are honourable exceptions, notably Mark Stibbe who helpfully summarises his own work within the debate on postmodernism in 'This is That: Some Thoughts Concerning Charismatic Hermeneutics' *Anvil* 15 (1998) pp.181-193.

⁵ See R.Lovelace *Dynamics of Spiritual Growth: an evangelical theology of Renewal* (Exeter 1979) pp.48-60, 261-70. For examples of renewal accompanied by theological maturity, see pp. 79, 179-84.

⁶ *Anglicans for Renewal* Vol. 72 (Spring 1998) p.33.

⁷ I.Kant *Critique of Pure Reason* (1781) (tr.N.Kemp Smith) (London 1933) p.29.

⁸ D.Cupitt *The Sea of Faith* (London 1984) p.34.

⁹ *ibid.*

¹⁰ J.Polkinghorne 'God's Action in the World' (1990 J.K.Russell Fellowship Lecture) CTNS Bulletin 10:2 (1990). Available on the internet at <http://www.starcourse.org/jcp/action.html>.

¹¹ See, for example, E.P.Sanders *The Historical Figure of Jesus* (London 1993) and N.T.Wright *Jesus and the Victory of God* (London 1996).

¹² See H.Butterfield 'God in History' (1952) in C.T.McIntire (ed) *Herbert Butterfield: Writings on Christianity and History* (Oxford 1979) pp.3-16.

¹³ Both H.Schlier *Principalities and Powers in the New Testament* (London 1961), and W.Wink *Naming the Powers: the Language of Power in the New Testament* (Philadelphia 1984) see the 'powers' as a significant part of Paul's worldview, but contend that the same is true for the whole of the New Testament. cf. especially Wink p.100. On the powers see also Tom Wright *New Tasks for a Renewed Church* (London 1992) pp.124-59.

¹⁴ cf. W.Wink *Engaging the Powers* (Philadelphia 1992)

¹⁵ cf. Wink *Naming the Powers* p.115.