

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF RESTORATIONISM

For twenty years, the charismatic movement has been affecting the life of all the Churches in Britain, in varying degrees. It has brought new songs, new freedom, new bondage, new spirit, new divisions. Generally it has poured its wine into existing denominational bottles. Becoming charismatic makes a Catholic a more fervent and more flexible Catholic, embracing the 'separated brethren' without letting go of the Mother of Our Lord. Such charismatics do not want or threaten radical reform of their own churches, which would mean the disappearance of their traditional identities.

In the last ten years, Baptist Churches in some places have been increasingly affected by certain sorts of House Church, or Community Church, or as Andrew Walker prefers to call them in his useful book (*Restoring the Kingdom: The Radical Christianity of the House Church Movement*, Hodder, 1985, £5-95), Restorationism.

At first sight Restorationism may appear to be an extreme anarchic, divisive, impatient and confident form of charismatic renewal, growing as charismatics come out of mixed denominations to form new churches of intense commitment on the essentials of a biblical protestant charismatic understanding of Christianity. There can be little doubt that many join them because that is what they are looking for. However, Walker argues that Restorationism is a separate historical development from the charismatic movement, and is a distinct type of Christianity. Far from being a development of the Charismatic movement, it is incompatible with it, in some respects.

Walker does not include all churches of the House Church type in Restoration. He excludes the Ichthus movement, for example (p.29). He divides Restoration into two main types: Restoration One (R1) is a 'clearly identified faction', Bryn Jones of Bradford, the Dales Bible Week and the magazine *Restoration* being the chief markers. R2 shares similar doctrines and life-styles to R1, but is not organizationally, or through acceptance of apostolic subordination, part of it. People like John Noble, Gerald Coates and the Basingstoke fellowship belong to R2.

Restorationism appeared in an organized way only in the mid-70s, which is one reason why it could be regarded as a special form of the charismatic movement which was already making its mark. Walker shows that some of its major characteristics stem from developments in the 1950s, thus predating the Charismatic movement. A specifically significant clue to the nature of Restorationism lies in the fact that many of its early leaders were Brethren. It might be said that the Brethren were the Restorationists of the 1820s: in Exclusive and Open they soon developed their R1 and R2 forms then. But the argument does not rest on an inexact historical parallel between the beginnings of Brethrenism and of Restorationism. It is rather that Restorationism is, in part, a solution that some have found for the agony of frustration the Brethren were in by the fifties. They denied they were a denomination, they wanted the unity of all true Christians in the simple apostolic essentials of faith; they could see their dream was not

coming true in many fossilised assemblies. Many young Brethren from that time became Anglicans or Baptists; they sold out to the denominationalism the Brethren had tried to escape. Those who refused such a retrograde step had to look for new ways of realising the Brethren ideal.

That ideal was not simply the quest for the simple local apostolic church. Key ingredients of Brethrenism were the blending of an interest in prophecy (apocalyptic coming true in our time and explaining the history the papers tell us we are living through) and a concern for revival. They were blended because revival was part of God's promise for the last days (at least on some readings). One tension - amongst many which characterise Brethrenism historically - is between those who lived a domesticated practical familial piety in the local fellowship and those who looked at the wider scene, the signs of the times whether of world disaster or world revival. Arthur Wallis (pp. 36, 59), the theoretician of Restorationism, is a good example of the second sort of Brother. The hopelessness of the 'denominations' is taken for granted; the positive enthusiasm is for establishing a Kingdom people in preparation for the return of Christ to reign on earth. Restorationism, therefore, cannot be expected to renew traditional churches: it is the agency of their supplanting, and wants to be different from them, not least in being a working force disciplined by eschatological urgency and by subordination to those men who are raised up by God who is acting to complete history.

It is not surprising, therefore, that where they have encountered Restorationism, Baptist and other churches have felt themselves hurt by a disrespectful assault which divides and threatens their traditional identity and values. Some see in Restorationism the kind of Church they have been waiting for; they may seek to take their Church into the style or even under the authority of some Restorationist leader; if they do not succeed they may secede brusquely. Hurt and fear has been engendered: in Churches where Restorationism is known criticism of it proliferates as a defence against takeover.

Walker deals gently with common criticisms. He shows that often they are not as fair or as fully informed as they might be, but, in the end (it seems to me) maybe against his intention, his book serves to sharpen the questions rather than to allay them. It is said, for example, that Restorationism is destroying the charismatic renewal (extremes are always accused of destroying the moderate form of the same thing). But, says Walker, if Charismatic Renewal is failing it is its own fault. It is simply Pentecostalism in a 'posher' form, adapted to suit the traditional 'posher' churches, and such a graft will not take - true Pentecostalism is not posh (p.263). That the Renewal is in decline is questionable, and this answer to the criticism is partial. Again, it is said that Restorationism divides churches. But, he says, Baptist Churches are already divided: Restorationism merely exploits existing divisions. The account he gives of what happened at Romford (pp. 261-271) goes some way to confirming such a view, but it merely re-directs the criticism from causing division to the ethics of the *exploitation* of division. Walker seems very soft on the charge that Restorationism is 'not Brotherly love - but Big Brotherly'. The story told in that section (pp. 277-286) is more one-sided than he allows:

one party tells a detailed story of manipulation and maltreatment by an 'Apostle', while the Apostle, in reply, merely denigrates the aggrieved accuser. What comes out through that tactic is an apostolic demonstration of the *paternalism* which Walker shows elsewhere is essential to the movement. Even when it does not lead to gross abuses, it is questionable (173, 175). The paternalism of 'shepherding' needs to be criticised long before it has issued in destructive manipulation and disordering of people's lives. It is questionable when it encourages docile good-living sheep in place of risk-taking and responsible human beings. This issue shows that comment on Restorationism needs to include a sense for 'human rights' in the face of dictatorial manipulation (cf. L. Boff, 'The Violation of Human Rights in the Church', in *Church Charism and Power*). We also need to go further and deeper into a theological appraisal of the *kind of humanity* being envisaged, encouraged and produced on the average by any religious movement.

Walker is short on such theological comment, though the seeds of it are scattered. In the final chapter, he explains (in effect) why his criticism of Restoration is so limited, so unclear and so restrained. He is using Restorationism as an example in his own argument for something Restorationism itself does not want. Walker has a special concern to defend *sectarianism* as a way - maybe the best way - of being Christian in our situation. But Restorationism does not want to be a certain kind of religious body fitting into society: it looks for the Restoration of the Kingdom of God before the end.

Walker, however, rejects any quest for one perfect church to supersede all others (290); he does not believe it will come to pass. If that part of Restoration's programme is dismissed, what is left? In effect, despite their protestations, they must settle for being a sect. So Walker asks: Is that such a terrible thing? His answer is: No. Secularisation being inexorable, religion has been pushed to the periphery as 'one of the consumer options in a pluralist society' (291). The traditional churches have already been undermined: 'Weber's concept of the broad church, universalistic and embracing the world is in fact the world embracing the Church'. He then repeats the conventional view that Anglican Bishops and the BCC and the like are politicised and lack confidence in, or concentration on, their *religious* essence. He uses Alistair MacIntyre (*After Virtue*) to argue the failure of religious authority in post-Enlightenment moral relativity. 'Can Churches, in the traditional denominational sense, resist secularisation and preserve the purity of the Gospel?'

The history of Orthodoxy (his own present tradition) is quoted: it sought to christianise the world and got confused in the process; now Orthodoxy recognises that the purity of the Gospel was preserved not through its involvement in Byzantine courts but through retreating to the monasteries. Walker echoes Newbigin's call to turn back from *modern critical rationalism* to the fundamental 'canonical faith' (p. 294). But the Churches ('conventional and denominational Christianity') will not be able easily to take this road. They are now in a situation where they can neither be sectarian nor can they leaven and integrate secular pluralist societies. Have they any future at all? By comparison, the sect 'with its close knit voluntary association and committed

camaraderie' will survive better under these conditions.

Walker rejects as fantasy any talk of world revival which Restoration looks for. Before it could happen, or perhaps because it will never happen, there has to be a retreat to preserve and conserve our sacred heritage. 'Before we take on the world, we have to call for a halt to worldliness in our churches and denominations'. So he does not accept the sense of eschatological world-purpose which he shows has been formative in Restorationism's view of itself, but he does endorse Restorationism as sectarian criticism of secularised churches and as an alternative to their ways. On these grounds, he will not be too dismayed if the worldly churches are troubled - even divided - by the challenges of this kind of radical Christianity.

It is worth pondering this point about the relation of Church and world. A discussion about Christian worldliness cuts both ways in this context. For the 'world' and 'modernity' are also in the Restoration. It tailors itself to features of contemporary culture. It does not achieve a purely New Testament pattern; sometimes it does not pretend to be attempting to do so: the new apostleship has broken free (282, 'Ted, you should know that we don't work from scriptural principles'). Restoration is itself a form of modernity. 'Preserving sacred tradition by retreat' is a form of modernity, at least as much as it is a form of faith in the living God. We all make some compromise with the world. Restoration makes a compromise with the world - the unpleasant, disordered but powerful world - which is somewhat akin to the compromise the gnostics made, a symbiosis with what they disapprove.

The policy of 'preserving sacred tradition' pursues the religious option as it is defined by our modern pluralistic culture: it accepts the niche provided. Restorationism (in R1 form) shows more wisdom, perhaps, than Walker because it knows there is no salvation in mere sectarianism. Unlike Walker, it does not attempt to justify its sectarianism in terms of sociological definitions nor by sociological prognostications that the future lies with sects. Instead Restoration sets store on eschatology and historical miracle. That is, it looks for the defeat of, and the release from, this world, because in the end the world will be swept away, swallowed up by the reality of the kingdom. So it does not make a virtue of its present sectarian compromise with the world, but relativises it eschatologically. Walker is right, of course, to say that by putting the emphasis on building the Church now in preparation for the coming of Christ (p.59) Restorationism has qualified the suddenness and discontinuity of traditional eschatology. It looks forward to more than the final judgement, the mere end of the world. History is not seen as going on meaninglessly until the day when the sudden end comes upon it and the elect (hitherto hidden) are brought out into glory. Rather; the end will confirm the historical gathering of all God's true people into one, a process already happening to prepare the way for the end. Such an eschatology, which includes historical preparation in its vision, means that Restorationism does not have to offer a thoroughly otherworldly Christianity in a culture that has little taste for otherworldliness. It can invite people to join the saving élite of history: that has more appeal. By taking that view of itself in salvation history, however, Restorationism is on course, sociologically,

to becoming a sect, though they would like to deny it. If that is so, however, the worldliness of Restorationism is not radically different in principle from that of the Churches; Restoration fits one available cultural niche, while denying that it is ultimately culturally determined. It may fit better than the Churches, or, perhaps, we should say, the social niche for sects is now more often more comfortable than the niche for Churches. In any case, it happily endorses itself, or feels divinely endorsed, in that niche. It is in the way God is moving in our times. This theological confidence about an ecclesiastical-sociological development is essential to Restoration. And it is here that theological questioning must be pursued. For when a community anticipates the eschaton with confidence that it is the agent preparing for it, the expectation of transforming judgement can be dulled. An historical assurance of election does not open up the believing community to judgement. It enables the community, the movement, to walk somewhat by *sight*, to being justified by its works; it is not cast radically on faith. And that choice between sight and faith is a basic theological and spiritual one in every age of the Christian Church (II Cor. 5.7).

Walking by faith, it could be argued, is more likely to happen these days in the historical Churches, aware of their failure, no longer happy to assert that their traditional compromises with the world are God's will and God's way of mission. They are pluralist, communities of communities - there are always friendships or partnerships or committees or movements or even *ecclesiolae* in ecclesia, where people and small groups try in many various and not always harmonious ways to perform different tasks as historically conditioned, historically compromised responses to the call of God in Christ (which they have heard in one of many forms, more or less authentic). They try to keep in touch with other Christians engaged in other tasks, in other ways; and these relationships, coupled with their sense of historical failure, prevent their having any great view of themselves as God's Elect, or as the special precursors of the final coming of God's Kingdom. They may even be living with no sense of the future: they may just be going on in old grooves out of habit. That would indeed be a loss of Christian substance. But if they have any sense of their own future in terms of Christ, it can hardly include the illusions of 'building a people of power' ready for his coming. It will have to be openness to judgement, the judgement of his coming, the expectation that we are *going towards* an event of transformation, which will surprise us, and so will be *radically* transforming; there is no change we can make - or enter into here - that will prepare us for it so we are not surprised by it. Christian living and worship, in this view, does not acclimatise us to heaven; if it did, our coming to it would not take our breath away. All that Christian living achieves is to get us used to little and muffled surprises so that we will not be disappointed or shocked out of faith when the coming of Christ utterly surprises us. Now, to live expecting the judgement, and knowing that it will not be a simple endorsement of ourselves, can hardly be borne without *faith in God* which transcends even our best present experience of God.

So, in this discussion about Restorationism, there is a challenge not only to be open to the *judgement* of God (as something we are

open to already, but not open to as we will be) but also to understand that, in our ecclesiology and our church activity, we *walk by faith not by sight*. In our failure, in our historical conditionedness in which and by which, one way or another, we fall short of the glory of God, we cannot hope or rejoice on the basis of what we are or do - or even what is visibly done amongst us. An honest reckoning with the *totality* of our achievements (such as careful bits of church history like Walker's help us to), a reckoning with all that is open to sight, the good and the not so good together, must leave us with burdened consciences, a sense of failure and weakness and frustration when measured by our calling in Christ perceived in faith. Beyond the sense of failure, Christians may have hope, but only because they are called to live by faith. Where things fall short because they are unfinished, imperfect, not fully grown, we are to have the patience of faith. We are to nurture and wait for what is not yet seen. Something of that kind of faith is present in some of the shepherding practised in Restorationism; it falls short perhaps because nurture becomes pressing and manipulative and creates *undue* dependence; it has patience as paternalist controlling caring but not much patience to 'wait for' others who are called to freedom. It gives intense care and direction but does not allow time to people. In pastoral practice or brotherly love it is often not easy to know where the patience of faith becomes an indifferent tolerance. If Restoration errs in one direction, others do in another: we all find it hard to get it right. Those dimensions of ourselves and our communities that fall short through sin call for more than the patience of faith: here faith's correlate is forgiveness. We are to walk by faith in the forgiveness of God who justifies the ungodly. Every day we are to get on with action, with what we can, or are given, to do, even though we know that, from our motives through to the execution, it is shot through with sin. We have confidence for such never-sinless action because we believe all our sins are covered by the forgiveness of God. That we know only in faith. Luther's advice, *pecca fortiter*, is the brief statement of how we live. Perhaps we make it more helpful by softening the shocking paradox and spelling it out: we do not lose our confidence and our will for action (we act boldly); we are not deterred by the occurrence of sin as a component of our action, even though, as a component, sin threatens convincingly to characterise the whole of our action. Such courage for acting, despite sin, requires faith in God who gives the specific freedom of forgiveness, the expectation that through his grace the sin in the action will not determine its results, its final meaning and worth.

To live with this perspective of faith means that we do not have to justify ourselves. It means that we are released from the driving concern of churches (like those of the Restoration - and of the Baptist denomination?) to be right where others are wrong. It means that we can bear and even welcome Church history which is at least as sharp and critical as Walker's (and as I have indicated, I think his is, at points, too gentle, too easy going). It means, for me, that I do not wish for Church history of mainstream Church Christianity or of the Baptist tradition (my tradition) to be written to justify us by comparison with the House Churches or anyone else. Church history should be written by Churches as an act of owning up to our total Church-selves before the Lord who will bring everything - including

sin - to light. What, over all, he will bring to light is the grace of God in the forgiveness of sins; we have no reason then to fear the judgement as irredeemably adverse. It will be - and is - painfully truthful but its full truth includes healing, because what is revealed in divine judgement is not just our doings and being, but God's doing and being, which is love taking form as forgiveness in order that sin may not have dominion.

Of course, a church that understands itself in this way is deprived of certain human incentives for action. It no longer wants to be alive, where others are dead, or right because they are shown to be wrong. It wants to live for, with and in others and it is right-wised in the confession of shared sin. When stripped of mean human incentives, any church faces the stark judgement of Christ: do we love God purely and do we act solely out of pure love of God, without the motive of other considerations? And do we really believe in God only, so that his grace is the truly sovereign incentive of our being? Are we walking by faith or by sight - moved by grace or by human comparisons, measures and techniques?

Another way in which walking by faith is important in this discussion relates to church order and the political understanding involved in it. Restorationism advocates the church as theocracy; the church is not to be run as democracy. The distinction between theocracy and democracy is, in their thinking, part and parcel of the contrast between Church and world. Democracy is a product of the world, especially the world of rationalist human confidence. It is inappropriate in the Church, it is said. So they want to deny they are a denomination, for denominations have headquarters and also use 'democratic' institutions, like synods and councils, to decide policy. On which denominations are they commenting? In the period in which the House Churches have grown, the Church of England and to a much lesser extent the Roman Catholic Church have been modifying their episcopal (theocratic?) polity by increasing elective representative and lay participation. But Restorationism is closer, and more akin to the evangelical and Free Church traditions; it has probably had a greater disruptive impact on Baptist Churches than on any other Church. So could it be that the 'democracy' which is in their sights is typified by the local Baptist Church Meeting as the key organ of Church government? In that case, their comment converges with the long internal Baptist argument about whether Baptist Churches are democracies or theocracies. It is for many Baptist Churches not a theoretical question: too many of us try to keep the Church meeting going with a guilty conscience; we look for theocracy and all we see is democracy with all its faults and, because we are not looking for democracy, we get little help to live in democracy by faith, not sight.

Against such a tendency to democratise the Churches, Restorationism looks for denominations to be replaced on earth by one people of God, over whom he reigns as king, so that they live a totally distinctive kingdom life. In that way, Restorationism aims to work with a model of Church as *direct and visible theocracy*: no other will but God's has sway. However, even the advocates of Restoration see that churches cannot be managed on those terms. Whatever kind of theocracy they may desire they also have a theory and practice of

human authority in the Church. Like all other Churches, they have an ecclesiology which saves the claim to be divine only by explaining how the obviously human elements in church order relate to the divine. The community is a theocracy because, before the end, God's rule is exercised through those to whom he gives his authority. Thus it turns out that God does not *directly*, personally rule; through apostles and the like, he rules mediately, not immediately. In reality, Restorationism does not offer an obvious theocracy, where God can be seen (as he will be at the end) by every eye and where all acknowledge him. That Restoration is theocracy is only evident to a specific faith, a faith that takes form in recognising and submitting to contemporary 'apostles' and to those who have authority in the hierarchy flowing from them, a faith which can cloak these particular men, in all their obvious humanity, with divine authority.

Over against this theocracy, the denominations, it is alleged, have been seduced into democratic ways of choosing and validating leaders (at all levels) and of discussing and deciding policy. In view of the analysis so far, this simple opposition of theocratic and democratic churches appears inadequate. It will not do because we should not measure by '*sight*' (let us say, for sake of an example) a Baptist Church with its elections of minister and deacons and its Church meetings and then, in contrast, read by '*faith*' the hierarchical and human government of Restorationist Churches. It is unbalanced to define Baptist practice as democratic because of certain obvious similarities with common democratic procedures, but to require the human - sometimes all too human - activities of a Restorationist (or any other) undemocratic hierarchy to be respected as God's rule (pp. 81-83). If the emergence (by human consultative though not open democratic means) of the Restorationist leadership (pp. 59-65) can be read by *faith* and so seen as God's doing, as it is by that leadership itself, then there is no reason in principle why God should not be seen by *faith* as exercising his rule through the procedures of Church elections and through the kind of discussion found in Baptist Church meetings. These have the merit that, in them, leadership is accountable to the people in such a way that people are responsible to God for their leaders - a truth Restorationism cannot do justice to, any more than papalism could. It is not only when people are accountable to leaders who are responsible to God for them that we can say God might be ruling. He also rules by making people responsible for their leaders. In both cases his rule is *mediated* humanly (if it is operative at all). So theocracy only occurs, if it does, with and through some human form or another. At the very least, the gracious omnipresence of God means that we should not think in terms of simple oppositions between theocracy and democracy. Certainly we should not identify certain human forms of organisation as theocracy over against other human forms of organisation as 'democracy' (which is almost always pejorative in the context of this sort of discussion), since God can rule through all sorts of imperfect human means.

The argument is in truth much harder, much more disconcerting for everyone, once simple claims to theocracy are surrendered. We all have to look critically at our ways of running the Church, in order to let God open us to his judgement and direction, through the mediation of our self-criticism and our freedom. I do not think anything more than a very penitent defence can be made of Baptist *practice* of the

Church meeting (or of any other form of Church life). Nevertheless, the institutionalising of discussion in the Church about its life and policy, on the basis that all members are responsible and that no leaders may be released from public responsibility downwards as well as upwards, to the people as well as to God, can be in line with what God wants his people to be like. It commits us in principle to open rational discussion, as a means of openness to a God who does not despise the rationality of his creatures. It commits us to respecting people. It commits us to living under the discipline not of submission and dependency, but of freedom and responsibility, of maturing as persons in community. It requires that we are a people of faith, a faith that takes form in openness to the coming Christ, in whom we are judged and renewed in forgiveness. Much more needs to be worked out here, but perhaps enough has been said to suggest that democratic forms of government can be *read* and *practised by faith*, so that in and through them God rules in Christ.

There is still an argument to be pursued about whether the human organisational forms of the House Churches (which are close to the way private business is often organised in our culture) or the forms of Baptist Churches (which are closer to democratic political institutions) is the best for us today as those who wish to live by faith in God. But that discussion cannot properly be embarked on until we are quite clear together that there is a prior question. That question concerns the inevitability of some form of *human* mediation in *all* Church-existence. That question is an implication of God's rule as always being known by faith not by sight, and therefore as always bringing us into judgement and forgiveness. If issues about the Church are worked through from that perspective, there is no room for halfheartedness, but there is also no justification for despising democracy in church - or in society generally.

From this point a complex of questions opens up, which concern not just the Church's internal order but its witness and service in the world today:

- (a) what is the relation of Christian faith to democratic *values* or *ideals*?
- (b) what is the relation of democratic *values* to democratic *practices*?
- (c) what then is Christian attitude to democratic practices and to societies which in varying degrees have democratic practice as part of their total range of practice? What is the contribution made by such elements of democracy to the character and effectiveness of the whole society?
- (d) what is the Church's responsibility in the crisis of democracy in society generally? How does the Church *interpret* its faith towards transcendent and eschatological reference points in relation to democracy in society?
- (e) what should the Church's view be of the alleged *insubordinate* characteristics of modern people?

It is unlikely that our social service as Christians on these issues will be unaffected by the theological teaching and the spiritual practice we get in our Churches.

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