

Christianity in Crisis: A Personal Journey

by David Orton

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Every good business does a stocktake towards the end of the financial year to ascertain their position. We have been doing the same, except our stock is not physical product—it's the spiritual riches that God has entrusted to us.

After more than 45 years of Christian experience and service **we find ourselves reviewing and evaluating**, not only our personal journey, but also the condition of the larger church and Christian movement of the West in these early stages of the 21st century.

And so, in this process **our two-fold question** has been: (1) *What has God deposited in us through the journey, and* (2) *how might it be relevant to the contemporary crisis of the Western church and culture?*

To address the questions. Over the journey we have had the amazing privilege of being grounded in and influenced by some **key movements and servants of God** that have been formative for our development and highly influential in the larger Christian movement of this generation.

I will first give an overview of those men and movements and then assess their contribution to us and their relevance to the current crisis of the Western church and culture.

Overview of our formative influences

Mid-20th century saw several movements of God's Spirit break upon the church. We came to the Lord in 1970 riding on the crest of that wave, thinking that the momentum was normal. Very early post-war there were two movements in particular – the **Latter Rain Revival** and the **Healing Revival** – that proved to be the precursor to the far larger outpouring across the global church in the **Charismatic Renewal**. The men and ministries that were formative for us were touched by the first two movements and then emerged as some of the leading international teachers of the latter—the Charismatic Renewal across the mainline denominations.

As new Christians we were immediately, not only sitting under the apostolic ministries of our first pastors and mentors, New Zealanders **Paul and Bunty Collins** who were catalytic for the Renewal in Sydney, but through them, also under the ministries of **W. J. Ern Baxter, Bob Mumford, Loren Cunningham, Judson Cornwall** – all from the USA – and Australians, **Peter Morrow** and **Kevin Conner**, among others.

All of these men were luminaries in the global outpouring of the Holy Spirit through the Charismatic Renewal. They were, on the whole, prophetic preachers and teachers of the Word and of God's kingdom purpose on earth. They carried an unusual measure of grace and spiritual gravitas that left its indelible mark on who we are to this day.

Through **the chaos of the renewal** – thousands of house meetings spontaneously springing up, new ministries, itinerants and independent Charismatic centres also springing up accompanied by many ministerial failures and doctrinal latitude – Bob Mumford, Ern Baxter, Derek Prince, Charles Simpson, and Don Basham among others were exercised to speak into it, emphasising the need for relational accountability and a **restoration of authentic spiritual authority** to the Body of Christ, including the function of apostles as spiritual fathers. It was also an attempt to reform church life through covenant relationships and the raising up of lay-leaders as shepherds of the flock. This developed into what became known as the **Discipleship-Shepherding Movement**.

Contemporaneous to the Charismatic Renewal, several other voices and ministries weighed in upon us—**Francis Schaeffer** and **Rousas Rushdoony**, in particular. Through his books and the **L'Abri Fellowship** in Switzerland, Schaeffer provided a penetrating analysis of Western culture and history, especially its intellectual history, showing the Christian roots of Western high culture and the Renaissance-Enlightenment shift to the current prevailing worldview of humanism. Demonstrating, in tandem, the intellectual coherence of Christianity and the irrationality of unbelief, Schaeffer exercised

significant influence among the searching youth and counter-cultures of the 1960s-70s. Rushdoony is recognised as the father of the **Christian Reconstruction Movement**, which became highly influential in American culture and politics, particularly during the 1980s, providing biblical answers for economics and government, but more strategically, an intellectually cogent defence of Christianity in the Van Tillian tradition and of God's sovereignty over the totality of life, especially in the face of messianic statism. Ern Baxter and Rousas Rushdoony became good friends, facilitating a measure of cross-pollination between the Reconstruction and Shepherding movements during the 1980s.

Assessment of those influences

Now to assess the message of these men and movements and relevance to the contemporary crisis of church and culture in the West and thus the stewardship of our own ministry.

Each of these movements has had their share of **critics and naysayers**. The internet is replete with armchair theorists and their opinions.

While not excusing excesses and aberrations, history teaches us that all reforming and revival movements have had their share of problems. Nonetheless, it does not annul the validity of the movement nor the truth being re-emphasised. As the wisdom writer so aptly penned:

Where no oxen are, the crib is clean: but much increase is by the strength of the ox.

Proverbs 14:4

In other words, whenever you have oxen in the stall, you'll have muck on the floor; nonetheless, there is increase because of them in the field. It is better to have reformers and their movements despite the problems; they bring needed changes and the kingdom harvest is thereby increased.

First, taking these movements chronologically, the **Latter Rain** outpouring of 1948 in Canada had international impact on the Pentecostal movement. It brought a restoration of spiritual worship and the manifest presence of God. This was accompanied by a fresh experience of prophecy and the laying on of hands for the confirmation of ministry calling and impartation of spiritual gifts, including the baptism of the Holy Spirit. The restoration of the ascension-gift ministries of apostles and prophets was also quickened. Additionally, a fresh insight into the prophetic significance of the Feast of Tabernacles was emphasised: the victorious future of the church, its ultimate unity and maturity as the Body of Christ, and a final worldwide ingathering. It is not insignificant that Jonathan Edwards, one of the greatest theologians of revival, had seen this prophetic promise in the Feast of Tabernacles two hundred years earlier. God's progressive restoration of his church and of truth from the Reformation to the present day, revival by revival, was also taught prophetically through the three feasts of the Lord: Passover, Pentecost, Tabernacles.

Contemporaneous with the Latter Rain was the **Healing Revival**, evidencing a fresh outbreak of God's power in dramatic healings and the emergence of many new healing evangelists (e.g. TL Osborn, AA Allen, Oral Roberts et al). The spearhead and inspiration of this was William Branham who moved in a unique sign-gift ministry with unfailingly accurate words of knowledge and miraculous healings. These campaigns filled auditoriums and sporting arenas around the world, evidencing an unusual level of supernatural power in indisputable physical healings and creative miracles. Branham invited Ern Baxter, who had been pastoring the largest evangelical church in Vancouver for 20 years, to serve with him as campaign manager and Bible teacher, which he did for the next 5 years; the campaigns were known as the Baxter-Branham campaigns. But eventually Baxter was obliged to amicably withdraw over concerns with Branham's newly emerging and aberrant teachings. I was privileged as an 18 year-old, sitting in a lounge room with him in Sydney, to hear Ern Baxter's eyewitness accounts and appraisal of these events, including specific miracles and operations of Branham's gift. His experiences are well documented in various interviews and historical pieces.

In assessing these two movements, the Latter Rain was beset by opportunists and sensationalists, making merchandise of the miraculous. And yes, there was an over-realised eschatology, leading many into fanciful claims of perfection and manifested sonship; an inaugurated eschatology would have been preferable. And in some cases an overly zealous use of typology bordering on allegorical interpretation of the Scriptures, opening the movement to a measure of Gnosticism. But these

weaknesses are not sufficient, in my estimation, to invalidate the pure stream that flowed from the throne and benefited many around the world, restoring the biblical truths and emphases already enumerated. I for one was a beneficiary through the ministries listed above. My own call to ministry was powerfully confirmed by the prophetic presbytery through the laying on of hands publically before our congregation. The laying on of hands was an annual highpoint of our church life with the groundwork laid through fasting and prayer. There was no sensationalising or merchandising of personal prophecy. It was always in the context of committed pastoral relationships and congregational life. The teaching on Restoration gave me an appreciation of God's sovereignty in history, a love for history itself, an appreciation of the larger Body of Christ, and a vision of the church's destiny and worldwide revival and harvest. Additionally, the vision of a mature church approximating the "full stature of Christ" as God's "Plan A" – there being no "Plan B" – not only gave hope and purpose for the future, but also, gave biblical accuracy as to the relationship of the old and new covenants and thus of Israel, the church, and the kingdom; areas of massive confusion across the Body of Christ with implications for the church's mandate and mission in the world.

As to the Healing Revival, having heard Baxter's first hand accounts and read a little, I affirm his evaluation; Branham's gift was legitimate, but moved outside of his divinely assigned ministry sphere and grace into one that he was not called to nor equipped for, that of teaching. He then stepped from under God's enablement and protection into deception and error. Additionally, the healing movement at large had been compromised by exaggeration, competition, and greed. Not to mention the shipwrecked lives of a number of the high profile evangelists.

Both movements coincided with other revivals and events. The Isle of Lewis revival with Duncan Campbell in Scotland and the student campus revival across America coincided. Through his 1949 Los Angeles crusade Billy Graham was also launched into national prominence. Additionally, in God's providence, the state of Israel was established in 1948, in my view, preparing ultimately for the re-inclusion of the Jews once the fullness of the Gentiles is complete. It would appear that mid-20th century saw an unprecedented release of spiritual activity, in my opinion, serving as a hinge of history on which swings a door into greater kingdom increase.

The lesson from these moves of God is that our humanity is vulnerable; that independent and competitive models of ministry play into that weakness, setting the Christian movement up for more failure and scandal. Nonetheless, the kingdom of God does come supernaturally through outpourings of the Holy Spirit.

Second, the **Charismatic Renewal** was effectively a continuation of the 1948 outpouring beyond the confines of the Pentecostal movement, but now across the historic mainline denominations, including the Catholics, emphasising the baptism and gifts of the Holy Spirit. The significance and extent of this is now recorded history. The emphases of the Latter Rain movement were carried through into the Charismatic Renewal through the key teachers mentioned above and many others. One of the dominant features of the Charismatic Renewal was the overwhelming sense of spiritual unity and spontaneous camaraderie among both Catholics and Protestants as they worshipped together in large conferences around the world. This climaxed in 1977 at Arrowhead stadium, Kansas City, with [50,000 Catholics and Protestants gathering for teaching and worship](#).

Media coverage of the event included *Time Magazine*. **Bob Mumford** and **Ern Baxter** were among the keynote speakers and convenors.

Both Bob and Ern were key influences in our development. While **Bob's impact** on us was immeasurable through his **teachings on the dealings of God**, and while both of them were Reformed theologically (despite their Pentecostal backgrounds), **Ern provided for us a strategic theological and visionary foundation**. As an 18-year-old student he first taught us in our fledgling Bible School in Sydney and then in numerous conferences over the years, both in Australia and America. Having pastored the largest evangelical church in Vancouver, Canada, for 25 years, and serving as a key leader in the Healing Revival and then as a prophetic teacher in the Charismatic Renewal, Ern brought a unique blend of Reformed theology and charismatic experience. With a personal library of over 9,000 volumes he was an avid student of the Scriptures, theology, and church history, often referring to his commentaries as his close friends and confidantes. His public ministry brought together an unequalled eloquence with solid theology and a powerful prophetic grasp of the majesty of God and his world purpose. The burden Baxter carried for the Word and Spirit to be held in balance is one to which we are firmly committed. His vision for God's government coming to earth through the ministry of the Word accompanied by the Holy Spirit's manifest presence and power, demonstrated through the redeemed community, animates this ministry.

As for the Charismatic Renewal, nothing now needs to be said; history records its universal impact and acceptance.

Nonetheless, the emphasis of the **Shepherding Movement** became highly controversial. Having stepped out of the movement in 1990 I have had over 25 years to evaluate. There is no question that there was authoritarianism and abuse of God's people. I know, I was on the receiving end in significant proportions! Nonetheless, I remain grateful for the journey, the relationships, and the exposure to truth and revelation, but also for the lessons of negative preparation and deferred gratification. From a human perspective my ministry was curtailed for 10 years; but from God's perspective it was meant for good; for greater fruitfulness, not only ministerially but more importantly, as a man of God in purity of motive and in character.

So, where did the Shepherding Movement go wrong?

In my judgement it was solid theologically and well served by its founders as genuine men of God, some of who were highly astute theologically. It was a sincere attempt to address an individualistic and consumerist church culture that had been moulded by worldly values and institutional systems, not to mention denominational sectarianism. While highly Reformed theologically it was Anabaptist ecclesologically, identifying with the radical arm of the Reformation in its redefinition of the church as a separated believing community and thus espousing believer's baptism and separation of church and state. As with many reforming movements it was thus more an error of emphasis rather than of theology. With independence and unaccountability manifestly a problem in the renewal a correction was needed. So far so good. But there was an over correction with the pendulum swinging toward control; but how did this happen?

While, in my experience, all the teaching on authority and accountability was qualified as relational and functional, to my knowledge the notion of ministerial "office" was never intentionally targeted and didactically dismantled—it is no where to be found in the New Testament; rather it was an intentional transfer of the notion of priestly office by several early church Fathers onto new covenant ministry to address the 2nd century crisis of authority. In my view, after 1,800 years of entrenched tradition in this regard, the teaching of relational authority only builds on inherited mentalities and structures of authority based on official position. The mind of the larger church needed – and still needs – renewing on this issue. I unpack this in some measure in my book, "[Snakes in the Temple](#)", chapter 9. Hubris and immaturity aside, this, in my estimation, was the cause of the abuse of authority.

The emphasis on relational authority (apostolic and pastoral) was – and still is – a needed corrective to the individualism and antinomianism of contemporary Western culture and church life. Time has only served to underscore the urgency of reformation in this regard. Likewise, the emphasis on covenant relationships and community.

Nonetheless, the underlying strategic weakness in the Shepherding Movement was in the swing of the pendulum from independence to pastoral accountability. Admittedly, for a grandfather clock to work the pendulum must swing both ways. Truth must always be held in tension. In this case it is the one between *form* and *freedom*. While the larger renewal was correctly judged to be in need of discipline and accountability – *form* – it should never have compromised the *freedom* of the believer's personal priesthood. However, the problem is that legitimate *freedom* becomes a *license* to do "our own thing".

So the strategic question is this: how is innate human rebellion (autonomy) addressed without compromising the *form-freedom* balance? In my experience, the Shepherding Movement attempted to address *pastorally* what can only be solved *dynamically*.

Let me explain. The movement implemented 'personal pastoring' as the solution; rather than the pastoring coming from the pulpit which is unworkable in medium to larger congregations, lay leaders were raised up empowered through a strong emphasis on authority and accountability to shepherd people one-to-one. This included all pastors and leaders who also had a 'personal pastor', usually through the external oversight of an apostolic ministry. While in theory this sounded workable, in practice a mere restructure to facilitate closer accountability was insufficient to deal with the deep congenital problem of human sin and rebellion, only ending in external control. Hindsight is great, but it was a setup for inevitable manipulation and abuse, albeit somewhat unwitting, at least initially.

So what is the solution? While one-to-one shepherding is a worthy approach, without the power of God to confront the human condition, it is merely a pastoral policing strategy. The only solution is the "Gospel which is the power of God to salvation". Any pastoral strategy – regardless of the church or denomination – that does not regularly and intensively teach the power of the Gospel to set people free from the congenital deformity of sin is doomed to fail. Their pastoral strategy may keep people in the pews paying their tithes, but is it successful in light of the apostolic burden for the believer to be conformed to the image of Christ? This demands an accurate unpacking of the Gospel from Paul's letters to the Romans and Galatians. Only then will the

human condition be dynamically and definitively addressed, including the correction of erroneous theories of sanctification (Keswick & Wesleyan) that do not work. [Read more >>](#)

In conclusion, the Shepherding Movement was a needed corrective and a genuine attempt to address status quo religion and self-serving church life. But to do so without regularly and systematically teaching how the Gospel deals with the sin problem is to set ourselves up for failure. This lack is endemic to the contemporary church and is at the root of our spiritual and cultural impotence.

Third, the **Christian Reconstruction Movement** pioneered by Rousas Rushdoony, undergirded by the apologetic of Cornelius Van Til – the influential teacher of Francis Schaeffer – intersected with our involvement in the Shepherding Movement. Rushdoony, Schaeffer, and Baxter were all theologically Calvinist and Reformed. As covenant theologians, the Reconstructionists underscored the continuity of God's covenant purpose for mankind and the harmony between Law and Gospel; the law (including OT case and civil law) providing an objective ethical standard not only for the believer, but also for society and civil government.

Similarly, this movement was a prophetic corrective to the antinomianism of contemporary Christianity and culture, but also controversially resisted. Dispensational theologies (including Liberalism and Neo-orthodoxy), echoing the ancient heresy of Marcionism, had created a disjunction between OT and NT, and thus Law and Gospel. Hyper-grace teachings that flout the Bible's objective ethical standards and the moral lassitude of the contemporary church have been the result. This theological allergy to God's law was only accelerated by the West's cultural milieu of Enlightenment humanism and existentialism. Through our ministry relationship to Ern Baxter we were exposed to the writings of Rousas Rushdoony, Greg Bahnsen, and Gary North et al. Bahnsen's ground-breaking work, 'Theonomy in Christian Ethics', is both exegetically and theologically commanding and convincing. He shows that God's moral government of the world is upheld by his law-word; that there is continuity between old and new covenants; and that God's law is not only an objective ethical standard for the redeemed community, but also for the nations. Christ, rather than abrogating the law, has reinstated it in the new covenant; but now through the incarnation has perfected obedience to the Father and thus the righteous requirement of the law. The law was never intended by God as a means of justification, but rather sanctification. In Christ, the believer now has the ability to obey.

The misconstrued relationship of Law and Gospel has been injurious to the cause of Christ, compromising the church's prophetic voice to society. It has robbed the church of the moral certainty to be light and leaven in the world.

Despite the claims of critics to the contrary, the movement, and Bahnsen in particular, were categorical in teaching that cultural change (reconstruction) does not come through political revolution, but gradually through supernatural regeneration, through the teaching of the Gospel.

In conclusion, undergirding our journey and all the above movements is the historic orthodox belief of the church concerning the divine inspiration, truthfulness, and authority of Scripture as God's Word as it relates to all matters it addresses; not only concerning salvation but also all facts concerning the cosmos (creation, history etc.).

Allied with this high view of Scripture as the Word of God is the *grammatico-historical* interpretation of it (i.e. the normal laws of language and historical context) hand-in-glove with the principle of *progressive revelation* (i.e. a covenant hermeneutic: the NT is in the OT *concealed* and the OT is in the NT *revealed*) and the *analogy of Scripture* (i.e. Scripture must interpret scripture, and thus a doctrine can only consist of all the biblical data on that subject).

So, where to from here?

Current Issues

In light of this review, let me crystalize the current issues that we believe are 'first principle' issues that must be addressed for the advance of the Gospel and increase of the kingdom, particularly for the re-evangelisation and cultural transformation of the West:

- **The current redefinition of the Bible's "inerrancy"** (without error) by certain neo-evangelicals that allows for errors in the original autographs (texts); it is a repeat of the "infallibility" conflict of a century ago between theological liberalism (higher criticism) and the historically orthodox view of the Bible; the downgrade of the Bible as God's

verbal communication to humankind was the first step in the 20th century spiritual and cultural decline of the West.

- **The misconstruing of the relationship between Law and Gospel** for the lack of a covenant hermeneutic such that contemporary Christianity has become antinomian (i.e. anti-law; hyper-grace), and thus void of any objective ethical standard; resulting in the acceptance and/or promotion of homosexuality and its concomitant – same-sex marriage – as morally valid, or at least morally neutral. Therefore, Christian theonomic ethics is foundational to a reformed church and a reconstructed culture.
- **The defence of Christianity (evangelism) in an increasingly hostile environment** must return to the two-fold apostolic message of the *resurrection of Christ* and of the *kingdom of God*; while evidences for these and for God's existence are useful, these truths are *transcendent* (i.e. wholly independent of all physical laws and human reasoning) and must be proclaimed on the basis of biblical revelation and thus as absolute; this entails a confidence in the Holy Spirit to witness to truth in the hearts of men when the word is declared; this is the genius of *presuppositional* or *transcendental* apologetics as taught by Cornelius Van Til.
- **The privatisation of faith** and the exorcism of Christianity from the public square through the lack of a vision of Christ's lordship over the totality of human existence and of God's creation purpose; resulting in a myopic vision of the Great Commission focussed only on personal salvation, rather than the discipling of whole nations and cultures.
- **The historic divorce between the Word and the Spirit**—the theology of the former and the experience of the latter; this is reflected in the entrenched separation between the Evangelical/Reformed movement and the Pentecostal/Charismatic movement to the detriment of both and the larger Body of Christ; both must be fully recovered – and held in tension – for the Body of Christ to mature into the full stature of Christ.
- **The confusion between the role and identity of Israel, the church, and the kingdom**, again for the lack of a covenant hermeneutic, must be clarified so as to bring in the fullness of the Gentiles and thereby the re-inclusion of the Jews; this covenantal confusion has led to a neo-judaizing Zionist movement within the church, promoting a reversion to Sabbaths, Sacrifices and Temple; it is not only a reversion to a superseded administration but a diversion from the advance of God's kingdom in history and in the nations.
- **The contamination of the charismata (gifts of the Spirit)** by certain elements within the contemporary “apostolic” and “prophetic” movements through unbridled ambition, self-aggrandizement, avarice, and huckstering—by making merchandise of God's people and of the Gospel; this is particularly true of market-driven, celebrity, and platform focussed ministry models; wholesale repentance and dismantling of ministry empires is demanded for true change to occur.
- **A consumerist church culture** moulded by worldly values, institutional systems, and denominational sectarianism cries out for radical reformation (new apostolic movements are not exempt from this): God's authority and humankind's congenital rebellion demands authentic spiritual authority to be restored to the Body of Christ and thereby true catholicity (unity); *primarily* in God's verbal communication to humankind and *derivatively* in those divinely called and qualified as apostles and teachers of that Word through both charisma and character; this reformation demands a recovery of the 'Gospel of the Kingdom of God' (Mtt 4:23; 24:14; Acts 1:3; 8:12; 19:8; 28:23, 31), a recovery of Christian initiation according to the 'Peter Package' (Acts 2:38), a recovery of the 'First Principles' of the doctrine of Christ (Hebrews 6:1-3), and a recovery of apostolic church life through 'Covenant Community' (Acts 2:42).

Conclusion

It is almost passé to say that Western Christianity and culture is in crisis, nonetheless, this is the reality as we negotiate our way into the 21st century.

The 20th century witnessed an unprecedented activity of the Holy Spirit in renewal and revivals, some with an extensive and global reach. Be-that-as-it-may we are still in crisis. Why? Because, in my view, of an underlying violation of the balanced tension between Word and Spirit.

At the creation the Spirit of God brooded over the turbulent chaos of matter, awaiting the Word—“*Let there be...!*” Only then was *chaos* transformed into *cosmos*. And so too, grounded in this *seed principle*, the New Creation in this climax of history awaits a declared Word through the corporate Christ, the church. Despite the great outpourings of the 20th century we remain in ecclesial and cultural chaos. But what, you may ask, is the nature and content of the Word that we await?

The kingdom of God is in the Holy Spirit (Rom 14:17). God's government does not come to the earth except by the Spirit. Nevertheless, God's government – like every earthly government – has a Constitution by which it operates. This is the missing

Word for which we await. It is the Law-Word of the King. The moral governor of the universe – the Lord Jesus Christ – seated at the right hand of the Father is that incarnate Word. And that Word is the Covenant that the triune-God has made with humankind. Incarnated in Christ and inscripturated in the Bible, the Covenant is the constitution of the kingdom—of God's government of righteousness and peace to transform *our chaos* into *his cosmos*.

In closing, my appeal is for a return to the covenant God—to covenant fidelity through the power of the Gospel, to what Paul called "the obedience of faith". This demands a rediscovery of a covenant theology in all its far-reaching implications for church and society, not as an abstraction, but as the concrete solution to the life and death struggle for the planet—for the kingdom of God to fully come. In summary, Jesus gave us the ethical conditions of the Covenant that will bring his government of righteousness and peace to the earth: "*You shall love the Lord your God... and ...your neighbour as yourself*".

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