



Editor's note:

There's more here than you might expect. That was true for me. I've been hearing the argument for church revitalization for years, and it has always sounded like a conversation about practical matters. There are practical reasons to sometimes plant a new church. And there are practical reasons to sometimes revitalize an old church.

But reading through the articles for this edition of the eJournal I discovered something larger, something older, something more basic. Church revitalization, it occurred to me, goes to the very heart of what it means to pastor. And the desire to see churches revitalized, I dare say, should be a constituent part of a Christian's heart. Could it be that we've been missing something as basic as evangelism and discipleship, even if it's rarer?

Church planting is a great thing, and there's no need to take anything away from it. But there should also be a default setting in a Christian's heart that always longs to see dying churches revitalized. It's not like the debate in your head about whether to fork over \$2000 to the mechanic to fix your clunker of a car or to just buy a new one. It's more like a decision about whether to walk away from a dear but difficult relationship. Our hearts should never want to do that, even if once in a great while we must.

Start with Andy Davis' remarkable story of reforming one church, and you'll find something that feels strangely like it's from the Bible, as if Andy was only doing what the apostles did. Then let the biblical burden of Bobby Jamieson's article sit on you. I'm serious. You just might find some new light bulbs turning on. Matt Schmucker and Mike McKinley's articles then round out the apologetic by offering crisp statements for why churches and pastors should pursue the work of revitalizing.

If you are a pastor, keep reading into the next section, where Jeramie Rinne, Greg Gilbert, John Folmar, J. D. Greear, and Brian Croft offer valuable and practical wisdom on how to proceed with the work of reform.

Could it be that church revitalization does not loom as large in the modern evangelical mindset as it did in Jesus' and the apostles'? Before you answer that question, if nothing else, read Bobby's article. You just might wonder if we've missed something basic.

—Jonathan Leeman

A STORY OF REVITALIZATION



The Reform of First Baptist Church of Durham

An inspiring and in-depth story of one church's journey to greater faithfulness.

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WHY REVITALIZE



The Bible's Burden for Church Revitalization

If we share the priorities of Scripture, we will have a burden for bringing life to dying churches.

By Bobby Jamieson

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Why Revitalize?

We should seek to revitalize churches for the sake of Christians, nominal Christians, non-Christian neighbors, stewarding resources, the future, and the name of God.

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The Pros and Cons of Planting and Revitalizing

Planting and revitalizing each have their advantages and disadvantages. In this article, one practitioner lays them out.

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HOW TO REVITALIZE



Be a Tortoise, not a Hare

In church reform, speed is often a killer. But hasty pastors come in many shapes. This article offers a taxonomy. Can you find yourself on this list?

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A Roadmap for Church Reform

Where do you begin in reforming a church? What do you do after that? Greg Gilbert provides a map through the jungle.

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What Makes a Church Reform Possible?

Without preaching, partnership, providence, and patience, church reform is not likely to succeed. But with them, amazing things can happen.

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Five Factors that Brought Life to a Dying Church

Ultimately, only God brings life to dead things. But there are some things we can do to nourish that life, and not hinder it.

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Five Unexpected Lessons in Church Revitalization

Church revitalization is full of surprises. Here are five lessons that snuck up on this pastor.

By Brian Croft

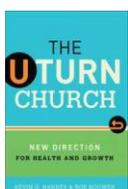
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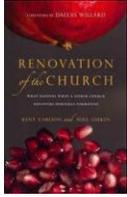
BOOK REVIEWS ON CHURCH REVITALIZATION



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"Your Old Testament sermon needs to get saved!" says David King in this conference message.
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[What is the Mission of the Church? Part 2 with Greg Gilbert and Kevin DeYoung](#)

Kevin DeYoung and Greg Gilbert, authors of the new book *What is the Mission of the Church?*, examine key biblical passages on mission, the poor, and the kingdom of God.
 Posted on October 1, 2011

UPCOMING 9MARKS EVENTS



[9Marks in Hawaii](#)

Honolulu, HI
 November 4 – 5, 2011
*Mark Dever, Ryan Townsend,
 Zach Schlegel, and Jaime Owens*



[Southern Baptists of Texas Convention Annual Meeting](#)

Irving, TX
 November 15, 2011
*After the Tuesday evening session, Mark Dever will speak
 and then host a panel discussion*



[9Marks at Cedarville University](#)

Cedarville, OH
 February 14 – 15, 2012
*Mark Dever, Eric Bancroft,
 Bob Johnson, Garrett Kell*



[9Marks Weekender](#)

Washington, DC
 March 15 – 19, 2012
Mark Dever and Matt Schmucker

9Marks
at Southeastern

a conference
about the church,
for the church

[9Marks at Southeastern](#)

Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary
Wake Forest, NC

September 28 – 29, 2012

*Matt Chandler, Mark Dever, David Platt, Danny Akin,
Thabiti Anyabwile, Alistair Begg*

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The Reform of First Baptist Church of Durham

By Andrew Davis

On Sunday morning, August 19, 2001, I began corporate worship at First Baptist Church (FBC) Durham by calling on the members of the church to repent. The church had just elected a woman deacon for the first time in its history, and deacons in our church's polity were treated as spiritual leaders with shepherding responsibility for the flock. I had been teaching the congregation that Scripture reserves spiritual leadership to men, and I had made private efforts to forestall this result. Still, the church voted in a woman as an authoritative spiritual leader.

So I began worship by calling on all the people of FBC to repent—including myself. In the spirit of Daniel 9, I felt that all of us must take responsibility for violating God's clear guidance.

My call was an object of horror to many of the members of the church. They were outraged. In their minds, repentance was something you do at the beginning of the Christian life and then never need to do again. For them, it was as if I were saying, "Because you voted for a woman as a deacon, you are not Christians."

But I didn't believe that at all. Rather, I know that because of the power of indwelling sin described so clearly in Romans 7, a healthy Christian life is one of constant conviction over sin and repentance from that sin.

A church that stops reforming is dead. And as dangerous and uncomfortable as church reformation can be, the far greater danger is *not* reforming. FBC was a church very much in need of reform.

CHURCH REFORM REQUIRES SUFFERING

My personal journey with FBC's road of reformation began in August of 1998. I remember kneeling before the Lord in my office at Southern Seminary where I was finishing off my PhD dissertation. The pastoral search committee at FBC had called on me to come and preach to the church in view of a call to be their senior pastor. I needed to know the will of the Lord in this, whether or not he was calling on me to serve in that way. James 1:5 promises that if we lack wisdom, we should go to God and he will give it. So I knelt and prayed and sought the will of the Lord: "Lord, do you want me to go there and preach that sermon? And if they accept me, do you want me to serve you there?" During that prayer time, I had an unmistakable sense of the Lord's pleasure in this, that it was his will for me to go. That sense of a clear calling from God served me well in the future years.

But I had no idea of the suffering that awaited me in this church. Looking at the text more carefully now, I see that the promise of wisdom in James 1:5 seems to be linked to the suffering that God ordains in our lives. James tells us to "consider it pure joy" whenever we face trials of various kinds, knowing that the testing of our faith produces endurance, and that endurance is necessary for God to finish his sanctifying work in us. God seems to be saying, "Seek my wisdom in the midst of your suffering and you will gain perspective." But if I had known ahead of time what reception awaited me at FBC when I initiated reform, it's possible that I never would have gone.

Thus, in view of my cowardice, God simply let it be known that I should go. The rest would become clear in God's own good time!

A BRIEF HISTORY OF OUR CHURCH REFORM

In 1998, FBC Durham was a church in need of reform. It was the oldest congregation in Durham, founded in 1845, and it took pride in being the "First Baptist Church." In the 1950s to 1970s, it was also the place where everyone who wanted to be anyone in Durham would have attended. By the time I came, those days were over. Yet the memory lingered.

Some godly men had preceded me as pastor and done solid biblical work, laying a good foundation for me in many ways. Best of all, they had left a motivated remnant of godly men and women who were eager to see FBC become a healthy and fruitful church. But these pastors who preceded me had also suffered significant persecution from the same cabal that awaited me. Behind the scenes, these pastors had been threatened, bullied, manipulated, and basically forced out of their ministries.

FBC's Flawed Church Polity

The church polity in 1998 would have been very familiar to most Southern Baptist pastors. There were five "points of power" whose relationship to each other was unclear:

- A senior pastor led a paid staff of associate pastors who were responsible for various specific ministries (college/career, youth, music).
- A board of deacons was called to "assist the pastor in leading the church to accomplish its mission." Some godly deacons did precisely that. But others regarded themselves as the true power of the church, especially as they were controlled by a small group of businessmen who saw the church as "their church." They had been there the longest and had invested the most money.
- Church committees run by these same key deacons controlled various aspects of the church's life—budget and finance, properties, missions, flowers (our church has an elaborate rose garden whose flowers are used to beautify the sanctuary and to cheer shut-ins), homebound, youth, and so on.
- A church council was comprised of the senior pastor, the chairman of the deacons, and all the chairs of the various committees (including the flower committee). This counsel met monthly and had the right to speak to any issue in the church and to vote on policies that would govern the life of the church.
- The church body, as in any congregational church, was the final human authority, but generally it followed the leadership of a few key people.

This arrangement was especially poisonous for a new young pastor like me because the cabal of older, powerful businessmen who ran the deacons saw it as their responsibility to keep the pastor and the church staff under their thumb, partly by making sure that no pastor stayed at FBC too long. They regarded the senior pastor as a hired employee, and they were his bosses. They saw themselves as forming a needed "check and balance" to the undue exercise of pastoral authority. They had been playing the game for decades before I got there, and knew how to run things to their advantage.

A previous pastor told me about one example which revolved around the church budget. The key leaders of the church gave a significant percentage of the church's annual income, so they were able to control "how the church was doing financially" to their advantage. Every October, the budget and finance committee would make up the church budget. During September and October, these men would see to it that the giving would start to lag and the church would fall behind in its receipts. Then they would say that, as a result, there could be no raises for the church staff or funding for programs that they were not interested in (like missions or urban outreach). The building and grounds, however, always received whatever money was needed to maintain a lavish and comfortable place to worship. Then, after the budget was voted in, the receipts would start flowing again and the church would comfortably make its annual budget. This game happened every year!

As I prepared to assume the role of senior pastor at FBC, I knew there was a significant flaw in the polity of the church that I would have to address: the issue of gender and authority. In 1988, the church had voted to allow women to be deacons, and, as I mentioned, deacons in this church's polity functioned like what the Bible calls "elders." Interestingly, no woman had been recognized as a deacon in the ten ensuing years. But I suspected in 1998 when I arrived that it was just a matter of time before a woman would be nominated. Now I personally believe that 1 Timothy 3:11 allows for women to be deacons, but I also believe that deacons are in no way to "teach or have authority over a man," as 1 Timothy 2:12 puts it.

My master of divinity degree from the egalitarian Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary had taught me the best arguments for “evangelical feminism,” and I had come to reject them as unbiblical. As I went to Durham to assume the role of senior pastor, I naïvely assumed that the church simply needed to change its by-laws back to the way they were in 1988, and all would be well. In fact, I was entering a spiritual war zone.

The War Begins

Within two years of my arrival, the first woman candidate for deacon loomed on the horizon. I had heard that this woman was interested in being a deacon, so I went to speak to her. I spoke to her in public, amidst people milling around after a worship service, but there was no one who heard our conversation. That was a mistake!

In the conversation, I asked her to refrain from pursuing the office until I had a chance to teach first the deacons and then the church about my convictions on gender and authority. She bristled. And later she would say that I threatened to preach a sermon about her if she didn't withdraw.

Actually, that was the very thing I never would have done. I wanted to avoid discussing this doctrinal issue over the case of a specific church member's candidacy. I wanted instead to discuss it from the Bible alone without the reputation of a specific person clouding the conversation. This woman eventually did withdraw later that year, but basically made it clear that she would do whatever she wanted in the future. I had some time to begin teaching on gender and authority, but it was hardly an auspicious beginning. The war had begun.

Teaching the Deacons

My next step was to write a paper entitled “Gender and Authority in the Church” and to present it at a special Saturday session to the whole deacon board. It was one of the worst meetings I've ever attended.

It became clear how divided our church was. Some of the deacons truly delighted in the clear teaching of Scripture. Others were aghast and enraged.

I remember the horrible looks on the face of the most powerful leader of the deacons. At one point, I was teaching them that God has prescribed in Scripture how the church should conduct its life together, and along the way I referred to the moment when God struck Uzzah dead for his irreverent act of touching the ark. At that moment, this deacon recoiled in his chair, appalled. He gestured down at the open Bible on the table before him and said, “I could never believe in a God like that!”

The moment crystallized the need for reform at FBC. This man could not believe in the God clearly revealed in the pages of the Bible. What god could he believe in, then? One of his own imagination?

That Saturday morning was an abomination to many of those deacons. They were used to a church that was socially comfortable, a place of barbecues and family gatherings and pleasant messages about the love of God. Some were aggressive in their opposition: “Where does your authority come from to tell a woman she may not run for deacon? Who do you think you are?” Others were more practical: “If we don't have women deacons, we won't have enough people to serve as deacons.” And still others were perplexed that there was “fixin' to be a fight” in the church. They wanted no part of it, right or wrong, and wished I'd just kept my mouth shut.

From that time on, the top priority of the opposition cabal was to get a woman deacon elected, and as soon as possible. For them, it was an issue of power and control in the church. For some feminists, it was an issue of right and wrong. For me, it was a matter of biblical faithfulness. For the church, it was going to be a long and difficult two years.

Teaching the Church

Week after week, I continued to preach expositional sermons from passage after passage and book after book, never mentioning the matter of women deacons from the Sunday morning pulpit. At other times of the week, such as Sunday and Wednesday evenings, I taught on gender and authority. I was always clear that the issue was not about “women deacons,” but about ensuring that our polity matched Scripture, which meant deacons should not be viewed as spiritual leaders in the church.

During this time, the ministry of the Word of God was having a powerful and divisive effect on the church. The genuine saints were being deeply challenged and were growing and flourishing, while the nominal, unregenerate church members were becoming openly hostile.

At the same time, my own poor attitude toward the Word of God was being challenged. I was secretly resentful that biblical faithfulness on the gender and authority question was costing me so much. I began to wish the Word was somehow written differently—that is, until a godly woman in our church came up to me and, not knowing my hidden thoughts, said, “Thank you so much for teaching so clearly what the Bible says about being a woman. It has freed me as never before to be a woman as God wants me to be!”

I was immediately convicted and realized that every passage of Scripture is nothing but good, pure, and healthy food for souls. Pastors never need to be ashamed of anything God has said in his Word, as I had been secretly thinking.

Since then, I have tried to remember that lesson, and have sought to teach the good food of every passage boldly and winsomely. I especially seek to be delighted in the texts that address controversial areas of doctrine: divorce and remarriage, predestination, providence, homosexuality, women’s issues, church discipline, charismatic issues, and so on. God’s Word is perfect and it brings health to individuals and churches. That was the lesson of that night for me as a preacher.

Unbiblical Attitudes Surface

At the height of the difficulties, we had several specially-called prayer meetings. Usually only people sympathetic to the changes would come. But I remember one particular meeting where a woman prayed, “God, help us to learn that we are a modern people and we don’t need to do everything it says in the Bible!” I think every head in the room jerked up to see who had prayed such a thing.

One godly man later said that he felt the need to move his chair away from the woman so that he wouldn’t get hit when God struck her! His wife told him not to worry since God has good aim. This man said, “Yes, but God told everyone to get away from Korah, Dathan, and Abiram because the ground was about to swallow them up!” My only thought at the time was that the woman just might find her prayer included on the “Ten Least Likely Prayers to be Answered” list.

At another time, a woman said to another godly man, “I don’t give a flip what Paul taught about women!” Clearly, the issue had to do with biblical faithfulness.

The First Woman Deacon...and the Next One

The powerful men who opposed me knew how to play politics. Their top priority was to get a woman elected so that I would resign.

Shockingly, though, the first woman who decided to run for deacon had up to that time been a supporter of missions and my ministry. No one could believe that she would actually run in those circumstances, but she did. And she became one of the top seven vote-getters, so she would serve as deacon. She was the first woman ever elected as a deacon at FBC Durham.

On Sunday, August 19, 2001, cards with the results from the deacon election were distributed to the congregation. As I already mentioned, I stood up and called the church to repent. As a side note, a godly family visiting our church that Sunday saw the little blue card with the election results, prompting the man

to lean over to his wife and say, "Should we walk out now or later?" But when I called on the church to repent, he decided to stay. Ultimately, they decided to join the church, and they remain fruitful members to this day.

Soon after this first woman's election, she felt pressure from godly friends in the church and decided to resign. She and her husband then left the church, but not quietly or in love. At a climactic church conference, the husband, who had up to that point been my friend, essentially called me a liar in front of the whole church. He and his wife left the room and the church from that moment. Shortly thereafter, she made some unflattering remarks about me to a local religion reporter which were then printed in the newspaper. All this was happening around 9/11 and the beginning of the war in Afghanistan, which gave a number of editorials and letters to the editor in local newspapers the opportunity to liken me to the Taliban since we both restrict women's rights for religious reasons.

After she left, the cabal that opposed me saw to it that the next woman deacon took office. According to our by-laws, a vacancy in the deacon board would cause the next highest vote-getter from the previous election to move up and take the resigning person's place. As it turned out, the original woman whom I had addressed months earlier while milling about after the Sunday service was two back in line. So two dissident deacons then resigned so that this woman could rotate up and serve. She actually did take the office and held it for that year.

The By-Law Change Initiated

From the first time I read FBC's constitution and by-laws, I knew that the church needed to change its by-laws on deacons. So I learned how to change a by-law at FBC, followed the procedure, and wrote a new by-law saying that only men could be nominated, elected, and serve as deacons.

The church vote on this measure was planned for Wednesday evening, October 10, 2001. Two weeks prior to that, I proposed the new by-law in a specially called business meeting, and then called the church to prayerfully consider it for two weeks. The man at the head of the faction which opposed me then yelled, "This is no way to run a church!" and wanted a full discussion and a vote there and then. But our only purpose that evening was to propose the new text.

Psalm 37 Changes Everything

The Sunday before the Wednesday vote was the hardest day of preaching in my almost thirteen years of ministry at FBC. The tension was so thick I could barely catch my breath or walk with a steady step up to preach. I was preaching expositional messages through Romans, and was on Romans 7:1-6. As usual, I sought to keep the pulpit clear of the controversy.

It was not a particularly difficult passage to preach on, but I was preaching to so many hate-filled faces that I found myself clutching the sides of the pulpit to keep upright. I wondered what I had done to engender such hatred, to stimulate such a desire for my own destruction in the hearts of church people.

I barely made it through the sermon, and then went home to recuperate for the evening service. I lay down in a hammock out in the backyard and prayed. I had just found out that week that one of the opposing church members was organizing a lawsuit against me. The reason? "Breach of contract," I had heard. The logic was that, in changing the church's by-laws which I had known about before coming to the church, I had misrepresented myself to the church. A friend of mine who is a federal judge said that the case was specious, but that didn't mean I wouldn't have to defend myself legally.

All of this was overwhelmingly pressing on my mind as I lay in the hammock. I felt like I was at the breaking point and couldn't take much more. That morning, a godly church member had recommended that I read Psalm 37 for encouragement. So that afternoon, I did.

Line after line of this ancient psalm washed over my heart and eased my burdens. I felt as though God himself were speaking those words to me one after the other. The basic point of the psalm is stated right at the beginning:

Do not fret because of evil men or be envious of those who do wrong; for like the grass they will soon wither, like green plants they will soon die away. Trust in the Lord and do good; dwell in the land and enjoy safe pasture. (Ps. 37:1-3)

This clear message kept coming across in this psalm: Wicked people make plots and schemes against the righteous, but they will fail. In the end, the righteous will inherit the earth, and the wicked will be no more. So do not fret or be anxious; do not worry or be alarmed. Simply stand firm and watch the deliverance that God will bring about. God even comforted me about the potential lawsuit: “The wicked lie in wait for the righteous, seeking their very lives; but the Lord will not leave them in their power or let them be condemned when brought to trial” (Ps. 37:32-33).

One passage especially leaped out: “I have seen a wicked and ruthless man flourishing like a green tree in its native soil, but he soon passed away and was no more; though I looked for him, he could not be found” (Ps. 37:35-36).

This made such an impression on my heart that I got up out of my hammock, picked up a saw, and cut off a leafy green branch from a tree. As soon as the saw passed through the branch, I knew that the leaves were as good as dead, even though they looked as healthy as they had a moment before. Soon they would wither because they were cut off from the living source. I took that branch with me to work and still have it. The leaves are completely dead now, because I cut that branch almost ten years ago. It represented the end of the era of unregenerate church members dominating the life of FBC.

That time of meditation and prayer over Psalm 37 changed my perspective in less than an hour. I knew immediately what would happen at that climactic Wednesday night vote: The plots and schemes of the powerful men who opposed my by-law change would succeed in the short term, but the church would be healthy in the long term. We would lose the battle, but would win the war.

I went to work as usual on Monday morning, but all the staff saw a noticeable change in my demeanor. I was happy, confident, and excited about what was going to happen long-term at FBC. Andy Winn, our present associate pastor, still speaks about the visible change he saw that morning. Everyone around me relaxed as well, and waited to see what God would do.

As I look back on all this ten years later, I now realize that that time of prayerful meditation on Psalm 37 was the key moment in the entire church reform. It was the turning of the tide. If I had continued to be as depressed as I was, and the vote turned out as it did, I would have almost certainly resigned and taken another pastorate that was being offered to me even then. If that had happened, I wonder if FBC would have been reformed. God could have raised someone else up, but the same battle would still have had to be fought. Psalm 37 was the turning point.

Surviving Our Slaughter at the O.K. Corral

That Wednesday night’s business meeting—our “Shootout at the O.K. Corral”—was a complete rout. Our church’s fellowship hall was packed with people, many of whom I’d never seen in my life. I had been the pastor there for three years, and at least a quarter of the people in the room were total strangers to me. The cabal which wanted to run me out of the church had worked the phone tree and had assembled a large number of non-attending church members to come and vote against this by-law change. The room was raucous and unruly, and the vote wasn’t even close: we lost 172 to 125. I still have the stack of blue cards from that night’s vote in my office.

Resuming Ministry, Waiting on the Lord

The outcome neither surprised nor troubled me. I was in the pulpit the next Sunday and continued my sermon series with the next text in Romans. My opponents fully expected that I would resign the pastorate that morning, but that thought was the furthest thing from my mind. This was Christ's church; I was called to be an undershepherd; and I was fully convinced he still intended great things for FBC.

Week after week of ordinary preaching followed. We had (for us) a large new member class a month later—eighteen people joined FBC, all of them eager for the Bible to be taught faithfully. The church had decisively turned a corner. We could have had a re-vote on that exact same by-law change and won there and then. The nominal members would not have kept coming back, and the new members were all eager for God's Word to be established as the rule of the church.

My opponents said I had lied, claiming that I had promised to resign if a woman ever got elected as deacon. However, I never said that. Politically, they had missed their chance to get rid of me. The reformation of FBC was now a certain fact waiting for the validation of a church vote on the by-law change.

The Church Changes Before Our Eyes

That vote happened a year later, in October of 2002. In the meantime, the church had already begun to remove inactive members, fighting a battle with an old vision of church membership that was decidedly unhealthy. Every business meeting in the first two-thirds of 2002 involved a spicy debate about the propriety of removing people who had not asked to be removed. The battle lines were clearly drawn, but reform-minded people always outnumbered those who were fighting the changes. At one point, I said to a fellow church member, "History is made by those who show up!"

By the time October of 2002 rolled around, we were essentially dealing with a new church. Over a hundred new people had joined, and many others had left or been voted out for failing to attend any services of the church.

"Frank Peretti Week" at FBC

In due time, I resubmitted the same by-law to be voted on at the October 2002 business meeting. The week preceding the vote was an astonishing one, with many satanic attacks and bizarre occurrences.

On one of the workdays before the meeting, I was sitting at my desk when I heard a loud bang on a door to my office that visitors never use. I opened the door and beheld a woman whom I'd never seen before who looked to be in her early sixties, dressed neatly in a gray business suit with her gray hair pulled tight in a bun. She briskly introduced herself and said she was a lawyer and a member of the church from the 1960s who had never renounced her membership. She was here to say something important to me. She also produced a handheld tape recorder since I "don't hear things the way they are said," and explained that she intended to record her own comments and any I chose to make, though she acknowledged I was under no obligation to speak.

I asked if she would wait a moment, and then went through the usual office door and asked my secretary, Jeremy, to be with us. She then pressed the "Record" button, and recorded her own diatribe about how she was a lawyer who "doesn't play games" and that she had looked up my own family's history—including some issues related to my parents' lives that had nothing to do with FBC. She also stated that I could personally expect legal trouble if I continued with my actions at the church. She told a story about how her own mother had had a stroke and that she then threatened a lawsuit to some doctors if they didn't give her a drug protocol that was perhaps against their policies. They gave the drugs to her mother, who then made a full and miraculous recovery. The point was that God was on her side, and that she didn't intend to play games with me.

Neither Jeremy nor I said a single word or made a single sound during this entire speech. She kept the recording going as she walked out of the office and we heard the doors close down the hall. Jeremy looked at me and said "That was satanic!"

That's how things went that week.

The night of the vote was like something from a Frank Peretti novel. The fellowship hall was loud and boisterous, and this same woman tried to take control of the meeting by yelling "Point of order, Mr. Moderator" over and over. The fact was, there was no proof of her having been a member of FBC for decades, and she was not permitted a voice or a vote at the meeting. But she persisted in making trouble as best she could.

During the meeting, one of our custodians went outside and saw an unknown woman leaning against the wall with both hands and praying. He asked her, "What are you doing?" She answered, "God told me to come pray for this church, so I came." She had no idea what was going on inside, or any of the history. She was just obeying God and praying for the church!

The vote was roughly a mirror-image of the failed attempt the previous year, but with the opposite result. It was something like 170-120 in favor of following biblical authority.

Soon after that, many people left the church, knowing that they had lost political control and that the church was going in a direction they could not accept. Meanwhile, many other new people came. God had given us a whole new era at FBC.

The Move to Plurality of Elders

That was in 2002. Over the next few years, my own personal influence at FBC rose to a potentially unhealthy level. Many of the people who remained and were strongly active in the church were extremely supportive of me, my preaching, and my leadership. They wanted to do anything they could to bless me and my family. At first, that was very encouraging, and in many ways it still is. But I began to realize that FBC could never reach the heights of biblical fruitfulness with my own gifts and limitations dominating the leadership and direction of the church. Those next few years were characterized by licking wounds, enjoying good worship services, and growing steadily. But I knew a significant change was needed in our polity. At one point, a lay leader in the church said to me, "Andy, you have unparalleled influence in the church...Be careful what you do with it!"

So I traded in that "unparalleled influence" for a new, biblical polity: a plurality of elders. For over a year, a select group of deacons and other lay leaders and I met to craft a new constitution and by-laws with a plurality of elders at the center of the church leadership structure. We then did a great deal of teaching on the topic, and had three different "town meeting" type question and answer sessions with the whole church. We moved very slowly and deliberately, and by the time the third one occurred, it felt like the people were saying, "Enough already! We agree! We are ready to vote."

When the vote came to change the entire governmental structure of FBC, it was approved at well over ninety percent. Next came votes on approving five individual lay elders, and they were all approved at ninety-five percent or higher. On a shelf in my office, I have the ballots of the elders' election side by side with the blue ballots from the failed by-law change from 2001. They are tangible reminders to me of the amazing journey of church reform that Christ has worked at FBC.

LESSONS FROM THE REFORM

Here are a few lessons I learned through this reform that might be useful to other men who are reforming churches.

1. Never Forget that Christ Alone Owns the Church

Christ alone owns the church. The church belongs to Jesus Christ, for he alone shed his blood for it (Acts 20:28). No one has a greater stake in the church; no one has a higher claim to its allegiance. No church

member or pastor can buy and control the church, for Christ has paid the immeasurably high price of his blood, and he has infinitely outbid the next highest bidder.

Further, no one can pull rank on Jesus based on length of membership. Many of our older members at FBC were accustomed to talking about how many years they had been members. As a result of this boasting, some godly members seemed almost apologetic that they had only been members thirty or forty years, and they knew others had been there far longer. I wondered when someone actually got to be a full member of FBC, as though we were only junior members until we'd outlasted everyone else. At one point, it occurred to me that only Christ had been with FBC for all of its days since its inception in 1845. No one could pull rank on him.

Finally, Christ's power alone is sufficient to purify the church and protect it from its enemies. Christ is jealous over the church and fierce against those who would harm it (1 Cor. 3:17). Therefore, the centrality of Christ must permeate all church ministry and church reform.

In the midst of church conflicts, it's easy for pastors to forget Christ in their sermons. And outside of the pulpit it's easy to speak too much of the divisive issues, too much of troubling personalities, too much on techniques and strategies for winning the battle, and all the while forget to keep the glory of Christ central in everything. Sometimes, returning to a clear proclamation of the majesty of Christ can heal a hurting pastor. Conversely, a pastor who forgets that Christ is all and is in all the church's business will be part of the problem, not part of the solution. Such man-centeredness is the very essence of why the church is needing reformation.

2. Rely On God, Not On Yourself

Self-reliance is such a core tendency of the human heart that the Lord will deal with it all our lives. Even the apostle Paul struggled with this. In 2 Corinthians 1:9 he recounts how the Lord put him in the pressure vice of a bitter trial in order to address this very issue: "This happened that we might not rely on ourselves but on God, who raises the dead."

The idol of self reliance is a powerful enemy of what God wants to do to reform a church. A pastor has to learn to trust God, to trust in his power, to look away from self-originated resources, and to fall wholly into the kind and all-sufficient arms of Christ. He must stop thinking that church reform finally depends on his clever schemes, his leadership skills, his winsome personality, or his skill at handling the Word of God. Rather, he must speak the truth to his own heart consistently: "Unless the Lord builds the house, its builders labor in vain" (Ps. 127:1); and "Neither he who plants nor he who waters is anything, but only God who makes things grow" (1 Cor. 3:7).

In this way alone can a church reformer avoid both pitfalls of self-reliance: despair (when self-reliance fails) and arrogance (when it succeeds).

3. Rely on the Word Alone

If you want to see a church reformed, put all your eggs in this one basket, the faithful teaching and preaching of the Word of God. In a sermon in 1522, Martin Luther made a famous statement about the reformation in Germany:

I simply taught, preached, wrote God's Word; otherwise I did nothing. And then, while I slept, or drank Wittenberg beer with my Philip and my Amsdorf, the Word so greatly weakened the papacy that never a prince or emperor did such damage to it. I did nothing. The Word did it all.

This is the doctrine of the sufficiency of Scripture. Simply put: Do you believe the faithful ministry of the Word of God is sufficient to reform a drifting church, to revive a dying church, to convict a sinning church?

It is a great error to think the Word of God is not enough, and that you need to add some other technique or strategy, or that you have to reproduce some other local church (like ours, for example) to be

successful in your setting. But what does the Scripture say? Scripture itself teaches that it is sufficient for life and godliness (2 Pet. 1:3-4), and that the proclamation of the whole counsel of God (Acts 20:27), centered on Christ and him crucified (1 Cor. 2:1-2), is what every church needs.

So, as you are establishing a ministry of reformation, preach books of the Bible in expository fashion. Perhaps begin with a book like 2 Timothy, which focuses on the gospel, or Philippians, which speaks of godly attitudes to suffering.

It may take your church time to embrace solid meat of the Word on issues like predestination, so I would advise you to save Ephesians and Romans for later in your ministry.

But preach the books of the Bible line by line. This will enable you to be far bolder than you ever can be preaching topical sermons. It will also help you to avoid the temptation to gravitate directly to the latest issue or controversy and use the pulpit to address it week after week. It is better by far to give a faithful diet of the Word of God and allow people to see you faithfully handle the text week by week. Then, when a controversial topic arises, they will see it as coming from the text and not from you.

4. Saturate the Church in Prayer

The prophet Samuel puts the priority of prayer in striking terms: “As for me, far be it from me that I should sin against the Lord by failing to pray for you” (1 Sam. 12:23). As a pastor, this convicts me that neglecting prayer, especially in a work of church reform, is a great sin. Prayer is essential to God’s plan for our salvation, because it puts us in the humbling position of spiritual beggars (Matt. 5:3). Prayer means that we have turned away from relying on our own techniques and are simply trusting in God’s power to reform the church.

There are many commands and examples in Scripture that encourage us to pray. Perhaps the best role model for a church-reforming prayer life is the apostle Paul. Many of his epistles carry clear examples of his prayer life. Don Carson’s excellent book, *A Call to Spiritual Reformation: Priorities from Paul and his Prayers*, highlights the lessons a pastor in church reform can learn from Paul’s prayers.

The reformation of a local church can never be anything less than fully turning to God—loving him, trusting in him, seeking him, obeying him. This is what we seek, a purely God-centered answer to church reform. And it is pure folly for a pastor to think that that doesn’t begin with him!

5. Avoid Pride Toward Opponents; Reject Gossip and Slander

When it comes to church reform, it is vital that we stay humble. One reason for this is that God has promised to bless the humble and fight against the proud: “All of you, clothe yourselves with humility toward one another, because, ‘God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble’” (1 Pet. 5:5).

In a church reform, it is especially vital that we guard our hearts. It is so easy to feel spiritually superior to those who are opposing us, to feel that we are intrinsically better than they are. It’s easy to feel like the Pharisee who thanks God that he is better than so many others, rather than the tax collector who cries out for mercy because of his sins (Lk. 18:9-14). We need to humble ourselves before God and recognize that there is not a single sin we can see in our opponents that we do not display in some measure ourselves. We need also to deal humbly with others, because “A gentle answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger” (Prov. 15:1).

We need to be especially careful to avoid gossip and slander against people who have wronged us or are opposing us. Church controversies are so painful and so personal that it becomes easy to seek comfort by surrounding yourself with allies who will agree with you and help you to slice and dice the opponent, or who might find out some dark secret about a person that you can use in the church fight. “The words of a gossip are like choice morsels; they go down to a man’s inmost parts” (Prov. 18:8). But Scripture rejects this approach completely. In Romans 1:29-30, Paul mentions gossip and slander in his list of the sins that characterize the human race.

There are two godly alternatives to gossip: yearning for the repentance of those opposed to God's Word (2 Tim. 2:25-26), and seeking protection from an enemy whose opposition has reached a flagrant level (2 Tim. 4:14-15).

Sometimes public opposition to the gospel can result in the need for private warnings about those opponents. But be careful! When you're going through a hard time it is all too easy to seek therapy in gossip and slander.

6. Be Courageous

It is impossible to reform a church without courage. Satan uses human beings in a very intimidating way, and the fear of man is a powerful hindrance to the work of church reform. At every step, we are tempted to wonder, "What will so and so think? What will the deacons do? Will people leave the church if I preach such and such?" We are tempted to shrink back and refrain from teaching the full counsel of God's Word. Connected with this is fear and anxiety in general: for a pastor, fear of painful attacks in public, and ultimately fear of losing his position and his way of providing for his family. Fear of man dogs the steps of church reform at every turn in the road, and it makes a pastor shrink back from the bold steps needed to reform a church.

Scripture clearly testifies to the danger of fearing man: "Am I now trying to win the approval of men, or of God? Or am I trying to please men? If I were still trying to please men, I would not be a servant of Christ" (Gal. 1:10). "Fear of man will prove to be a snare, but whoever trusts in the LORD is kept safe" (Prov. 29:25).

I certainly felt the powerful pull to fear people. The leader of the faction that opposed me was a man with a powerful temper, who more than once became visibly enraged with me. Once when we were riding in a car together and I tried to broach the subject of the growing controversy at church, his driving became erratic and he yelled, "I will fight you every step of the way." This was no idle boast. He used to sit with his arms crossed and glare at me while I preached. At one point, however, I realized that he would never be pleased with me no matter what I preached. His real problem was with the Lord, not with me. The Lord made it clear to me that I needed to learn to fear him more than I feared any man: "I, even I, am he who comforts you. Who are you that you fear mortal men, the sons of men, who are but grass, that you forget the Lord your Maker, who stretched out the heavens and laid the foundations of the earth" (Isa. 51:12-13).

7. Fight for Essentials, Not Non-Essentials

It is important not to draw a line in the sand over an issue that doesn't deserve it. This is particularly a fault of zealous young pastors who yearn to be faithful to God in adverse circumstances, to prove their courage and willingness to suffer, or, perhaps more darkly, to exert their power and authority over any issue in the church.

There is a famous quote that is falsely attributed to Augustine: "In essentials, unity; in non-essentials, liberty; in all things, charity." It actually probably entered church history during the Thirty Years' War in Germany, a war fought over Christian doctrine, and it has been a favorite of peace-lovers and even of liberals who care nothing for doctrine.

I once heard a story about a well-known preacher of the Word whose expository ministry has helped shaped my own. To this day, this man is characterized by boldness and uncompromising clarity in his preaching, but he also tends to admit of no gray areas. Everything is equally true, certain, clear, essential. When he came to his church, that supposedly Augustinian slogan was painted on the side of the church vans; he had them painted over to say, "There are no non-essentials!"

Well, in one sense that famous and godly pastor is right. He is picking up on the certainty and seriousness with which we should embrace every word of God. But not every issue is worth fighting over.

First, not all doctrinal issues are of equal weight. Jesus rebuked the Scribes and Pharisees on this very issue:

Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You give a tenth of your spices—mint, dill and cumin. But you have neglected the more important matters of the law—justice, mercy and faithfulness. You should have practiced the latter, without neglecting the former. You blind guides! You strain out a gnat but swallow a camel. (Matt. 23:23-24)

Perhaps there are some “gnat” issues and some “camel” issues in church reform; it is wise to discern which is which. Further, Romans 14 speaks of “debatable issues” that Christians should not divide over: “Accept him whose faith is weak, without passing judgment on disputable matters” (Rom. 14:1).

Second, not every church fight is even over doctrine. Many are over pragmatic issues, like finances, or the appearance of the church building, or, for us, the use of projectors and screens in our corporate worship. Many of these issues come down to personal preference and to power. So many churches split over power struggles, not over doctrine.

Save your strength for attacks on the Word of God, and the purity of the church: “But even if we or an angel from heaven should preach a gospel other than the one we preached to you, let him be eternally condemned!” (Gal. 1:8). “Dear friends, although I was very eager to write to you about the salvation we share, I felt I had to write and urge you to contend for the faith that was once for all entrusted to the saints” (Jude 3).

8. Be Patient

Church reform is slow work. It requires a great deal of patience. Here’s a key verse: “Preach the Word; be prepared in season and out of season; correct, rebuke and encourage—with great patience and careful instruction” (2 Tim. 4:2). That phrase was incredibly important to me as we were going through suffering: “great patience and careful instruction.”

We must give God time to work in people’s hearts. It can take a while for the truth of the Word of God to transform a church. People don’t change easily, new doctrinal concepts don’t take root quickly, and new pastors don’t gain the confidence of their congregations overnight. It is prideful for a young pastor to expect people to get with the program immediately and trust him immediately and follow his leadership immediately. Instead, he should reflect on how long it has taken him to come to these convictions himself, and allow God the time to work similarly in other people’s hearts.

You must know your people, and must not go too fast. Develop a pastor’s heart for your flock and know what they can handle. Jesus and the author of Hebrews both display this kind of patience: “I have much more to say to you, more than you can now bear. But when he, the Spirit of truth, comes, he will guide you into all truth.” (John 16:12-13). “We have much to say about this, but it is hard to explain because you are slow to learn. In fact, though by this time you ought to be teachers, you need someone to teach you the elementary truths of God’s word all over again. You need milk, not solid food!” (Heb. 5:11-12).

I think it is for this reason that there are so many agricultural analogies in the New Testament. The progress of the kingdom of God is slow, gradual work and requires great patience. If a farmer plants a seed, and then the next day goes to see how it’s doing, he may be tempted to dig it up because there is no evidence anything is happening. So James 5:7-8 counsels pastors to wait patiently for God to give growth in his own time.

There is a powerful illustration of this from Martin Luther’s experience. Some young, zealous iconoclasts were pulling down statues from the walls of churches and destroying religious art and artifacts that were emblematic of the old order. Luther commanded them to stop, saying, “Take care of the idols of the heart, and the idols on the wall will take care of themselves!”

If you don't change people's hearts and minds, they're just going to put the statues back up on the walls once you've left. Preach the word faithfully, and watch as God changed their hearts. But that means patience is essential!

9. Watch Out for Discouragement

One of Satan's primary weapons against the work of God is discouragement. Satan knows the power of our offensive weaponry: it is the gospel, a mighty force for the salvation of everyone who believes, and he cannot stop it. Satan also knows the power of our defensive weaponry: it is the full armor of God described in Ephesians 6, and he cannot penetrate it. If God's people, fully arrayed in God's armor, take the field covered in prayer, preaching God's mighty gospel, he will lose! So all he can do is hit us with discouragement. This, too often, keeps us off the battlefield, down, dejected, defeated, and discouraged.

Just about every great servant of God faced immense battles with discouragement. Paul certainly did: "We are hard pressed on every side, but not crushed; perplexed, but not in despair" (2 Cor. 4:8). So did David as recorded many times in Psalms.

Church history is also full of examples of incredibly fruitful men and women of God who were assaulted with discouragement. Martin Luther battled discouragement in his pastoral ministry at Wittenberg and was so dejected about the poor progress of the gospel there that he gave up preaching for fifteen months in 1529-1530.

Or consider Adoniram Judson, the eighteenth-century missionary to Burma. At the funeral of his beloved wife Ann, he said of her, "There lies, enclosed in a coffin, the form of her I so much loved—the wife of my youth, the source and centre of my domestic happiness." After her death, Judson entered into a deep depression. He avoided his colleagues and drowned himself in work. He built a hut out in the jungle and behind it dug his own grave, spending hours staring into it, contemplating his own demise. He wrote, "God is to me the Great Unknown. I believe in Him, but I find Him not." Over time, he recovered and was amazingly fruitful for the Lord. But it was a mighty battle.

Martyn Lloyd-Jones wrote a great book on *Spiritual Depression*, and I think it is a vital resource for any pastor going through the wrenching difficulties of church reformation.

10. Identify and Develop Men as Leaders in the Reformation

This is no mere strategy, but it is the will of God for the leadership of the church. Too many churches have a senior pastor who has to face the brunt of church reform alone. This is one of the reasons why God ordained a plurality of elders.

For us, moving to plural elder leadership required reform. But in the meantime, it was vital for me to surround myself with godly men who could pray with me, hold me accountable, persuade others, speak up at vital church meetings, and stand with me in a visible way.

Christ worked to train twelve apostles. Paul had his men around him and trained them for leadership. So, too, a godly pastor will constantly pour into young men who can do the future work of reform. And it is even better for him to have older, respected men who can share the brunt of church controversy.

I will never forget Mac Woody's leadership at a key moment. The time had come to present the controversial by-law to the church a second time. We had a group of men meeting to discuss strategy and to pray, and at that meeting we identified the need for someone to make the speech and do the presentation. Mac vigorously stepped forward. He had been a member at FBC for over forty years, and well knew all the faction that opposed us. He was completely unafraid, and when some younger men thought to give him advice, he stated confidently, almost indignantly, "I got this one! Don't worry about it at all!" In my mind's eye I saw a venerable lion, roaring confidently, filling the jungle with his power. Mac, Jack Evans, and many other godly men stood with me at key times and brought about the reform at FBC.

Other pastors who are godlier than I am, better preachers than I am, and better prayer warriors than I am, have nevertheless failed in church reform because, through no fault of their own, they had no allies to help shoulder the burden of leadership.

ONE OF THE GREATEST DISPLAYS OF GOD'S GLORY

The reformation of First Baptist Church is one of the greatest displays of God's glory that I have ever seen in my life. My prayer is that God will use this narrative to effect similar reformation in other churches around the world for his glory.

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The Bible's Burden for Church Revitalization

By Bobby Jamieson

Throughout much of the United States (and a few other parts of the world) evangelical churches quite literally litter the landscape.

Many of these churches are like trash left on a street corner—they cause people to cross to the other side to avoid them. The people who belong to them profess to believe in the gospel, and their historic statements of faith confess the gospel. And some true Christians do belong to such churches. But on the whole the life of the church broadcasts anything but a gospel message. These churches instead churn out toxic waste rather than the nourishing food that people need.

Some churches in this state may be unrecoverable. But the sad thing is, many evangelicals seem content to ignore such churches and simply start new ones.

Church planting is important and strategic, and I am glad to see more and more people taking up that work.

But if you saw a garden overrun with weeds, would you simply plant some nice new irises right in the middle? If you couldn't hear the news on TV because your radio was blaring, would you simply turn up the TV?

I would suggest that church revitalization—bringing life to dying churches by dealing with the causes of decline and building toward faithfulness—is a biblical burden. That is, when we see these churches acting as anti-witnesses to Christ, we should, according to Scripture, have a burden to *do something* about it. The burden of this article is to prove that point.

CHURCH REVITALIZATION: AN APOSTOLIC PRIORITY

Consider the letter of 1 Corinthians. Paul planted the church in Corinth sometime around 50 AD, and he wrote this letter just a few years later in response to reports he had heard about the church, as well as some questions the church had posed to him. What were the issues that prompted Paul to write?

Consider the following:

- Divisions and factions: some saying "I follow Paul," or "I follow Apollos" (1:10-17);
- Tolerating sexual immorality (5:1-13);
- Lawsuits among church members (6:1-8);
- Confusion over marriage and sexuality (7:1-40);
- Division in the church over the limits of Christian freedom (8:1-13; 10:1-33);
- Worship wars (chs. 11-14);
- And false teaching about the resurrection (ch. 15).

If you squint your eyes slightly and adjust the cultural particulars, the church in Corinth circa 55 AD is the spitting image of many evangelical churches today. Many churches today are beset by a similarly potent mixture of false teaching, immorality, division, infighting, and all-around worldliness. Many churches today are in similar need of radical pastoral surgery in order to save their lives and restore their health.

So when faced with these issues in Corinth, what did Paul do? He didn't say, "Those people are hopeless. They're a mixture of false believers and proud, stubborn religious people. You don't want those people in your church anyway"—and then commission Timothy to go and plant a new church in Corinth.

Instead, he pleaded with them. He came to see them again and again. He rebuked them and instructed them and bore with them. In short, he worked to reform the church of God which was at Corinth.

Yes, there are discontinuities between Paul's situation and ours. For one, this church was the *only* church in Corinth at the time. But the point still stands: instead of abandoning the church at Corinth to simply rot away in its sin, Paul labored to repair and restore it. A similar kind of repair and restoration is exactly what countless evangelical churches need today.

And this is consistent with Paul's broader priorities as an apostle. Unlike some contemporary missionaries, Paul didn't simply try to start as many new church plants in as short a time as possible. Instead, here's what Paul did after his first missionary tour: "And after some days Paul said to Barnabas, 'Let us return and visit the brothers in every city where we proclaimed the word of the Lord, and see how they are'" (Acts 15:36). And so Paul "went through Syria and Cilicia, strengthening the churches" (Acts 15:41).

Paul was so concerned for the health of the churches he had planted that, with huge regions of the Mediterranean still to be evangelized, and an ambition to personally do so (Rom. 15:20), he went back through a region in which he had already labored, in order to strengthen the churches. I would suggest that if we are to follow in Paul's footsteps, as Scripture calls us to (1 Cor. 4:17, 11:1; Phil. 3:17), then we should have a burden for the ongoing health and strength of congregations which bear the name "Christian" and profess to adhere to the gospel.

Churches aren't compostable. And when they begin to decay, they can give off a stench for years or decades or even centuries that utterly overwhelms the aroma of Christ. When a church is divided, it proclaims that Christ is divided (1 Cor. 1:13). When a church tolerates immorality, it says to the world that Christ isn't holy—and that the sexually immoral and idolaters and drunkards and swindlers *will* inherit the kingdom of God (see 1 Cor. 6:9-11).

So we, like Paul, should have a burden to restore, revitalize, and reform churches that are in various stages of sickness. And we've got no shortage of those churches on our hands, especially in America.

JESUS THE CHURCH REFORMER

In the letters to the seven churches of Revelation 2 and 3, Jesus himself works to reform those local congregations. He speaks to those churches in order to set right what is broken, to heal what is sick, to rebuke what is false, and to give new life to what is dying.

Here's a sampling: Jesus rebukes the Ephesians who are doctrinally sound but lack love (Rev. 2:2-7). He commends the church in Pergamum for holding fast his name, yet he rebukes them for entertaining false teaching, and he calls them to repent (Rev. 2:13-17). The church in Thyatira had some who held to false teaching, and Jesus promises to judge them (Rev. 2:20-23), but the rest of the church he commends and encourages to persevere (Rev. 2:19, 24-28). And to the church in Sardis Jesus says,

You have the reputation of being alive, but you are dead. Wake up, and strengthen what remains and is about to die, for I have not found your works complete in the sight of my God. Remember, then, what you received and heard... Yet you have still a few names in Sardis, people who have not soiled their garments, and they will walk with me in white, for they are worthy. (Rev. 3:2-4)

If you need a one-verse proof text for church revitalization, Revelation 3:2 is it: "Strengthen what remains and is about to die."

True, this verse was written to the church itself, but shouldn't sister churches and aspiring pastors exemplify the compassion of Christ toward churches like the one in Sardis? Shouldn't we have a similar concern for the faithful few in such churches, who suffer at the hands of false teachers?

Jesus reformed and revitalized churches—seven of them in these two chapters alone. So should we.

GOD'S PEOPLE BEAR GOD'S NAME

One more motivation Scripture gives us for reforming and revitalizing churches is that God's people bear God's name. Christians are baptized into the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit (Matt. 28:19). Christians are the end-time temple, the embodiment of the place where God caused his name to dwell (1 Kgs. 8:17, 19). The church is the people who are called by God's name, whom he created for his glory, whom he formed and made (Isa. 43:7).

Further, God is jealous for the glory of his name (Isa. 48:9-11)—and we should be, too.

But, as I've said, when churches languish in sin and division and nominalism, God's name becomes a byword in the community. Such churches slander the name of God, rather than adorning and magnifying it.

A decaying, sin-riddled church is like a lighthouse with a broken bulb—and mirror. Instead of reflecting the light of God's glory for miles around, to call sinners into the safe haven of God's mercy, such a church leaves the night as dark as it was before—or even darker. It's like a radio transmitting station that's been hijacked: regardless of what they claim to believe, such a church broadcasts lies about God rather than the truth.

So a concern for the name of God, which he has placed upon his people—and upon their corporate gatherings in a special sense (Mt. 18:20)—should move us to reform and revitalize churches. As Mark Dever has so often said, church revitalization is a kingdom two-for-one. You tear down a bad witness and set up a good one in its place.

SO WHAT?

If this biblical case holds water, what should we do about it? I would simply say that as we think about how to spread the gospel witness to the kingdom, church revitalization should be a major option on the table. It should be something our churches think about and strategize over and pray for. Churches that want to spread and promote the gospel should be concerned, as Jesus and Paul were, to strengthen and restore the witness of struggling churches.

Consider seeing what your local church can do to assist other local churches that may be struggling. Get to know them. Discover their needs. Build relationships with them. Be open to helping them in whatever ways you can, including, if the opportunity arises, sending a pastor and people to help with the work of reform.

If you're an aspiring church planter, consider church revitalization as another option in addition to planting. If you revitalize a church, you may be able to glorify God and serve his people not only by establishing a new church (which is essentially what church reform often amounts to), but by cleaning up the trash your brothers and sisters have left around the city. As with cleaning up your neighborhood physically, you might be surprised by how much your neighbors appreciate a spiritually renovated church. And who knows how many churches may be planted or revitalized out of your renewed congregation!

Church revitalization should be our burden because it is God's burden, as seen in the personal ministries of the exalted Lord Jesus Christ and the apostle Paul. God's people bear God's name, so we too should strive to strengthen what remains and is about to die.

Bobby Jamieson is assistant editor for 9Marks.

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Why Revitalize?

By Matt Schmucker

I asked the young man sitting across from me at lunch, “Why did you decide to go to seminary?” He said, “I want to do great things for God!”

His answer made me shudder slightly. I wondered if he had ever read any biographies of men who had “done great things for God.” Did he know the sacrifice that comes with “greatness?”

Many of the great ones were reformers. They saw something broken, directionless, or distorted, and set about to change course—to re-make. Those great ones were actually pastors: they were students of the Word who took on the burden to proclaim. They worked like prophets, not through foretelling, but through forth-telling: being forthright about the present in light of what was written in the past.

That’s what a pastor does. He holds up God’s Word and calls men and women to renew their minds and reform their ways. If you don’t want to be a reformer, you don’t want to be a pastor.

MOTIVATIONS FOR REFORM

When you look at a small, broken, unhealthy, body of believers, what could drive you to begin the reforming work that’s necessary? Let me suggest six motivations:

1. For the Christian’s Sake

In John 21, we hear Jesus ask Simon Peter (three times), “Simon, son of John, do you love me?” Three times Simon Peter says, “Yes.” And three times Jesus says, “Feed my sheep.” In Luke 15, we read of Jesus valuing his own people so highly that if they were sheep he would “leave the ninety nine in the open country” to rescue the one lost. God loves his people. He wants them gathered, and he wants them fed.

In every church revitalization I’ve seen, there have been at least a few sheep present (often amidst wolves). They have been malnourished and even mistreated. But they have been adopted by Christ and are therefore deserving of care. Consider revitalizing a church for the benefit of the true believers who are there.

2. For the Nominal Christian’s Sake

Few things are more pitiable than the person who believes heaven is his reward when, in fact, his destination is hell. Many of our churches are full of this kind of person—the nominal “Christian.” Paul had this concern on his mind when he wrote, “Examine yourselves, to see whether you are in the faith. Test yourselves” (2 Cor. 13:5).

Since the fall, no one has escaped self-deception. We are easily fooled. And a loving pastor will labor to disabuse the self-deceived.

In the early 1990s at Capitol Hill Baptist Church, we worked hard to track down hundreds of our members who never attended services. As we found them, most didn’t want anything to do with us and our ideas of “meaningful membership.” But there were a few who, when presented with the gospel and God’s call to be a part of the body, repented and came to faith. One woman named Dorothy, an eighty-year-old who had not attended for over three decades, lived nearby. We shared the gospel with her, not wanting to presume anything. She said, “I don’t think I’ve ever understood this before.” Consider revitalizing a church for the benefit of the nominal “Christian.”

3. For the Neighbors’ Sake

In 1993, after four decades of decline and another failed pastor, Capitol Hill Baptist reached rock bottom—at least in my mind. I was on my way to the local market one evening and was following two neighbors on foot. I knew these men. They were a well-known homosexual couple who lived in the neighborhood of our church. That night, having heard what happened to our dismissed pastor, the two men were mocking my church with loud voices. What irony! Homosexual men mocking a gospel-minded church, but one that failed to live out that same gospel. To use an Old Testament term, we were a “byword” in our own neighborhood. We were a reverse witness in the very community where we should have been a model of holiness. Thankfully, as our church grew healthier, so did our witness.

Several years later, Mark Dever and I were on a walk, and one neighbor who had watched our church for twenty years stopped us and asked, “What’s different about your church?” Mark said, “Well, Matt’s been trying to get some painting done and has been cleaning up the yards.” The man said, “No, not that stuff. There’s something different about the people.”

I can report today that many in our neighborhood have come to Christ. In the process of revitalizing, we were able to take down one bad witness and replace it with a good one—that’s a two-for-one gospel deal. Consider revitalizing a broken church for the benefit of neighbors.

4. For the Sake of Resources

Billions of dollars, donated by faithful Christians over many decades, have been invested in land and buildings. Today, those buildings are too often underutilized or even empty—mere monuments to the past. Church planters often shun these resources and don’t think twice about pursuing the potentially life-consuming “mobile church” or “church on wheels” approach to ministry.

Why is this approach so consuming? Ask almost any planter. He’ll probably tell you how much effort it takes from his best people in the church to re-set every week, let alone to relocate when a school auditorium or hotel ballroom is lost. So consider moving into an old neighborhood, revitalizing a church, and reclaiming resources that were originally given for gospel purposes.

5. For the Sake of the Future

Shortly after we lost our previous pastor and I heard the two men mock our church, my church-owned home was broken into and ransacked. The front door was kicked in and valuables were stolen. My family stayed out of the city with my wife’s parents until I could get the house secured again.

The first night back, my wife asked a most pertinent question: “What are we doing here?” As we lay in bed that night, I wondered the same. I simply (and prayerfully) said, “I think we’re here for the people who will come.”

I must quickly admit I’m not normally so cheerfully optimistic about the future. But at the moment, it felt like Satan had overplayed his hand and we needed to hold on. By God’s grace we did hang on through some very difficult circumstances, and the future, as it turned out, was quite bright: We have been in a nearly two decade-long season of prosperity as a church. With each confession of faith, each baptism, each act of repentance, each mission trip, and each young man who commits to preparing for ministry, I quietly rejoice. Each of these events was at one point a part of our church’s future—a future I did not know, but God did.

Consider revitalizing for all the people who someday may pass through your doors and be helped in their walk with Jesus.

6. For the Sake of God’s Name

Are you jealous for God’s name to be honored in the world? What do you think of the church or pastor who uses God’s name and borrows traditions from Scripture but doesn’t follow the one, true God who reveals himself in the Bible?

Friend, God is jealous for his own name and praise!

For my name's sake I defer my anger, for the sake of my praise I restrain it for you, that I may not cut you off. Behold, I have refined you, but not as silver; I have tried you in the furnace of affliction. For my own sake, for my own sake, I do it, for how should my name be profaned? My glory I will not give to another. (Isa. 48:9-11)

For the sake of God's name being rightly represented in the world, we need to be jealous for the witness of his church. Why? So that God's glory might be spread and magnified. His name is defamed when so-called Christian churches misrepresent him with tolerance of sin, their bad marriage practices, wrong views on sexuality, and a host of heresies from salvation to the authority of Scripture.

I pray against those churches that would defame God's name. I pray they would die or at least be invisible to the neighborhood.

I positively pray for those true churches in my neighborhood that proclaim truth, that rightly gather those who have been born again, and whose ultimate purpose is God's glory. Consider revitalizing for the sake of God's name.

CONCLUSION

I've seen faithful men in our days go into situations where unfaithfulness reigned and reform a people by pastoring them. You might have heard of some of their names, like John Piper or Mark Dever. You might not have heard of many others who I could name. But known or unknown, they are all faithful men who have used existing resources to revitalize a church for the sake of the Christians, the nominal "Christians," and the neighbors. Through all their many faithful days of blood, sweat, and tears, God had a lot of people in mind—in the future—who would eternally benefit. And God's name is being magnified!

Revitalizing a church is not easy—reformation never is. But there are hundreds of churches that need pastors who will make that daily sacrifice for the sake of the kingdom. So, to my young seminarian friend who wanted to "do great things for God," I had a suggestion: "Instead of doing great things for God," I said, "why don't you simply try to be faithful to a great God?"

I think this is what all the great reformers did and what even great pastors do today. Their greatness, if that's what you want to call it, comes not from a few heroic acts, but from the accumulation of many faithful days spent preaching, praying, and working for reform.

Matt Schmucker is vice president of 9Marks and is an elder of Capitol Hill Baptist Church.

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The Pros and Cons of Planting and Revitalizing

By Mike McKinley

Church planting is in vogue today, and that is a trend for which I am grateful to God. But statistics indicate that thousands of churches go out of existence every year in America. Far more churches flounder with declining attendance and inadequate leadership. In some cases, it may be more strategic for church planters to invest their time and resources in revitalizing these existing congregations.

Church planting and church revitalizing share the same goal: to see a God-glorifying church established where it does not currently exist. Both strategies aim to reach communities with the gospel and both share some difficulties. But each strategy carries with it some unique opportunities and challenges. In this article, I will lay out some of the relative advantages and disadvantages of starting a new church from scratch (planting) over against revitalizing an existing congregation (replanting).

THE RELATIVE ADVANTAGES OF CHURCH PLANTING

1. A new church has no personal baggage (though it will if you give it some time).

An older pastor once advised me, “Plant a new church. That way, no one can ever oppose you by saying they were there before you were.” There’s truth in that statement. If you have a clear and unique way that you want to do church, it can be easier to start from scratch. You can do things the way you want to do them, and if people don’t like it, they will stay away. That can make a pastor’s road much smoother.

2. New churches can do a good job of reaching new residents of a community.

Someone who is new in town may be more attracted to a ministry where he or she can get in on the ground floor and quickly become an important part of the church’s life. In addition, existing churches aren’t always socially flexible; they can have difficulty accommodating shifting demographics and embracing different kinds of people. A new church might better adapt to people from different socio-economic backgrounds. This is particularly strategic in locations where the population is growing or changing rapidly.

3. New churches tend to have evangelistic energy.

New churches usually have a period at their inception in which everyone involved understands the mission of the church and is committed to their role in it. In a church plant, there are no established patterns that curtail energetic and creative outreach. There’s no institutional machine that needs to be fed, no programs that need to be maintained for the sake of the long-term members. The church understands that it won’t survive unless it reaches out to the community.

THE RELATIVE CHALLENGES OF CHURCH PLANTING

1. New churches can encounter significant logistical difficulties.

Most church planting models require the planter to coordinate a lot of logistics with relatively little manpower. In many communities it is difficult to find a place to meet. Once a location is found, the planter still has to pay for it, establish programs and procedures (like children’s ministry or welcoming visitors), and get volunteers to set up and tear down Sunday after Sunday. That can be a prohibitive burden on a small gathering of people who don’t have a longstanding commitment to the church. After all, you want your core group to spend its precious time doing the work of ministry, greeting visitors, showing hospitality, teaching children, and evangelizing the neighborhoods.

2. New churches can have less credibility in the community.

Established communities are sometimes suspicious of new churches. A church plant (especially one with a goofy name?) will have to work hard to gain credibility in the community. People who are not familiar with evangelical Christianity (especially people from a Roman Catholic background) are often surprised that someone can just hang out a shingle and start a new church. In the eyes of some people in the community, you will be a cult until you prove that you are not.

THE RELATIVE CHALLENGES OF CHURCH REVITALIZATION

1. Dead churches are dead for a reason—there will be opposition.

There's usually a good reason why a church needs to be revitalized. Churches often dwindle in size and effectiveness because of a traumatic event or years of poor leadership. As a result, church facilities and programs may be in ruins—not to mention the spiritual state of the congregation itself. In these cases, there will be much to overcome and tear down in order to move the church forward. This process is often very painful. If a church was already inclined to do the things that healthy churches do, it probably wouldn't be dying. Finding a struggling church isn't a problem. Finding a struggling church that wants to change and grow is much more difficult.

2. Existing churches sometimes have a bad reputation in the community.

While it's true that new churches sometimes suffer from a lack of name recognition in the community, that can be a good thing. The reputation of older churches often works against their revitalization. It could be that the church you seek to revitalize has a reputation in the community for some past moral scandal, or racism, or institutionalized unfriendliness. If that's the case, the pastor who wants to revitalize the church will have to work hard and be patient in order to change that impression in the community.

THE RELATIVE ADVANTAGES OF CHURCH REVITALIZATION

1. Revitalization provides a kingdom two-for-one.

Like church planting, revitalization efforts establish a new gospel presence in a town, but they also remove a bad witness. If healthy churches make a positive statement about the gospel to the surrounding community, dying churches send out the negative message that "Jesus and his people are irrelevant. Keep driving." When a dying church comes back to life, the watching world sees a vibrant and dynamic witness for Christ where formerly there was an anti-witness.

2. Revitalization encourages the saints in the dying congregation.

Many of the members of struggling churches are faithful believers who are deeply committed to their congregation. They have hung on through lean times. They have shown up Sunday after Sunday even though very little was happening. Jesus loves these sheep, but they usually do not have a pastor who cares for them. When a church is revitalized, these saints are often encouraged and shepherded in a new way. Their faith is refreshed and they are encouraged anew as they serve the growing body.

3. Revitalization enables us to harness resources for the gospel.

Many dead churches are sitting on a treasure trove of resources (land, money, equipment) that can be leveraged for the spread of the gospel. Those resources are just sitting around idle, doing almost nothing for the kingdom. As a matter of good stewardship, evangelical churches interested in planting should consider revitalizing as well. And let's be honest, if we don't revitalize these churches, they will most likely fall into the hands of liberal churches, mosques, or condominium developers.

SO WHAT SHOULD YOU DO?

So should you seek to plant a new church or revitalize a dying church? It depends to some extent on your gifts, temperament, and opportunities. But before you plant a church in a community, it might be worth your time to investigate whether there are any dying churches in the area that could use your help.

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Be a Tortoise, Not a Hare

By Jeramie Rinne

You know the classic fable: The cocky rabbit challenges the other animals to a race. The tortoise accepts, much to the hare's bemusement. The race begins, and the rabbit dashes ahead—so far ahead, in fact, that he has time to nap. But while the hare sleeps, the tortoise faithfully plods on and crosses the finish line first in a dramatic upset. The moral of the story: Slow and steady wins the race.

Perhaps seminaries should offer a class in the exegesis of Aesop. Too often, pastors come to a new congregation, quickly see the need for revitalization, and shoot off at a hare's pace to turn the church around. Within a few years, serious problems emerge. And the race ends prematurely with a conflicted congregation and a wounded pastor who's ready to drop out of the ministry.

Young pastors in particular can fall prey to the dangers of a rapid reform. This is partially because they are often long on energy and idealism and short on experience, but it's also because young pastors and declining churches seem to find each other. A struggling church says it wants "new energy" and "more young folks" and so is willing to take a chance on a younger man. And the young pastor is eager for that first job and up for a challenge. And so the freshly-minted minister arrives and the race begins at a furious pace.

FOUR CHURCH REFORM RABBITS

Rabbits come in many sub-species. That is, there are many ways to rush reformation and renewal in a local church to the detriment of congregation and pastor. Consider four archetypal ways that we pastors move too quickly in our efforts to bring needed change to our churches:

The Purist

The Purist has strong theological convictions. He has been blessed with a clear biblical vision for church life and practice. He runs straight and true without deviating from the course.

Unfortunately, he moves too fast for the congregation. In the first six months he proposes a new doctrinal statement, a constitutional change to adopt elders, and a radical pruning of the membership rolls. Ironically, in his zeal for a faithful theology of the church he runs roughshod over the actual people of the church. He thunders out the doctrines of grace each Sunday, but fails to show his people the patient grace of God in his dealings with them.

This pastor can get fired fast. And, sadly, he can go away as a theological martyr in his own mind, blind to his faults. More sadly still, that church has now been inoculated against the biblical reformation it desperately needs.

The Pragmatist

The opposite extreme from the Purist, the Pragmatist will do "whatever works" to get people into the church and keep them there. Nothing is out of bounds so long as it grows the church and doesn't involve blatant immorality or obvious heresy. A charismatic and talented pragmatist can grow a church from 50 to 500 in short order with a savvy blend of humor, technology, leadership, and style.

The Pragmatist may crack the code of how to rapidly raise church attendance, giving all appearances of revitalization. But important questions remain: Are people truly being converted by the gospel, repenting of sins and trusting in Christ? Or are people merely being efficiently "churched?" Is this pastor making disciples of Jesus, or just fans of the latest "it" church? Is he cultivating a spiritual redwood, which grows slowly but reaches majestic stature? Or is he merely growing a rose, which blooms today but fades tomorrow?

Sadly, the more effectively and rapidly one can raise church attendance, the less likely anyone is to question the methods theologically. Numbers bewitch us.

The Copycat

The Copycat shaves time by taking a short-cut: he merely replicates another church's philosophy, programs, and structure in his own congregation. Why reinvent the wheel? Why not just buy the book, attend the conference, order the kit, and download the sermons from another successful church?

The Copycat sounds like the Pragmatist, and at one level he is. But the Purist can fall into this temptation, too. Reformed Copycats have their hero pastors and churches as well.

Learning from other church models isn't wrong. In fact, Scripture commands us to follow the godly examples of others (1 Cor. 11:1; Phil. 3:17), and the apostle Paul even holds up an entire local church as a model for other believers (1 Thess. 1:7). However, we pastors become Copycats when we impose another church's model without lovingly considering the unique character, history, and culture of our congregation. We also err as Copycats when we fail to assess our favored model in light of biblical teaching on the local church.

Faithfully exegeting your church and your Bible is tortoise-work. It can't be done overnight.

The Narcissist

This final hare is perhaps the most dangerous. The Narcissist views church ministry through the lens of his own personal narrative. He sees congregational renewal and reform as the stage for acting out a self-centered script.

Maybe he dreams of being the guy who helps the stodgy traditional church become cutting edge. Or perhaps he fancies himself an activist who confronts the complacent suburban church about engaging the poor. Or maybe in his mind he's the reincarnation of Luther looking for a doctrinally wobbly church to which he can nail his 95 theses. Or maybe he simply sees himself speaking to thousands, and wants to transform his congregation into that mega church. It's the American dream, pastoral edition.

Such delusions of grandeur tend to breed impatient pastors. When we're full of ourselves, we interpret ministry setbacks as personal failures, and pushback from church members as personal threats. We race like driven men when it's all about us.

GRAB YOUR SHELL

And then there's the tortoise. While the rabbits tear off, he plods along faithfully.

The tortoise strives for renewal through a steady rhythm of weekly expository preaching, letting the Word do its transformative work. He commits significant time to prayer, calling on God to revitalize. He goes slow enough to know and listen to church members, understanding that you cannot truly reform what you do not love. He has an overarching confidence in God's sovereignty to bring about the needed change, so that setbacks roll off him like rain off a shell. If God wills, the tortoise is open to spending a career in one church. His personal narrative is simple: I am just a servant of Jesus.

It's amazing how far a tortoise can go.

Every church needs renewal. The church reformed is always reforming. So let us strive for renewal in a way that puts the spotlight on God's Word, God's timing, and the gospel's power, rather than our own creativity, know-how, and style. Then when people ask how we turned our church around, we won't be flexing our own muscular rabbit legs. Instead we will be able to say with all sincerity, "The Lord has done this, and it is marvelous in our eyes."

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A Roadmap for Church Reform

By Greg Gilbert

The work of church reform can look a little like a jungle when you're in the thick of it. Where do I go from here? Where do I even *start*? What do you do first? What should you ignore? What's the goal I should be working toward?

A ROADMAP FOR CHURCH REFORM

Of course, every situation will be different, but I think there's also a general pattern that sets a pretty good course for guys trying to lead a church in reform. Here's a short roadmap that might help you keep your bearings as you move forward.

1. *Preach the Word.*

First, preach the Word. This is not just step one; it is the air you breathe. Always and as long as the Lord gives you breath, preach the Word. It is God's Word that gives life, and it is God's Word that the Holy Spirit uses to shape a church into the image of Jesus. If you don't do this—faithfully, accurately, and well—reforming the church won't matter anyway.

Also, a huge part of reforming a church is constantly teaching your congregation about the biblical foundations for what you're doing. At every step along the way, you'll have to teach them—about membership, about elders, about deacons, about congregationalism, and even about the meaning of the church itself. The teaching component of reform is never done. In fact, it clears the way for everything else.

2. *Learn the Polity.*

Second, learn your church's polity. If you're going to reform a church rather than start it from scratch, you have to know its polity. You have to know *how* to change things. What do you have to do to change the rules? To elect leaders? To bring members in or see them out? How does it all work? You as the reforming pastor need to know the existing rules better than anybody in the church. If you don't—if you just try to steamroll things—you'll create massive problems for yourself because people will feel cheated. It's usually easier for someone to swallow defeat if they feel it's been above board. You want to create a rebellion against you? Ignore the rules.

3. *Get to Know the Gatekeepers.*

Third, get to know the gatekeepers. Every church has pressure points of authority, people who are in key positions of leadership, whether formal or informal. In a situation that needs reform, a good number of those gatekeepers—by definition—are going to be problematic. Otherwise the church would have reformed itself before you got there.

In order to reform a church, then, get to know those people. Spend time with them before you offend them, and find out what they value, how they communicate, and how they can be persuaded. It's helpful to know which of those people can influence others of them, and where those people are going to be helpful to you at different points in the reform. If the deacon chairman likes the idea of elders but hates the idea of meaningful membership, lean on him when you get to elders, but don't count on him when you're dealing with membership.

4. *Get Some Help.*

Fourth, get some help. You can't do a reform alone. You want other people to think through it with you, to look at ideas and identify the ninety percent of them that are bad, and to talk you down from doing stupid things and talk you *into* doing things that are good but unpleasant. It doesn't have to be formal; you don't

need to elect men to fill this role. But you do want them to “buy in” to the reform, almost as much as you yourself have. You want them to feel the weight of it, to care about it deeply, and to have not a thought in their brains of leaving you high and dry if the going gets tough. Look for men you’d nominate as elders if you could. They need to be not just big voices, but peacemakers and persuaders, encouragers and spine-stiffeners. If you can find even one or two men like that to walk alongside you, your work will be immeasurably more bearable.

5. Make Membership Meaningful.

Fifth, make membership meaningful. This is one of the first things you can do in a reform, and the good thing is that most pastors will be able to do at least part of this without any formal change to a rule. It probably won’t require a congregational vote. Even if you’re culturally required to keep letting people into membership after they “walk the aisle” of the church, most pastors will at least be able to make a case that it would be good for him to speak with prospective members before they’re allowed to join. Then, when you meet with them, you can make sure they understand the gospel and are actually Christians. Not only that, but you should also begin, early in the reform, to make your membership rolls more accurately reflect your attendance. If there are people on your rolls who have not attended the church in decades, you should probably remove them. The decisions about the various steps of reform in your church should be made by people who actually have a vested interest in the church, not people who simply show up for crucial votes and then disappear again.

6. Reform the Rules.

Sixth, reform the rules. Once the membership rolls are clean and accurately reflect your attendance, you should move carefully to reform the church’s rules, if that’s necessary. Usually that means amending or replacing the constitution or by-laws. The point to notice is that reforming the rules is actually pretty far down the timeline of reform. You might think of it as the fruit that emerges from a lot of spadework, sometimes *years* of spadework, that has to be done first. Once it’s done, though, it paves the way for even more beneficial reforms.

7. Recognize Elders.

Seventh, recognize elders. If your congregation was ready to change its rules to make way for a plurality of pastors, they’ll probably be ready now to recognize men to become elders. On the other hand, the specific is always harder than the abstract, and deciding which men to nominate is often a difficult decision. You may have some men in the church who will be obviously qualified to fill that role, but there will also likely be some who are *almost* qualified. There may also be some men whom the congregation would *expect* to be recognized as elders, but who actually are not qualified at all. As with every other step in the reform, you’ll need to do a good deal of teaching on the role and character of elders before you nominate a group of men.

8. Develop a Culture of Discipleship, and Build Structures to Support it.

Eighth, develop a culture of discipleship, and build structures to support it. Once you have a group of men recognized as elders, the next step is to start building on the foundation of reform you’ve laid. That’s not just a step in a process; it’s a lifelong process of leading the church in its spiritual growth. Building a culture of discipleship is key to that growth: By example and by teaching, you want to show your congregation what being a Christian is all about, and how the church functions in helping Christians to grow.

Not only so, but you should build structures that will support that culture of discipleship. Different churches do this in different ways, of course. At my church, we have a structure of home groups that support discipleship for about eighty five percent of our members. Other churches rely on other structures. The important thing to remember is that discipleship doesn’t just happen; it has to be led and supported.

9. Preach the Word.

Ninth, preach the Word. We end where we began. The most fundamental step in church reform—and it's more than a step; it's what underlies and pervades everything—is to make sure the Word of God is being proclaimed and applied to every area of the church's life. When the membership is cleaned up, the rules are reformed, the officers are elected, and the discipleship structures are in place, what's left is a lifetime of preaching the Word and praying that God would cause growth. We can plant and we can water, but if there is to be life, it will only be by God's gracious power.

CHURCH REFORM: MORE LIKE PARENTING THAN BUILDING A MACHINE

I've given you a set of numbered steps here, and they are roughly the steps we followed as we were working to reform Third Avenue Baptist in Louisville. But of course, a church isn't a machine, and church reform isn't a matter of just clicking parts into place. Different situations may call for a different order of steps, and that's where pastoral wisdom comes in. In the end, reforming a church is much more like parenting a child than it is like building a machine. You pour yourself into the church, you love it, you serve it, you instruct, and you lead it—and you pray all along that God will mature it into a vibrant, living witness to his Son.

Greg Gilbert is the senior pastor of Third Avenue Baptist Church in Louisville, Kentucky. He is the author of What is the Gospel? (Crossway, 2010) and, with Kevin DeYoung, of What is the Mission of the Church? (Crossway, 2011).

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What Makes a Church Reform Possible?

By John Folmar

Church planting seems to be the cutting-edge nowadays. But I would say that revitalizing existing churches is at least as important for the sake of the kingdom. In fact, revitalizing an unhealthy church gets you two-for-the-price-of-one. Not only do you establish a reformed, vibrant outpost for the gospel, but you also eliminate the poor witness that was there previously. Sickly churches are, as Mark Dever puts it, “terribly effective anti-missionary forces.” They announce to the community: This is what a Christian is like! This is what a Christian is like! Such false advertising maligns the gospel and actually impedes evangelism in the surrounding area. But when a church is transformed, the gospel surges forward as the community is confronted with a genuine corporate witness for Christ.

I’ve witnessed two church turnarounds, one in Louisville, Kentucky and one in Dubai, United Arab Emirates. In both cases the churches have been utterly transformed, from the preaching, to the corporate worship, to the church’s culture, to the evangelistic impact on surrounding neighborhoods. In both of these turnarounds, although I cannot claim credit for either one, I’ve enjoyed a front-row seat for observing the radical reform of a church.

What made these church reforms possible?

PREACHING

The driving force behind any true reform will be the Word of God. As the Word powers through a congregation, it softens up the hard ground and produces spiritual change. In Dubai there were faithful members who had been laboring away for years but to little effect; they weren’t being consistently supported by the weekly sermons. Valiant attempts were made to strengthen the community, but something was lacking. But when the preaching became consistently expositional and gospel-centered, it was as if someone dropped a burning match on gasoline. Ministry was multiplied. As the church began to turn around, one long-time member compared the preaching to a weekly artillery barrage. The steady pounding of the Word softened opposition and opened up avenues for more fruitful ministry to occur throughout the body.

The pulpit must lead a church reform effort, and this means preaching expositionally with gospel emphasis and judicious application to the life of the church, especially those areas that need reform. If the pulpit is not solidly behind the effort, reformers are probably wasting their time. It’s better to move on to a place where the Word is already being rightly preached and see how that ministry can be supported.

PROVIDENCE

Moribund churches will only be enlivened if God is at work there. Years ago in Louisville, I joined an old church whose ministry was dwindling for various reasons. Elderly people predominated in the church, many faithfully ministering but without pastoral leadership. The younger generations had long ago deserted the church, and I could understand why. Aside from family loyalty, there was not much to keep them there. The preaching consisted mainly of homespun stories without any serious scriptural exposition. The church was not so much theologically driven as it was culturally driven, and the contemporary culture had long since moved on.

But in God’s providence, there was another church nearby (meeting in a school) where the gospel was clearly proclaimed. This younger church enjoyed life and vibrancy and sound doctrine, but had no roots in the community and no building. The obvious solution was a merger of the two congregations. Initially the idea of a merger was rejected by the older, needy church. They were too different theologically, musically, culturally, and in every other way. But God began to sovereignly remove the opponents of this merger, and he gradually changed people’s hearts toward the new church coming in. Like night and day—from settled opposition to almost unanimous congregational approval—God providentially arranged for a new work to begin there in Louisville, a church that remains vibrant and unified to this day.

There are so many forces arrayed against the turnaround of a local church that it will never happen unless God brings it to pass. God's providential care is essential to church reform, which is why prayer is crucial.

PARTNERSHIP

Try to not do this alone. Church reform can be grueling, thankless, and discouraging. The timetable is not measured in months, but in years. And deep spiritual reform is usually not flashy. God uses the ordinary means of grace to grow and change his people. Fickle churches can become impatient, and during difficult times it helps to have friends.

When I began pastoring in Dubai, there was one like-minded elder who particularly encouraged me when the times were tough. He was a pro at identifying evidences of grace, even as I slogged through my own pastoral missteps and the inevitable setbacks that come with the territory of church reform. When crucial elements of the reform were in jeopardy, he was there to lend a hand at just the right time. If possible, partner with others before diving headlong into a reforming situation. Don't go it alone.

Place a premium on identifying men who are responding to the ministry, and build your life into theirs. Consider it a top priority to disciple men in the congregation who will one day be elders and partners in ministry.

PATIENCE

How many pastors have been fired because they foisted changes on the church before the church was ready? How many reform efforts have been jeopardized by the impatience of leaders who perhaps knew the right thing to do, but failed to spend the time teaching and praying and serving the people in order to earn their trust and persuade them on the points needing reform? Remember Paul's admonition to Timothy: "Reprove, rebuke, and exhort, with complete patience and teaching" (2 Tim. 4:2). Just because you know what the problems are doesn't mean they should all be fixed immediately.

When I began pastoring in Dubai, someone helpfully reminded me that it wasn't "my" church. In other words, the people there and their state of spiritual maturity were the fruit of another pastor's ministry, not mine. I could hardly go in and expect the church to immediately adopt my views of church life and ministry. This liberated me to serve people contentedly who did not always share my convictions about the Bible or the ministry. But after a few years, that picture began to change.

Take the long view when it comes to church reform. It helps to have a ten to twenty year time horizon. With a long-term perspective, we can more patiently prioritize the areas of church life that need to change. We can more contentedly operate in an imperfect ministry environment even as we ask people to forbear with our personal weaknesses as well.

There are, however, two things a pastor can begin changing immediately upon arriving at a new church: preaching and membership. On day one, you can uphold the authority of the Scriptures in the way you preach, deriving your points explicitly from the text itself and showing yourself to be governed by the text. Second, you can immediately begin interviewing new members as they come in. In this way, you can:

- ensure to the best of your ability that they are genuine believers,
- ensure that they know and can articulate the gospel,
- lay out your expectations for church membership,
- and begin to establish a pastoral relationship with the new members coming in, which over time will affect the complexion of the church as a whole.

FEW THINGS BEAT A FRONT-ROW VIEW OF CHURCH REFORM

In conclusion, there are few things that beat watching a church change from sickly and irrelevant to biblical and vibrant. The only way this will ever occur is if the Word of God is rightly preached. Even then,

some reform efforts fail in spite of faithful pulpits; the Lord must be at work to turn the ship around. You will be more likely to succeed in the long haul if you have a few brothers who are laboring with you in the work. But even with all these things in place, you must take the long-term approach to church reform. "See how the farmer waits for the precious fruit of the earth, being patient about it, until it receives the early and late rains. You also, be patient" (Jas. 5:7-8).

John Folmar is the pastor of United Christian Church of Dubai in the United Arab Emirates.

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Five Factors that Brought Life to a Dying Church

By J.D. Greear

The church I pastor, the Summit Church, was planted in 1962. In 2001, however, the Summit Church (then Homestead Heights Baptist Church) was a plateaued, declining Baptist church. The current pastor had been asked to resign after being caught in immorality. The pastor prior to him had unsuccessfully attempted to impose a Willow Creek model, and the pastor prior to him was a theological moderate. When I arrived, the church was in its fourth straight year of attendance and offering decline, and the outlook was bleak.

FIVE LIFE-GIVING FACTORS

Only God brings life to dead things. But here are five lessons I learned that I believe contributed to our church's revitalization.

1. Inward transformation drives external change.

Just as external moralistic changes cannot transform the human heart, so external changes to a church's programs or structures cannot revitalize a church. You might as well try to bending a metal rod without first heating it. It will either resist change altogether, or simply snap in two.

Internal change in the believer happens only through the preaching of the gospel. People become willing to extend themselves to reach others as they learn more about God and what he has done.

There is a time to push change and a time just to preach Jesus. It takes wisdom to know what to do when. A church that has its "first love" (Rev. 2:1-10) is likely to undergo even the most uncomfortable changes to complete the mission.

As the Summit Church developed a love for the lost, changing our structures to reach more people became relatively easy.

2. Do not underestimate the power of momentum.

It is easier to change churches that are growing, just like it is easier to steer a bike that is moving. In any organization, including a church, momentum can provide the capital you need to purchase change. Sun Tzu, author of the 2500 year old military classic *Art of War*, said that momentum is a general's most valuable ally. Small armies can win great victories if they know how to build it.

You might consider focusing first on changing those things that are hindering the church from growing. When growth is happening, you'll find it easier to change the other things. As people experience the joy of new believers being born into their midst, they become more willing to shift away from what is comfortable for them and into what is effective at reaching others.

Further, in most cases I would encourage you to spend more time developing the people who are with you than engaging those who are against you. Momentum and excitement often silence opposition. So instead of spending a lot of time putting out fires, you might want to start one of your own.

When I first got to the Summit, there were a number of problems we chose to ignore, at least for the time being. These included dress code, music style, the length of the services, and an inefficient (and in some ways unbiblical) constitution. We changed a few key things that we knew would signal a new day in the church, and we set a couple of big goals for some upcoming outreaches. When we reached those goals, we made a big deal of celebrating God's faithfulness in them. After one of these outreaches, we baptized our first African-American believer. An older gentleman who would later become the chairman of our elder board came up to me with tears in his eyes and said, "Son, I'm not crazy about a lot of these changes you are making. But if that is a taste of what we are going to get, count me in."

During that first year I baptized an exchange student from another country. I happened to speak her native language (having lived in her country for a couple of years), and so I conducted her baptism in that language. After that, I probably could have suggested that we all stand on our heads in church and people would have gone along with it. Within two years, we had changed our dress code, sold our property, and re-written our constitution, all without a dissenting vote. Had I suggested those things during the first year, it would have been a bloodbath. But after we had gained momentum, they changed naturally.

Win a few evangelism “battles,” and then celebrate them. Isn’t that what we see the psalmists doing both to strengthen their own souls and to inspire a vision for the future? In Psalm 48, the sons of Korah tell Israel, “Walk about Zion, go around her, number her towers, consider well her ramparts, go through her citadels, that you may tell the next generation that this is God, our God forever and ever.”

3. Beware of fighting battles that lead you nowhere.

A third lesson is tied to the second. Beware of fighting battles, no matter how worthy, that gain you little strategic ground.

Some battles (often worthy battles!) won’t help you in the bigger “war” of revitalization. Often, if you postpone them, you can win them later without shedding a drop of blood—on either side. Know which battles to fight when.

I’ve noticed that leaders who are perfectionists tend to have trouble with this principle, because they can’t distinguish “the right” from “the expedient.” We sometimes forget it’s not about winning battles, it’s about leading people.

The Apostle Paul seemed to understand this. Sometimes he let people malign his character; other times he defended his apostleship. Sometimes he brought himself into conformity to the law; other times he publicly rebuked those who refused to embrace their freedom. His grid for engagement was what was strategic for the mission (1 Cor. 9:19-27; Gal. 2:11-15).

Of course this does not mean we ever tolerate open sin or substantial doctrinal corruption in the church. It just means that we fight the right battles at the right times.

4. Create a sending culture.

In my opinion, creating a sending culture is essential to revitalizing a church. Churches that are revitalized see themselves as communities on mission with God, not as country clubs for Christians.

One very practical thing you can do to encourage this mentality is to send as many people on short-term mission trips as possible. Few things open our eyes to missional living like spending time with missionaries overseas. The more that mentality gets into the bloodstream of the church, the more church members become willing to apply missional principles to their own context.

During our first two years we sent an inordinate amount of our people and leaders overseas. It cost a lot of money and took up valuable time, but it did two things. First, it raised the level of generosity in our church. Having seen the needs on the field, the people gave. The trips may have cost us a lot of money, but they paid for themselves many times over. Second, it made our people ask themselves if we were laboring to reach our city the same way that missionaries overseas were laboring to reach theirs.

When you create a sending culture in your church, you will likely lose some of your best people to a church plant or a missions assignment. But don’t be afraid; the sending culture creates more leaders to take their place. It has worked for us like the five loaves and two fish: the more we give away, the more is multiplied and given back to us.

5. Lead your people to yearn.

The French mystic Antoine de Saint Exupéry once said, “If you want to build a ship, don’t drum up the men to gather wood, divide the work and give orders. Instead, teach them to yearn for the vast and endless sea.” As people yearn for the salvation of the world they will not only put up with the changes you propose, but will probably instigate a few of their own as well. That’s when the church is really revitalized.

Again, it is the preaching of the gospel that creates this yearning. The gospel makes us stand in awe of Jesus, who was rich, yet for our sakes became poor. It moves us to pour ourselves out for others as he has poured himself out for us. The gospel awakens people from their middle class slumber to follow Jesus as he seeks and saves the lost. It moves them to love the poor, the stranger, and the outcast.

The gospel teaches us to see the world through the lens of the compassionate God demonstrated at the cross and revealed in the resurrection. The gospel fills us with audacious faith, making us (in the words of William Carey) “expect great things of God and then attempt great things for God.”

The gospel makes us yearn to see the glory of God cover the earth like the waters cover the sea. It gives us a passion for his kingdom that outweighs our comfort with the status quo. As the gospel has become more of the center of our church, I have seen our people do the most amazing things—from moving from richer neighborhoods into poorer ones, to adopting unwanted children, to loving refugees, to sharing Christ with their neighbors.

So personally dwell on the gospel. Meditate on it until it burns in your breast and you can’t contain it. Then preach it, letting it do the work of revitalization.

J.D. Greear is lead pastor of the Summit Church in Raleigh-Durham, North Carolina and the author of Gospel: Recovering the Power that Made Christianity Revolutionary (B&H, 2011).

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Five Unexpected Lessons in Church Revitalization

By Brian Croft

The work of church revitalization brings many surprises. Each dying congregation has its own quirks, blind spots, and sins that led to a nearly lifeless situation.

FIVE UNEXPECTED LESSONS

Eight years into my own church revitalization work, I have learned a number of lessons I didn't necessarily expect to when I began. Here are five of them.

1. Wait for the right time to implement change.

The most common tactic of a zealous pastor beginning a church revitalization—which is the worst thing he could do—is to try to change everything that needs to be changed within the first year or two. Of course the church needs to change, else it would not be characterized as needing revitalization, yet change must come slowly. Trust must be built. Sheep first need to feel cared for by the shepherd before they will follow him down a new path.

The point is not merely that change should happen slowly, but that the timing for any particular change has to be right. In year four of my present pastorate, I almost split the church over a major change. So, I realized that this was not the time and pulled back. Nine months later, the same measure passed unanimously. Change must come slowly, at the right time.

2. Don't underestimate the power of persistent love.

Because the Bible calls us to watch over souls as those who will give an account (Heb. 13:17), pastors cannot choose to care for some sheep and avoid others. Caring for those who do not seem to want our care can make us feel helpless. Yet don't underestimate the way God powerfully works through persistent love.

Some of the ring leaders of an effort to remove me as pastor five years ago are now warm supporters. What brings that kind of change of heart? First and foremost, God's power and grace at work. However, God seemed to work through actions of relentless love. You will give an account for all the sheep under your care, regardless of how they receive your ministry, so persistently love them all.

3. Don't underestimate the joy of winning those who were once hostile to you.

Without a doubt, some of my most meaningful relationships in the church are with those who once wanted my head. Some who once prayed that I would leave now pray that my ministry in the church will be fruitful. These people do not think I am the greatest pastor in the world. Nor do they agree with me about everything. Yet through the struggles and battles over the years God was doing something miraculous of which I was largely unaware. Trust was building, understanding was growing, and mutual affection was subtly forming in both our hearts.

4. Don't neglect your elderly members—they're one of your greatest gifts.

I am increasingly concerned that in the midst of a church planting frenzy, the multi-generational church is fading. Elderly church members are commonly seen by the younger generation of pastors as an unhelpful burden, a hindrance to the work of the ministry—a lie I was once tempted to believe.

You can imagine my surprise when I began to recognize the gift of elderly church members, as well as the God-honoring blessing of a multi-generational congregation united by the gospel. To witness a self-consumed, trendy college student get up and go sit with an elderly widow during a Sunday morning

gathering because she was sitting alone is a uniquely powerful display of the gospel. And that display is found only in a local church when old and young are present (Tit. 2:1-8).

5. Labor for the satisfaction of seeing unhealthy, dysfunctional church patterns broken.

It is a great joy to see the gospel change a person's life. That joy is magnified as the gospel begins to change decades of unhealthy, destructive patterns that have strangled the life out of an entire local church. God's Word and Spirit are so powerful that they can not only build a healthy church, but even take a dying, broken, discouraged congregation and give it renewed life, causing it to flourish far beyond what its founders ever imagined. So labor diligently and patiently to see the gospel transform the corporate life of the church.

THE GOSPEL IS POWERFUL TO BUILD AND REBUILD

Church revitalization is hard work. Every situation is unique and unpredictable. Many of the lessons I've learned have been not just unexpected, but difficult and painful. Yet the difficulties are more than worth it. The gospel can not only build a local church, but rebuild it also—sometimes in surprising, unexpected ways.

Brian Croft is the pastor of Auburndale Baptist Church in Louisville, KY and is the author, most recently, of Conduct Gospel-Centered Funerals (with Phil Newton; Day One, 2011).

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Do's and Don'ts of Church Reform

Responses from Thabiti Anyabwile, Mark Dever, Bob Johnson, Garrett Kell, Michael Lawrence, Mike McKinley, Josh Smith, and others.

CHURCH REFORM “DON'TS”

Leading Change

- Don't try to change everything in the first year. Or five years.
- Don't pursue major changes until you've cleaned up the church's membership rolls (so that membership reflects actual attendance and participation).
- Don't change something that costs a lot of pastoral capital before you've built up that capital.
- Don't kill a sacred cow without knowing it was a sacred cow.
- Don't spend \$100 worth of effort on a \$2 problem.
- Don't think revolution. Instead, think evolution.
- Don't be in a hurry.
- Don't pick a fight you can't win. You don't want your church to go on record making the wrong decision.
- Don't require total unanimity for major changes. This can allow a stubborn few to hijack something the entire rest of the church agrees about.
- Don't try to make changes before people know that you love them.
- Don't make changes if you're planning to move on as soon as you get a better job offer.
- Don't forget that preaching the glory of the gospel is the only thing that can make the heart willing to change.

Relating to Other Leaders

- Don't go it alone.
- Don't make any major decisions or changes without getting godly counsel.
- Don't do everything yourself. Instead, immediately begin to work on raising up other leaders to come alongside.
- Don't fire anyone if you can help it. Instead, love, train, teach, and invest in your staff. They will appreciate it, and attrition can take care of the rest.

Family

- Don't tell your wife everything that's going on in the church, including what your (and her) detractors are saying.
- Don't burn out your wife by spending all your time in ministry.

General Counsel

- Don't make a public statement about something until you're sure about it.
- Don't ignore your church's history, especially the ministries of the past few pastors before you.
- Don't try to make sure everyone likes you. Not everyone will.
- Don't underestimate how dramatic a possible change can feel to the congregation, even if it seems minor to you.
- Don't obsess over attendance numbers. Take care of the quality of your ministry, and let God take care of the quantity.
- Don't respond to stupid suggestions. Just smile and nod. Thank them for coming to you with their concerns. Tell them you'll pray about it.
- Don't assume your enemies are really your enemies. If you serve your opponents in kindness, you'll often win them over.
- Don't try to set the agenda for the senior ladies class. Just let them keep it.

- Don't preach Romans or Ephesians as your first series.
- Don't ignore your church's formal structures and governing documents—generally.
- Don't preach an agenda (or a series that allows you to preach an agenda). Instead, focus on a book of the Bible and seek people's spiritual progress as the priority.
- Don't freeze in place because you're afraid of making mistakes.
- Don't neglect your building, grounds, and signs. Instead, make sure your neighborhood can see that your church is open for business.

CHURCH REFORM “DO’S”

Member Care

- Pray for your members. Invite your other leaders to join you in praying for the members. Model prayer in every meeting you can. As you pray for them and they pray for each other, you'll be surprised at the spiritual reform that happens that you're not driving.
- Love the congregation, even though you may not feel like it at first. Tell your people you love them—frequently, publicly, and sincerely. Love the church that the Lord has given to you, not the one that you wanted him to give to you.
- Get out of your office, and into people's homes, workplaces, and so on. The same is true for Sunday mornings. Don't be so busy with your stuff that you don't have a chance to observe and appreciate other people's ministries.
- Specifically praise the congregation for its faithful ministries and service. Spend your first two years just noting everything for which to give God thanks. When you notice something worth thanking God for, tell somebody personally and the church publicly.
- Put relationships before issues.
- Write notes to members as you pray for them.
- Smell like the sheep.
- Make use of positive examples in the congregation.
- Learn the stories of significant deaths that affected the entire congregation, like those of a young person that everyone loved who was killed by a drunk driver, or a young dad who died from cancer, or families whose infant or toddler died.
- Learn the stories of business meetings or traumatic issues that affected the congregation.
- Discover which traditions or practices are particularly meaningful, and why.
- Find out who your people are reading and listening to. Affirm good authors they are already reading. They'll be happy to have you introduce others later.
- Ask people, “How are you doing spiritually?”

Leading Change

- Familiarize yourself with the constitution/by-laws by having the existing leaders lead you through them, explaining why certain things were adopted.
- Teach first, and then act.
- Under-promise and over-deliver.
- Realize that lots will change simply because a new senior pastor is now in place, so you don't really need to try to change much at first. If anything, you're going to have to work hard to keep things from changing!

Other Leaders

- Figure out who the other “pastors” are in the church, and seek their counsel, advice, and support. They might not all be officially recognized leaders, but could be senior adult Sunday School teachers, or retired missionaries or pastors, or other ministry leaders. Their sheep will follow their lead, so prioritize those relationships.
- Invest in the leaders (elders, deacons, staff) that you have while you wait for the leaders you want. It may be that you already have them.

- Build meaningful friendships with the leadership (elders, deacons, volunteer ministry heads). Get to know them outside the pressures of ministry.
- Continually build a nucleus of godly men.
- Keep your teaching with the elders brief and manageable. At the beginning, think short articles rather than books.
- Study topics with the leaders that are not controversies or in need of change right away. There will be less resistance or suspicion that you're manipulating a change, and you'll lay deep foundations for longer-lasting change.
- Let the other leaders teach you. In staff meetings and elders' meetings, allow other staff or elders to lead the meeting, or the teaching component if you have one. Model submission and teachability.

Family

- Keep a regular and sensible schedule. It's a long haul, your family needs you, and you need your rest.
- Play with your kids every day.

General Counsel

- Read Scripture publicly, all the time: in staff meetings, in elders meetings, in hospital visits, in congregational meetings, Sunday mornings, Wednesday nights. By example, teach that all of life is lived under the Word of God.
- Get to know your supported workers before making any judgments about their ministry. There may be more going on than at first appears.
- Establish a weekly "service review" right away. Invite your elders (not just your staff) and model humility and encouragement.
- Praise the pastors who have gone before you wherever you genuinely can.
- If you're the first expositor, preach shorter sermons than you'd like until the congregation develops an appetite for the Word.
- Sometimes respond to questions with, "I don't know. Let me pray and search the Scriptures," even if you have an answer at the ready. They may not be asking what you think they're asking, and you may have the correct answer but not the correct approach or sensitivity.
- Gladly suffer for the sake of the elect.
- Start a bookstall.
- Celebrate and appreciate all that is good about your church's past. Members will see that you really care, and it will set a good model for when you are gone. Your successor *may* not say that everything you did was wrong.
- Expect disappointment and loneliness.
- When attending senior adult functions, bring your wife and cute kids. (If your kids aren't cute you can go either way on this one.)
- Prioritize personal evangelism. Obviously you should do this always, but people tend to welcome reform from a pastor who is leading people to faith in Christ. It's hard to argue when people are getting saved.
- Be hopeful. God is in the business of bringing dead things to life.
- Pray that God would deliver you from the fear of man. You cannot pastor well if you fear man. If you struggle with this, make it a priority to work on this privately during your first year. It's a killer in long term reforming ministry.

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Book Review: *The U-Turn Church*, by Keven Harney and Bob Bouwer

Reviewed by: Brian Croft

Kevin Harney and Bob Bouwer, *The U-Turn Church: New Direction for Health and Growth*. Baker, 2011. 208 pages. \$16.99

The current church planting trend among evangelicals forces an important question: Why would anyone choose to pastor a struggling church rather than simply plant a new one? Pastors Kevin Harney and Bob Bouwer offer some intriguing answers to this question in their new book *The U-Turn Church*.



There are two reasons this book piqued my interest: First, I am eight years into a revitalization work in a church that met many of the authors' criteria of a church that needs a "U-Turn." Second, before coming to my current church, I spent almost ten years as an associate pastor in large churches that were immersed in a pragmatic philosophy, which made me wonder how the author's advice would match up to these experiences.

Harney and Bouwer went to pastor two different RCA (Reformed Church in America) congregations that had similar problems. For various reasons, both churches had been either stagnant or in decline for many years. Through an engaging and conversational writing style, these two pastors share how they took these two congregations through a U-Turn and turned them into vibrant mega-churches, and what they learned in the process.

Here are a few ways this book can help pastors who are reforming churches, as well as cautions you will want to consider as you read.

HELPS FOR PASTORS

1. Helpful diagnosis of some of the typical problems in declining churches.

Harney and Bouwer identify several misguided principles that cause churches to wither away through the generations. One common mistake is what the authors call the "Field of Dreams" philosophy: "If you build it, they will come" (19). This was a common movement in the 1950s through the 1970s, which is why today we find so many churches with more room than they need.

The authors also critique churches who know they need to change, but desire change for the wrong reasons: self-preservation, increased income, and larger attendance (20-21). Instead, they argue that what should motivate a church U-Turn is a holy zeal, which they define as "a passionate commitment to count the cost, be willing to sacrifice, and follow Jesus into his ministry of making disciples of all nations" (20).

2. Wise advice about how to shepherd members through a transition, as well as helpful counsel for a pastor's heart.

Something that causes aspiring pastors to choose to plant a church instead of entering an existing church is the prospect of finding intransigent traditions and unyielding mindsets among long-time members. Yet Harney and Bouwer give excellent advice about how to guide members through change. They emphasize the need to patiently and clearly communicate the vision (ch. 3), to cultivate a culture of prayer (ch. 4), and to diligently teach the difference between biblical truth and personal preference (ch. 5).

I think my favorite section in the book was chapter 8, "Tough Skin and Soft Hearts." Harney and Bouwer conclude that most pastors usually have one or the other. Yet every pastor needs to develop a deep love for his people (soft heart) that can even survive attacks from the people, as well as an ability to take criticism and deal with conflict (tough skin) without taking it personally. The authors' key to finding this balance is the expectation that "In the church you will find the healthiest and the sickest of humanity"

(124). Having a realistic perspective about your people is a tremendous help as you deal with the frustrations of changing an established church.

CAUTIONS

Here are a few cautions about the book.

1. Make faithfulness your chief aim, not the “wow” factor.

The first subheading of the “wow” factor chapter (ch. 11) makes a weighty theological claim: “God desires the ‘wow’ factor to be our goal” (164). The authors argue that those who come to our churches should leave saying, “Wow! That was amazing.” They highlight many characteristics that can help produce the “wow” factor, including pursuing excellence, relevance, aesthetics, music, and the effectiveness of the communicator. Much of the book reflects this chief aim in the practical advice they offer pastors.

Scripture does indeed talk about making the church attractive, but it calls for churches to be attractive with love and good deeds, not with the things that money can buy. How discouraging pastoring would be if I thought pastoral success depended on the size of my church budget. After all, let’s be honest, it takes serious cash to produce the “wow” factor as these authors mean it. But look up passages like Matthew 5:13-16, or John 13:34-35, or 1 Peter 2:9-12. You’ll find a different kind of “wow” entirely—not one you buy with cash, but one you receive from the Spirit and the Word.

The goal for people to have a meaningful experience at our churches is not wrong, but it is wrong for a church to make that its chief aim, or to assume that “success” depends on it. As others have said, what you win them with, you win them to. If the goal is to “wow” people, then what happens if we win them with technological savvy or slick rhetoric instead of the message of the gospel itself, even if it is being preached? The gospel is offensive and the faithful preaching of God’s Word does not always leave a person with warm fuzzy feelings, even if you dress it up with hip music, a friendly greeting team, or warm colors in the gathering place.

2. Be aware that your methodology can contradict your theology.

Both pastors declare themselves to be unapologetically reformed in their theology (86). They believe in the sovereignty of God, as well as other “biblical absolutes” (75). Yet the majority of the book is driven by pragmatism. For example, the authors write, “Healthy numbers communicate good health” (30). “The process of the U-Turn journey is to embrace the new. People outside the church will say the old church didn’t work for them but they would consider something new. New is good” (34). “Something that worked at one time may not work in a few years” (76).

It appears to be a contradiction to believe that God, by his sovereign grace, draws his people powerfully by his Spirit through the faithful preaching of God’s Word (reformed theology), and yet to place so much emphasis upon doing what is new and trendy, because it “works” (pragmatism). Unfortunately, this contradiction permeates this book and could easily cause confusion in the heart of a pastor. When theology and methodology are in tension, methodology almost always wins. Pastors, be cautious. This book demonstrates that your methodology can contradict your theology.

WORK TOWARD A HEALTHY CHURCH, NOT A BIG ONE

Although my church has experienced a kind of U-turn, it has been vastly different from what these two pastors have experienced. In one way, we should be encouraged that churches can be revitalized to be effective for the kingdom of God through different means and approaches. These two pastors have certainly turned their churches around. Because of this, there are many principles in this book that will be helpful if you are revitalizing a church. Just make sure to connect the dots between theology and methodology, and that you work not toward a big, new, and impressive church, but toward a faithful, healthy one.

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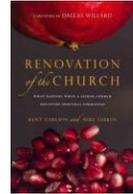
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Book Review: *Renovation of the Church*, by Kent Carlson and Mike Lueken

Reviewed by Bobby Jamieson

Kent Carlson and Mike Lueken, *Renovation of the Church: What Happens When a Seeker Church Discovers Spiritual Formation*. InterVarsity Press, 2011. 185 pages. \$15.00

The seeker-sensitive ethos is alive and well in evangelical circles. This ethos assumes that the primary purpose of the church's weekly gathering is to attract non-Christians. It holds that the substance and style of corporate worship should conform as closely as possible to non-Christians' preferences. And it treats numerical growth in attendance as an absolute metric of success. This ethos still governs the operating systems of many churches, even some whose reformed theological convictions might seem to imply a different ministry philosophy.



Yet there are also increasing symptoms of discontent. Willow Creek Community Church, the mother ship of the movement, recently conducted an extensive survey and concluded that they were doing a poor job of actually helping Christians grow to maturity in Christ. And, if anecdotal evidence can be trusted, it seems that many pastors who have followed in that church's footsteps have drawn similarly disconcerting conclusions.

Two such pastors are Kent Carlson and Mike Lueken, co-pastors of Oak Hills Church in the suburbs of Sacramento, California and authors of the new book *Renovation of the Church: What Happens When a Seeker Church Discovers Spiritual Formation*.

A WELL-TOLD STORY OF CHURCH RENOVATION

Renovation of the Church tells the story of how and why Carlson and Lueken turned a seemingly thriving seeker church into a church in which forming mature disciples of Jesus is the central concern that permeates the entire corporate life of the church.

It's a great story, and Carlson and Lueken tell it well, with disarming self-deprecation and evident humility. They recount how, in a well-intentioned effort to build a truly evangelistic church, they had created a performance and entertainment-driven monster that demanded to be fed—and grew in appetite—every single week (ch. 1). Then at a pastoral retreat at, ironically, Donner Lake (google “Donner Party”), they came to the dramatic realization that

attracting people to church based on their consumer demands is in direct and irredeemable conflict with inviting people, in Jesus' words, to lose their lives in order to find them. It slowly began to dawn on us that our method of attracting people was forming them in ways contrary to the way of Christ. (35; ch. 2)

They further explain this crucial turning point:

In order to help people follow Christ more fully, we would have to work against the very methods we were using to attract people to our church. As person after person shared at this retreat, we slowly began to realize that, to be faithful to the gospel of Jesus, consumerism was not a force to be harnessed but rather an antibiblical value system that had to be prophetically challenged. (35)

This began a process of rethinking theological and methodological issues that, over the next several years, radically transformed—and significantly shrunk—Oak Hills Church. Chapter three tells the story of the transition years, and chapter twelve and the epilogue reflect on mistakes and the future. Chapters four through eleven work through the theological and pastoral issues that changed their church from the inside out: the gospel (ch. 4), consumerism (ch. 5), pastoral ambition (ch. 6), co-pastoring (ch. 7), ecclesiology (ch. 8), spiritual formation (ch. 9), outreach (ch. 10), and worship (ch. 11).

MUCH TO LEARN FROM

There is much to learn from in this narrative and its accompanying theological and pastoral reflections.

Humility, Character, and Pastoral Wisdom

First, the book is written humbly and transparently; the authors are well aware of their own sins and failures. Their writing displays the kind of Christ-shaped character that these men have worked hard to teach and model for their people. And these brothers show plenty of pastoral wisdom as they reflect on the twists and turns of the journey of reforming their church.

Penetrating Critiques of the Seeker Ethos

Further, this book provides a number of penetrating critiques of the seeker ethos.

For instance, the authors asked themselves, “To what extent have we oriented our church around the needs of people who have minimal interest in actually living as disciples of Jesus?” (57).

And on the issue of losing people to other, slicker churches they comment perceptively, “We simply can’t build churches around attracting people through all these religious benefits we offer and then be surprised when they actually take us up on it” (67).

Moreover, they write concerning the performance burden which the seeker model places on pastors and church staff, “Once we have communicated to the masses that if they come to our church, they’ll be surprised, then we have this never-ending burden to surprise people every week. There is no resting. If there is a particularly wonderful experience one weekend, we are driven to do even better the next” (27-28).

Finally, they cast off the devotion to numbers which inheres in the seeker philosophy: “The loss of momentum may be God’s way of exposing our hidden attachments and deepening our dependency on him. Outward success may cost too high of a price. Decisions that negatively impact the bottom line are not necessarily mistakes” (163).

The Centrality of Discipleship

Another strong point in the book is the authors’ insistence on the centrality of discipleship in the life of the church. Their crisis in ministry philosophy was brought on by a dawning awareness that, whatever their church services were accomplishing, the vast majority of attenders were not being progressively conformed to the character of Christ. The catalyst that drove their extreme church makeover is the burden to make disciples. The agenda of their church reform is the agenda of the great commission (Matt. 28:18-20). And as these brothers rightly recognize, this entails far more than merely gathering a crowd or leading people to make a one-time decision that doesn’t lead to real transformation.

What We Do in Worship Preaches a Message and Forms Character

Something else worth learning from is the authors’ understanding that everything a church does in its corporate worship services preaches a message, and forms a certain kind of character. Unlike many contemporary evangelicals, Carlson and Lueken rightly perceive how tightly intertwined our message and our methods really are (57). They concluded of their former ministry approach that, “The way we did church, the style of our services, the underlying values behind our ministry—these communicated a ‘gospel’ in which accepting Jesus was required but apprenticeship to him was optional” (56). In other words, “We are training people as we attract them” (67). And again, citing Marva Dawn,

“Every aspect of the time we spend together in the worshipping Christian community influences the kind of people we are becoming.” In other words, our worship services will form us into a certain kind of person. If worship services are centered on the story of God, we will be assisted in

becoming men and women whose lives are more deeply rooted in God. If our worship services are centered around our personal tastes, needs and desires, they will become merely another place that props up our inherent self-absorption. (152)

This insight also leads the authors into some generally helpful discussion of corporate worship. Their paradigm of content, structure, and style, in that order, is a helpful tool for thinking through what matters in corporate worship (153 ff.). And I was glad to see a strong accent on the Bible's whole story of redemption as the content that should permeate our services and provoke our response of worship (153).

MATTERS TO CRITIQUE

Yet for all of these strengths and insights, there are a few significant matters to critique.

Approach to "Spiritual Formation"

First, I can't quite endorse the authors' overall approach to what they call spiritual formation.

For all the ways it offers a decisive improvement upon contemporary consumerism, the authors' vision of spiritual formation is still too individualistic. That is, it fails to give the corporate life of the church its proper role in forming the character of Christians.

For instance, they write, "For the first few years after Donner we were laser focused on the individual's journey toward Christlikeness" (168). And then they unpack how that focus led them to encourage people to explore their past, their need for growth, and the roots of lust, anger, worry, and so on. In order to facilitate this, "We taught on solitude, silence, and spending time alone with God" (168).

Now, there's little to argue with in this emphasis except what's missing: this kind of spirituality gives the impression that Christian growth happens strictly between me and God, that it's a purely individual matter. I go into seclusion to practice the spiritual disciplines, and then I gather with other Christians for teaching, worship, and service, which supplements what I do in private.

But the New Testament picture of discipleship portrays individual and corporate growth as fundamentally interconnected (Eph. 4:11-16). The primary way that we mature as Christians is through the life of the church. The members help the body grow—which means helping each other grow. We are built up as we build others up. Christian growth is fundamentally a team effort.

Carlson and Lueken clearly grasp this on one level, as their discussion of corporate worship as character formation demonstrates. Further, the authors explain that they recognized the individualistic tendencies of their new approach and have sought to correct them. But it seems that this biblical insight has yet to work its way through their entire spiritual formation program.

Second, the authors draw on spiritual practices that are, at best, not grounded in and informed by a robust theology of the gospel. For instance, they describe how they were pivotally influenced by works by a number of Roman Catholic mystics, such as St. John of the Cross and Teresa of Ávila (32). And the chapter on worship begins by narrating a five-day retreat of silence and solitude at a monastery (147 ff.). At the very least, some of the spiritual disciplines modeled and advocated here fail to find scriptural warrant in either command or example. Further, practically speaking, many of these recommended practices are divorced from God's Word, and seem to treat silent contemplation as a means of grace apart from any biblical content.

The problem is, spirituality can't be disconnected from theology. How we grow as Christians must be rooted in what God has done for us in Christ, as revealed in Scripture.

Fuzzy Ecclesiology

A second problem is a somewhat fuzzy ecclesiology. The biggest issue here is that, for all their efforts to define discipleship in biblical terms, the authors explicitly want to include people in the church who do not understand or intend to live according to those terms.

For example, they write that while the church obviously includes those who understand what it means to follow Jesus, “it’s also those who don’t understand and really don’t care” (100). And they argue that while “[a] sect is composed of those who understand the requirements and expectations, and have agreed to live by them” (106), the church is “not a sect but an eclectic community of diverse people with varying degrees of commitment and interest in following Jesus and pursuing spiritual formation” (107).

The authors do affirm our need to be accountable to others, to submit to authority, and to be in community with people different from us (110). But I’m afraid that they fail to distinguish between those whom the church should welcome as friends and seekers while withholding formal fellowship, and those whom the church should recognize as members.

Yes, Christians are imperfect. Yes, our affections wander and flag. Yes, our obedience is inconsistent and our knowledge is all too partial. But the church still has to draw a line somewhere to separate those who are in and those who are out (1 Cor. 5:12; Matt. 18:17). And it doesn’t help anyone to act as if someone can be a Christian—which is what their inclusion in the church implies—if they don’t understand what it means to follow Jesus, and don’t intend to live in that way.

If a church can’t say what a Christian isn’t, it can’t very well say what a Christian is. And if a church deliberately includes people whose lives bear little resemblance to Jesus’ teaching, and who don’t intend to live as disciples of Jesus, then it constantly undermines its own efforts to call people into that life of discipleship.

CONCLUSION

There’s plenty more that could be said about this thoughtful book. I deeply appreciate the authors’ humility, candor, pastoral insight, keen critiques of consumer-driven ministry, focus on discipleship, and insights into how worship shapes character. Yet I can’t commend all the materials they’re building with, nor fully align with their vision of the church (or their articulation of the “gospel of the kingdom,” but that’s for another day).

Still, I’m grateful for the story these brothers have told, and for the work they have done. I hope that their example will encourage the pastors who happen to read the book to look for other ways of doing church than the dominant seeker paradigm. And I hope that those who do will turn not to the desert fathers or Thomas Merton, but to Scripture, and to others who have reflected more thoroughly on Scripture’s teaching about spirituality and the church. For example, dig into Calvin’s *Institutes* and commentaries, or most anything by the English Puritans; or more recently Donald Whitney’s work on spiritual disciplines, Peter Adam’s book *Hearing God’s Words*, or Jonathan Leeman’s *Reverberation*.

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