

In the late 60's, four Catholic men started a weekly prayer meeting in Ann Arbor. Eventually this prayer meeting gave birth to an organization called the Word of God Community. One of those original leaders was a man named Ralph Martin. Martin became an important figure and leader, not only within this prayer group, but for the whole Charismatic Renewal movement. Thus the books he wrote were for a wider Christian audience than just his local Christian Community, but at the same time they are representative of the Word of God Community since Martin was a primary leader. In his book Unless the Lord Build the House Martin writes in a way to show that he does not see his renewal efforts (namely the WOG Community) as a direct product of the Vatican II Council and the main attempts for renewal within the Catholic Church. Martin sees himself and his community as something distinct from the Church, while at the same time remaining within the Catholic Church.

Unless the Lord Build the House was a short book written as an expansion of series of talks. In May of 1970, Martin spoke to over 1600 people on a charismatic weekend conference about renewal in the Church and from those talks he wrote the book. The purpose of the book was to analyze the various renewal attempts within the Catholic Church as well as to analyze some of the basic blocks to Christian renewal. While the book claims to outline a strategy for renewal, the constructive comments are saved for the final four pages, of which half is block quotes from scripture. The three elements for 'authentic renewal' are: a) preaching the gospel, b) living in the Spirit, and c) building community. But as these are hardly addressed, the main emphasis of the book to show the weaknesses of the Church and it's renewal strategy.

Martin speaks of the Vatican II, mostly in a critical way. “Now, six years after the close of the Council, we might do well to ask: are all our parish councils, associations, synods, workshops, conferences, due process systems, multi media religious education programs, computerized and publicized diocesan finances, plainly dressed bishops, married deacons, inner-city priests and nuns...producing a modern *Church*...or a poor imitation of the modern world?” (pg 10). Martin agrees with many other Catholics and with the Vatican Council that renewal is needed in the Church, that the Church is not where it is supposed to be; however, he disagrees about what the end result should look like and how to go about it getting there. This is important. Almost at no point does Martin praise the work of the Council¹, instead he uses language like ‘misdirected’ (9), ‘tragic results’ (11), ‘theological jargon’ (13), and ‘of the world’ (25). “The Liturgical changes were almost invariably superficial. *I believe that this widely accepted approach to renewal is not only fundamentally wrong in its basic presupposition, but because it has been so extensively accepted and acted upon throughout the Church, indeed being the overwhelmingly dominant response to the call for renewal crystallized by Vatican II, it as produced a seriously distorted Christianity through the Church.*” (12, 13). Martin has a fundamental disagreement with the approach of one of the highest authorities in the Roman Catholic Church (the Council), this shows something important about the way Martin viewed himself and the Charismatic renewal, whose approach he championed. First of all, he was speaking within the context of the Catholic Church for the Catholic Church. Secondly he openly expressed disagreement with the Church’s approach to renewal. So, while Martin speaks from within the Church, he doesn’t speak on behalf of it. The position, from which he does speak, is as a director (coordinator) of a lay movement. Martin held no titles, or position of

¹ Except in agreeing with Pope John’s statement at the beginning of the council of the need for a new Pentecost (pg 62)

authority within the Catholic Hierarchy, but he felt at liberty to criticize the Church and its methods. The strange part about his criticisms is that they aren't the criticisms commonly associated with the early 70's. Martin is arguing for stricter fundamentalism and literalism of the Christian message: he is not criticizing the Church for holding outdated beliefs or stick moral teaching. He would even criticize these beliefs for being too worldly.

Martin, in many ways, sounds more like a fundamental Protestant evangelist than a Roman Catholic. To argue his point he relied almost exclusively on the Bible. The pages of his book are filled with quote after quote from scripture. The only 'tradition' or church doctrine that he uses is from a statement in the Vatican II Council that clarifies the need for real evangelism, but he goes on to say that the point is "stated more starkly" (41) in the following Scripture passage. He does not quote from famous Saints or other Catholic sources to make his point: he simply quotes the Bible. Even the major points and the language he uses are ideas and phrases that sound more at home in a Billy Graham crusade. He argues for the need of a personal relationship with Jesus Christ, new life, repentance and conversion, grace and faith. Perhaps one of the reasons the weekly prayer meeting attracted Protestants (even though the leadership was primarily Catholic) was that the message resonated with the language of Evangelical Christians. Bible reading and personal conversion were talked about and good news of Jesus Christ was preached instead of emphasizing "Christian social principles or morality" (12) without references to the redemptive work of Christ.

Martin even criticizes the Vatican's encouragement for the increased involvement of lay people: "One frequently hears from both laymen and clergy the exhortation to "get involved," often with a reference to Vatican Council II and its call for an involved laity in an involved Church. Unfortunately the call to get involved, even if it were effective in producing

involvement, is not nearly precise enough to lead to Christian involvement. Getting involved in politics, the ecology movement, the peace movement, the problems of the family next door, the problems of the parish isn't itself Christian action." (40). This is ironic in some ways, since Martin is himself a lay person who has gotten involved in the renewal of the Church. A fair question to ask is whether or not Martin would be doing what he is doing without the exhortation of the Vatican Council to get involved. This Council's encouragement certainly made room and gave a certain kind of validity to what Martin was trying to do. The important thing is that Martin didn't view his work as following the directive of the Council. He stood apart from it, able to criticize it as something wholly different. So while Vatican II made room for what the Word of God Community was doing, at best there were mixed views of the role of the Council's statements and approach and influence in this movement. There was certainly a degree of isolation and separation from that impetus.

What Ralph Martin has to say is significant for understanding the Word of God because Martin was considered one of the two major leaders of the Word of God Community. His beliefs and teachings affected the identity and life of the Word of God Community. However, his style, approach, and beliefs were in many ways different from that of Steve Clark, the other major leader. The Community formed out of a mix of tensions between their two styles, emphases, and personalities. So this book gives us an example of one stream of influence and belief, but not a complete picture.

While Martin and the Word of God Community did not praise the traditional approach of the Catholic Church, they nevertheless remained part of the Catholic Church as individuals. The Community/Christian life that they formed was outside of the normal Catholic liturgical life, but seen as supplementary to it, not as a complete replacement of it. With all the criticisms, Martin

never left the Church, instead trying to work out his concept of renewal from within the Church. He saw this new Community life as “The Church of the future” (63). Not a new church, not a new denomination, but a body of real Christians living the Christian life in a different way than most Catholics had been for centuries. However he argues that this Church of the future was more a return to the apostolic, biblical church of the past than a new development. “What began years ago as tentative, speculative theology has progressed in certain instances, to a worked out, systematic world view or “new ideology” which is fundamentally in opposition to what, for lack of a better name, has been called orthodoxy throughout the centuries. There is serious and systematic departure from the basic saving message and reality in some of the new approaches to the content of religious education.” (53, 54). The use of the word ‘departure’ shows that he does not see his movement as a new development, but as a more genuine and traditional approach than the current Church’s approach.

In summary, the Word of God viewed themselves in a unique light. They were not traditional Catholics, but neither had they forsaken their Catholic identity. Instead they reshaped the meaning of Catholic identity to include such Protestant features and ‘born again,’ ‘bible reading,’ and ‘sin, repentance, and salvation preaching.’ While the changes of the Vatican Council made room for them within the Catholic Church, they didn’t credit the Council for their existence. They created their own existence and identity, or rather, they received it directly from God. Such an approach contributed to their success in being an ecumenical community, one made up of Christians of various denominations, which was an entirely new development within the Christian people.