

C H A P T E R

The Need for Church Revitalization

Church-Planting or Church Revitalization?

The people of God need a biblical strategy for church revitalization because so many of us are or will be part of a body that is in need of it. Consider the following information:

- About 95 percent of all churches in North America average one hundred people or fewer at worship.¹
- Over 80 percent of established American churches are either on a plateau or in decline.²
- Every year 3,500 to 4,000 churches die in this country.³

As Lyle Schaller writes, “An average of fifty to sixty congregations in American Protestantism choose to dissolve every

week compared to perhaps five to ten that are able and willing to redefine their role.”⁴ And Kirk Hadaway, church-growth research specialist with the Southern Baptist Convention, writes: “The typical church in almost any American denomination is either on a plateau or declining in membership and participation. Rapid growth is atypical, and among older congregations the pattern is even more pronounced—plateau and decline are the rule; growth is the rare exception.”⁵

My denomination, the Presbyterian Church in America, is considered one of the fastest-growing groups in our nation. You can see why when you look at our statistics, which indicate, for example, that twenty-eight new churches were established in the PCA during a recent year. That is more per capita than most other denominations. But if you look further, you will also find that in the same year, twenty-four churches were “dissolved,” or closed. So we could claim a net growth of only four churches during that particular year. And if that is the case with one of the fastest-growing groups in America, you can imagine the struggles facing many of the others!

I suggest that it is not inevitable that so many churches find themselves sick or dying. The principles discussed in this book will help leaders and members in those churches to rekindle the flames of godly growth in their bodies. And they will also serve as *preventive* measures for currently healthy churches, to keep them from the decline that will inevitably overtake them unless they experience the continuing grace of renewal. But before we begin learning about the cure, we should first diagnose the disease.

SYMPTOMS OF A SICK CHURCH

What happens when a church is plateaued, stagnant, dying, or declining? Or what problems do you want to *avoid* in order

to keep a church from sliding down the path to ineffectiveness and regret? Falling numbers in attendance and finances are often a sign of sickness, of course. But I have observed other, less obvious symptoms in churches that need a ministry of revitalization.

A Focus on Programs

Dying churches tend to be focused on programs. Like a gambler looking for a winning ticket, they search for a program that will “turn their church around.” They are pinning their hope for success on the latest organized ministry or prepackaged church-growth plan, and they evaluate the health of the church by the number and impressiveness of such programs. In fact, I wouldn’t be surprised if some people read this book expecting to find just that—a new program to implement in their church. But they will be disappointed because this book is not about a *program* that you can use to turn your church around. Rather, this book contains *principles* that the Lord has designed and will use to bring more life to the body as He chooses to do so in His sovereign plan.

The difference is important because when a program succeeds, it is likely to be credited to the efficiency of the plan or the cleverness of its author. And when one fails, we tend to run off to find the next program, in the hope that it will work better. But when we experience health and growth through the principles that God has provided in His Word, all glory goes to Him alone. And if those principles don’t seem to “work,” we know it is not God’s fault; so we turn back to the Scriptures to find out what we need to understand and do better. As we will discuss more fully in the next chapter, we should not be looking for something new as a model for

revitalization, but should be learning more about the model that God has already given to us in His Word.

Nostalgia and Tradition

Dying churches are often living in the past. In fact, many times a pastor is not actually called to a church with the hope of moving it forward, as should be the case. Rather, the people are hoping that he will move the church *backward*, to recapture the “glory days.” Remembering a church’s past is important—we will learn more about that in chapter 3—but there is a big difference between remembering the past and living in it.

A few years ago I was asked to visit a church in Louisiana, to give the leaders some counsel about their struggling ministry. At a break in our meeting, one of the deacons walked me down a hallway lined with portraits of all the former pastors. There were quite a few along this “hall of fame,” because the church had been in existence since the 1700s. The deacon made comments about many of the men as we walked along, but when we came to a particular man, he stopped in his tracks and stood there in reverent silence. And when he did speak, he did so in hushed tones. The pastor in the picture had come to the church in the mid-twentieth century and had remained there for twenty-five years. It soon became clear to me that this spot in the hall represented the “glory days” of the church, when it had been led by *the* pastor. I half expected to see candles on each side of his picture, with an eternal flame burning underneath!

As I talked with the leaders at that church, I realized that everything that happened now was being judged by what had happened back then. So I eventually asked them, “If everything was so great back then, why are y’all in the shape you’re in now?” I encouraged them to follow the principle in Philippians

3:13, where Paul says that he is “forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead.” The past is important and should be celebrated, as we will discuss more fully in the third chapter. But we need to realize that the pleasant river of nostalgia can swell into a sweeping current that takes the church backward and downward to destruction.

An overemphasis on tradition is another way that the past can haunt a church. At Pinelands Church, for instance, I found a group of not eighty people trying to uphold traditions begun when the church was nine hundred strong. You could shoot a cannon filled with grapeshot from front to back and not hit a single person during the morning worship service. Yet some wanted to go to four services on Sunday morning. Why? Because four services were symbolic of the glory days! The logic? Four services would recapture those days. I patiently tried to explain that it wasn’t four services that had brought the people. It was growth that necessitated the four services.

Personality Dependence

Dying churches tend to rely on certain personality types, whether or not they have such people in the church. If they have a strong leader, they may look to him (or her) to do all the work or make all the decisions.

If they are looking for a pastor, on the other hand, they may think that only one type of person can lead them into growth. I remember talking to one pulpit committee whose members told me, “We could solve all our problems if you could find us a good preacher who has a high-D personality.” By this they meant an extroverted man who was a “real aggressive leader.” But they were under the misconception that God uses only one type of personality in His work of church leadership.

I asked them whether they had ever met Frank Barker, who is now the pastor emeritus of Briarwood Presbyterian Church in Birmingham, Alabama, where I am currently serving as senior pastor. Frank was the founding pastor and led the church for forty years, during which time it was very successful by any standard. But he is hardly an extrovert or a “high-D” personality. Two stories illustrate that fact. First, a man I know once sat for a while in the church library talking to a man that he guessed was the church sexton, only to find out that it was Frank Barker. And one of his staff members once decided to test a little theory when he accompanied Frank on a two-hour drive to Atlanta. He decided that he would say nothing at all, but simply wait to see how long it would take Frank to initiate a conversation. Two hours later, Frank finally said, “Is this the city limits?” Yet this quiet, unassuming man led a very successful church for many years.

D. James Kennedy is another example of an effective church leader who was definitely not an extrovert. And there are many others. So be careful not to fall into the trap of thinking that God can work only through certain personality types. He has granted to the church a wide variety of gifts, and He has planned to use a wide variety of people in the building of His kingdom (cf. 1 Cor. 12:4–6).

A Maintenance Mentality

Remember the old “Looney Toons” cartoons and Wile E. Coyote, who would chase Road Runner off a cliff and then realize he was dangling in midair above certain death? Wile E. would grab the edge of the cliff and hang on until his fingers eventually slipped and he became a brown pancake on the canyon floor. That is the way a lot of churches look at ministry today. “Let’s just hold on,” they are thinking. “Hopefully,

we can replace the number of people we lost last year,” they say, or “We will be lucky if we can meet our budget.” They do actually have a “vision” for ministry, but the vision is “hang on and hold on.” It is a maintenance mentality, whereby they are merely polishing a *monument*, rather than building a *movement* of God’s grace. They are on a life-support system, rather than on a life-saving mission. And their only hopes and dreams are to keep the doors open, rather than to bring a harvest of souls through those doors.

Excuses and a “Victim” Mind-Set

Another attitude that seems to pervade sick and dying churches is this one: “It will never work here because” The leaders and members already have a well-rehearsed list of reasons why a new ministry idea will not be effective. Two classics are “We’ve tried that before” and “It will cost too much,” but others might be “The neighborhood has changed,” “Our building is in the wrong place,” and “This is a tough, unchurched community.” The church has become like a sports team that has lost every game for ten years and already has a list of excuses for the defeats it expects in the upcoming season.

The assumption underlying those excuses is that the church is a *victim* of some outside factor, which keeps it from being greatly used of God. Whether it is a lack of money, a tough location, or whatever, there is a subtle, dangerous mentality that the church is doomed to mediocrity or failure because of its circumstances. Such a church has no real hope because it is allowing itself to be dominated by negative circumstances—a problem that the Bible says we must work hard to avoid (cf. James 1:2–4). In fact, the Scripture teaches us that even our *weaknesses* provide an opportunity for God to work in and

through us. Consider what the apostle Paul says in 2 Corinthians 12:8–10:

Three times I pleaded with the Lord about this, that it should leave me. But he said to me, “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.” Therefore, I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me. For the sake of Christ, then, I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities. For when I am weak, then I am strong.

The believers in Uganda, Africa, illustrate this point well. I have been privileged to minister the gospel during six trips to that country, but I will never forget my first one. It was in the mid-1980s, not long after Idi Amin’s war for power and reign of terror had left the nation and its people in unspeakable misery. Among the casualties of that era were many thousands of believers in Christ who were tortured and killed for their faith. While I was there on that first trip, in fact, the new regime uncovered the skeletons of five hundred Christians that had been used as filler and paved over to make a road. Inflation in the economy of Uganda at that time was between 600 and 800 percent, and the people lived under martial law with the constant fear of a new war or the rise of a new dictator who might rape their land.

But there was (and still is, in fact) a great movement of God taking place in and through the churches of Uganda. I remember being asked to preach one day in a bombed-out cathedral, then being asked to preach again after I was finished. And then I was asked to preach again! I said to them, “You want me to preach more? I’ve already done it twice.” And through the interpreter they answered, “Yes, please; we have walked a

long way today.” I had to frantically flip through my Bible to find something to teach them because they were so eager to hear the Word of God! And they were reaching out to their friends, also—even during my brief visits, I saw hundreds of people come to Christ.

So even in the midst of great persecution and difficulty, the churches in Uganda were thriving. They did not view themselves as hopeless victims, or use their circumstances as an excuse for defeat. In the same way, many churches in our land need to realize that God is able to bring them new life, no matter how dim their prospects may seem at the present.

Making excuses is so easy and can become such a habit that we can fall into self-deception and lose touch with reality. I once talked with the leaders of a church who wanted to sell their building and move to another area because, they said, “We just can’t minister here anymore.” Their reason was that the community had changed over the years. “We used to be able to reach the community because it was people like us, but now it is all Hispanic.” I asked them how they knew that, and they told me that a Spanish-speaking church was renting their building on Sunday afternoons, and it had a growing attendance of over four hundred people. The church that owned the building, on the other hand, had only about forty people attending on Sunday morning.

We checked the census records, however, and found out that the community around the church was actually 88 percent Anglo and less than 12 percent Hispanic! So I told the church, “I have some good news and some bad news for you. The good news is that 88 percent of the people around you speak the same language you do, so you don’t have to move. The bad news is that the church renting from you is reaching the other 12 percent and filling the building every Sunday

afternoon.” I suggested to them that at this point, they should be less concerned about moving, and more concerned about what they might be doing wrong and what they could do right in order to reach people with the gospel. And I hoped that their sense of responsibility to do so would be greater now that their excuse had been removed.

A Bad Reputation in the Community

Another symptom of a dying church is its perception by others around it. The longer a church follows a pattern of decline, the worse its public image and reputation become. The community at large and the neighboring churches form opinions about the church’s condition. The people who do the most damage in this regard are often the ones who have left the church and gone elsewhere. They find it difficult not to share their “inside” information and “horror stories” about the decline of the church, the lack of resources in the congregation, or their mistreatment by people in the body. In fact, as a pastor, I have often discovered people who will not listen to a word I say because of the damaging reports they have heard about the church from former members. And as the years go on, the list of evil rumors becomes longer, and the task of revitalization grows harder.

Sometimes the symptoms of decline can appear *outside* your church before they are even noticed inside. Leaders and members in a church may think that everything is proceeding wonderfully, but the real tale may be told in the world around it, and even in other churches. So I’ve suggested that pastors and other leaders in a church regularly ask questions about their congregation when they talk to people on the outside. Here are two good ones: “What have you heard about our church? And how do you think the community perceives us?”

When standing in line at the grocery store, ask the person next to you, “Have you ever heard of [your church’s name]? What do you make of it? Would you go there?” Then listen carefully. Such boldness takes courage, but the results can be revealing. Remember that reputation is not what we print on our church bulletins, but what people actually think of us!

Distraction from the Gospel

This final symptom of sickness in a church is the worst one of all. Churches that have grown ineffective in reaching the world around them have often done so because they have lost sight of the *centrality* of God’s grace. Something else has become more important than living according to the gospel and sharing it with people who need to be saved. Perhaps the priority has fallen on certain doctrinal distinctives, on the physical condition of their buildings, or on a particular method of education. Whatever the emphasis may be, it will be counterproductive to God’s work if it is allowed to usurp the rightful place of the gospel as the center of all we do as the people of God.

We will discuss the priority of the gospel much more fully in chapter 5. But if your church has slipped in this regard, or is manifesting any of the other symptoms of decline that I have mentioned, it is in need of revitalization. And if your church has not yet been afflicted with these problems, praise God! But realize that it could succumb to them at any time if the principles that we will learn are not practiced for the glory of God.

THE PRIVILEGES OF CHURCH REVITALIZATION

Church revitalization is important because so many churches are dead and dying, and because all healthy churches

run the risk of becoming diseased and developing the symptoms of decline that we have discussed. But I want to suggest a number of *positive* reasons why we should pray and work for church revitalization today. These should encourage those who are in this ministry already, and they may also motivate others to enter it, as the Lord leads them.

The Heart of the Shepherd

If a particular church is dying, the conventional wisdom in some circles is that it should be closed down and perhaps “restarted” somewhere else. There is certainly a time and place for that approach, but I suggest that in most cases a ministry of church revitalization is closer to the heart of our Lord. He is, after all, the Great Shepherd:

What do you think? If a man has a hundred sheep and one of them has gone astray, does he not leave the ninety-nine on the mountains and go in search of the one that went astray? And if he finds it, truly, I say to you, he rejoices over it more than over the ninety-nine that never went astray. So it is not the will of my Father who is in heaven that one of these little ones should perish. (Matt. 18:12–14)

Those words of our Lord Jesus were directed primarily at individuals (cf. vv. 15–20), but they have an application to churches as well. Look, for instance, at how our Savior pleads with the troubled churches in Revelation 2–3. Yes, there comes a time when the lampstand has to be removed, or when “Icha-bod” must be written on the door of the church—but before that, the Lord has exhorted the leaders and the congregation to repent and preach and pray for revival (cf. Rev. 3:18–20). So I think that when a pastor, a supporting church, or a denomination comes alongside a church in need of revitalization,

this action reflects the heart of God. And when such a church is dissolved too soon, when there is still hope for change and growth, this may grieve the One who leaves the ninety-nine to seek the stray.

The Heart of the Apostle

In Acts 13, Paul and Barnabas were sent out from the church at Antioch on what has become known as Paul's first missionary journey. They traveled throughout Asia Minor with a clear philosophy of ministry:

- Gospel evangelism and discipleship;
- Gospel church-planting;
- Gospel deeds of love, mercy, and justice; and
- Gospel leaders developed and deployed.

In Acts 15, Paul was ready for another round, so he set off on the second missionary journey. Interestingly, the apostle did not simply say, "Let's go find new places to spread the gospel." Rather, he said, "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). The apostle Paul renewed his commitment to all the elements of the philosophy of ministry mentioned above, and now he added to them a fifth objective:

- Gospel church revitalization.

Acts 15:41 says that "he went through Syria and Cilicia, *strengthening the churches.*" And when he began his third missionary journey, as Acts 18:23 says, "he departed and went from one place to the next through the region of Galatia and Phrygia, *strengthening all the disciples.*" If you look at a map of

Paul's third trip, in the back of your Bible, you will see that it follows the path of the second trip almost exactly.

So the Great Commission work of the apostle Paul was not just a ministry to unreached places and people, but also a ministry of revitalization. We know that some of these churches were struggling with great difficulties even during Paul's lifetime (just look at his letters to the Galatians and the Corinthians!). Therefore, a major part of Paul's ministry was devoted to bringing declining churches from embers to a flame!

This should be a great encouragement to pastors and others who find themselves in a ministry that needs a lot of help. If some of the churches started by the great apostle were in need of revitalization within a few years, why should we be surprised when this happens today? If Paul's churches suffered from decline, we should not be ashamed or reluctant to admit that ours are hurting, too. And when we have the privilege of working with such a church, we should be excited about being involved in this truly apostolic ministry!

Church-Planting or Church Revitalization?

The ministry of starting new churches is a rewarding one, but I suggest that the ministry of revitalizing existing churches is sometimes even more rewarding. Many would say that church-planting is easier to do, especially for young pastors, but I do not think that is necessarily true, for several reasons.

Consider the people with whom you will be working. Don McNair's book *The Birth, Care, and Feeding of the Local Church* contains the fruit of his extensive study of, and experience in, church-planting.⁶ McNair suggests that when a pastor starts a church, it is likely that after three years, 90 percent of the people who attended at the beginning will no longer be

there. Or the pastor himself will be gone. I realize that there are many exceptions to this rule, but in my experience I would have to agree that it is indeed generally true. Many of the people who come to a new church *do* end up leaving before too long, perhaps because they couldn't get along anywhere else, and they brought the same problems along with them. Or perhaps they were drawn to the new church in the hope that it would become what they wanted a church to be, and they grew disappointed when it did not develop in the direction in which they expected it to go.

Most church plants do not attract many people who are mature believers with a missionary zeal, eager to sacrifice themselves to advance the kingdom of God. On the contrary, those who are zealous tend to be zealous about other matters. For instance, they think they know "what a church should be," and the leaders back at their former church stood in the way, so they want to hook up with this smaller group of people so that they can have more control over what happens. Or maybe they are just upset with what was happening at another church, and they decide to "try this one out." Or maybe they simply like the idea that it is "something new," and when it is not so new anymore, they lose interest. All this adds up to the fact that in church-planting, a typical result will be that about 10 percent of the initial group will remain, but the other 90 percent will eventually end up moving on to another church.

When a pastor receives a call to a church in need of revitalization, however, he inherits a group of people who have stayed with that church through thick and thin. Their weaknesses have probably contributed to its decline, and they may be clinging to dead tradition, but at least they are not "consumers" who will move away for no good reason. In addition, they probably do not have varying ideas about what the church should

be, as is often the case in church-planting. The people who have stayed with a church during its decline are committed to that ministry in that location. And although such people will certainly present many challenges of their own, I believe that they can be renewed in their faith and greatly used by God through the principles discussed in this book.

Church revitalization, in many cases, also has the advantage of existing resources. You don't have to worry about buying a property—you just have to worry about reaching the people around it. You don't have to build a building—you just have to fill up the one you already have. In church-planting, on the other hand, the leaders can be heavily distracted for years by the hard work and headaches of obtaining such resources. When Steve Brown is asked what a pastor should do when the church starts a building project, he usually says, "Resign!" And my guess is that he's only half kidding. Nothing can chew up and spit out pastors faster than a building project!

So not only does the ministry of church revitalization reflect the heart of God and of Paul, but when it is carried out according to the Word of God, it is also a practical and effective way to meet the current needs of the body of Christ in our land. And I believe this type of ministry could become a catalyst for the large-scale revival that we desperately need in America.

The Global Opportunity

The priority and privilege of church revitalization extends far beyond our borders, however, to many other places around the world.

For example, there is a denomination in Egypt called the Evangelical Presbyterian Church, which was planted during the

nineteenth century, as I understand, by Scots-Irish Presbyterians. Today there are about 650 licensed and approved Evangelical Presbyterian churches in Egypt, many with buildings that they own. The last statistics that I saw, however, indicated that only 250 of them have pastors. Only a few of them are growing. So here is a tremendous opportunity to have a major impact on an entire country and an entire culture through church revitalization! We do not have to “sneak in” any Bibles, and we do not have to come in under cover. The Egyptian government allows these churches to function.

Can you imagine what would happen if 650 churches came alive in Egypt? That would be church revitalization not only on a local scale, but also on a national and even *historical* scale! I say that because long ago this Muslim country was actually one of the centers of Christianity. The city of Alexandria, at the mouth of the Nile River, was the location of the greatest theological library in the ancient world. Muslim armies overran Christian North Africa many years ago, but our Lord is able to win back those nations for Himself with the weapons of the Spirit and the power of the gospel. Perhaps He will do it through the revitalization of the many churches that already exist there.

I and some other pastors have been holding conferences on church revitalization here in America since 1992, and in recent years we have seen a wave of interest in this ministry from people in other lands. We now have opportunities to conduct Embers to a Flame conferences in Australia, New Zealand, Korea, Japan, Uganda, South Africa, Scotland, Ireland, England, Romania, and France. And the list is growing. We find ourselves in a time similar to that of Paul’s second missionary journey. Gospel work has spread throughout the world, and now it is time not only to continue planting churches

through evangelism and discipleship, but also to engage in gospel church revitalization. May God help us to make use of this tremendous opportunity!

So God is working to plant churches in America and overseas, but He is also doing great things through the ministry of church revitalization. I am convinced that the best is yet to come, and that this type of ministry will become an increasingly important part of any strategy for home and foreign missions. If God blesses you with the privilege of playing a part in the revitalization of a church, He can then give you the opportunity, which I myself have enjoyed, of helping others along the same path, throughout our nation and the world.

For me, it all began when I arrived at that dying church I described in the introduction. After a few weeks there, I began to wonder whether the “experts” were right—that the church should be closed down and moved to greener pastures. I had an appreciation for the zeal of the church-growth authors and their literature, but intuitively I wasn’t convinced. I came to believe that this situation was a test for me, like the one Abraham faced when he was told to offer up his son Isaac. Would I continue in obedience to the call of God, despite the conflicts outside and the confusion within? The Bible says that Abraham “considered that God was able even to raise him from the dead” (Heb. 11:19), and I likewise believed that He is able to heal and renew a dying church. So I settled in and searched the Scriptures for anything I could find that related to church revitalization.

And I found more than I had ever dreamed. Yes, the apostle Paul returned to revitalize the churches that he had planted, but Christ Himself exemplified that the Good Shepherd not only goes after a wandering sheep, but also goes after a wandering *flock* of sheep, as illustrated by the pursuit of the wayward

dying churches—comprising four of the seven churches in the book of Revelation. But what was really interesting was how the apostle Paul had commissioned Titus on a ministry of church revitalization in Crete (i.e., “I left you in Crete, so that you might put what remained into order,” Titus 1:5) and Timothy on a ministry of church revitalization to Ephesus. I found Ephesus to be a specific case study of a church that had once been great, but found itself declining and heading for destruction! It seemed that God had put this case study in the Bible just to help me—and anyone else wishing to see a church renewed by His grace. That divine plan for revitalization is the subject of the next chapter.

Q U E S T I O N S

1. Discuss each of the symptoms of a sick church, and consider whether they apply to your own church. Why or why not?
2. In what ways could you address each of these problems in your church?
3. What are some of the positive opportunities of being involved in a church that needs revitalization? How does this encourage you in your personal ministry?