



## Foreword

Brian Croft has done us a great service. How? He has thoughtfully and I am sure prayerfully produced an inspirational, instructive and insightful volume on how to minister effectively to churches that are dying, stagnant or declining—specifically how to implement a ministry of church revitalization that is not only biblical but is also solution oriented. So at Brian's invitation here are a few paragraphs designed to encourage you as to how important and valuable the contents which fill every page of this book are. Furthermore this book read with a teachable spirit has the potential to become a life-changing and ministry-renovating encounter.

The statistics concerning the status of the Christian church in North America are not encouraging. In fact they are starkly discouraging. Why? Because an honest appraisal reveals that the church in North America is in a sustained statistical free fall. There are multiple evidences. Let me share two of them. The first statistical evidence is the unmistakable fact that the number of local churches in North America is diminishing. To be specific, if you take the number of churches in existence at the beginning of the year, add the number of churches that were planted throughout the





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year and then subtract the number of churches that closed that year, the result is an astonishing net loss of churches. Specifically there has been an average net loss of 3,500 churches each year over the last twenty-plus years. The second statistic is that of the remaining churches, 88 to 91 per cent of them are dying.

At the moment our strategic response to this phenomenon is the call to plant more churches. While church planting is essential to the strategy of fulfilling the Great Commission as evidenced in the New Testament, the strategy isn't working today. Why? Let me suggest it isn't working because there is another strategy revealed in the New Testament and employed by the Apostles that is being neglected. That strategy is an intentional commitment to church revitalization which, if employed, would result in fewer churches closing. The plain fact is that the Bible not only affirms church planting, it also affirms church revitalization. So here are three biblical church revitalization principles to initiate your journey through this book, which intentionally and effectively promotes the strategy of church revitalization.

### **1) The objective is church health not church growth**

Whether it is church planting or church revitalization, the objective is not statistical growth. The objective is church health. Certainly statistical growth is a desired consequence—more churches, more conversions, more disciple-makers, etc. But our ministry objective in church planting or church revitalization is not to be 'big' nor is it to be 'small'. We must dismiss both the notion that 'big defines success' or that 'small defines faithful'. Why? Success is not the verdict if a church is 'five miles wide and one inch deep' nor is faithfulness assured in a church that is 'one inch wide and five miles deep'. A better idea and more importantly a biblical objective would be a church 'body' that is spiritually healthy and increasingly marked as both 'deep and wide'.

### **2) Statistical growth is not the objective of church revitalization but it is an expected consequence**

*And the word of God continued to increase, and the number of the disciples multiplied greatly in Jerusalem, and a great many of the priests became obedient to the faith. (Acts 6:7 ESV)*





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In Acts 6:7 spiritual vitality is described as the *‘Word of the Lord grew’*. Spiritual vitality then produces functional growth in the life of the church evidenced by prayer, worship, evangelism, disciple-making, etc. Functional growth normally leads to statistical growth – *‘the numbers increased’*. So then what is the objective? The objective of church revitalization is simply yet profoundly a God-glorifying, Christ-centered, Holy-Spirit empowered, Gospel-driven and Bible-shaped church expanding, not by church growth techniques but, by an intentional commitment to a Gospel disciple-making ministry as profiled in the church of Jerusalem in Acts 2:42-47 (ESV):

*And they devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. And awe came upon every soul, and many wonders and signs were being done through the apostles. And all who believed were together and had all things in common. And they were selling their possessions and belongings and distributing the proceeds to all, as any had need. And day by day, attending the temple together and breaking bread in their homes they received their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having favor with all the people. And the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved.*

### **3) Church revitalization is not simply a desirable strategy but when united to church planting it is the apostolic model to ‘turn the world upside down’ for the glory of God**

There are thirteen words recorded in Acts 17:6 (ESV) that I would love to hear one more time. A pagan opponent of the Gospel from the continent of Europe (less than twenty-five years after the ascension of Jesus) uttered them as an invective of abject frustration— ‘these people who have turned the world upside down have come here also.’

We know ‘who’ *turned the world upside down*—the Holy Spirit through the body of Christ. We know ‘what’ *turned the world upside down*—the power of the Gospel. But what ought to also capture our attention as we examine the expansion of the Kingdom from Jerusalem to Judea and Samaria and to the world is ‘how’ they *turned*

*the world upside down.* The answer to that question is unmistakable if we examine the documented ministry of the Apostle Paul and his team as they went city to city in the first missionary trip gloriously revealed in the book of Acts.

The Acts 13–15 record of the first missionary trip reveals a repeated ministry formula. As the Apostolic team entered the city they would engage in Gospel evangelism and disciple-making. Next they would plant a Gospel church in the city. Then they would respond to prevailing needs in the city with Gospel deeds of love and mercy. Finally they would ensure the well-being of the new church by appointing Gospel leaders. If that was not possible they would leave a portion of the team behind until indigenous leaders could be installed, since the health and vitality of a local church is directly related to the health and vitality of its leadership. After the first General Assembly of the burgeoning New Testament church the Apostle Paul in conversation with his mentor and friend Barnabas outlined his proposed agenda for a second missionary journey in Acts 15 and 16. Interestingly the agenda for the second missionary journey was the same as the first missionary journey except for one significant addition—church revitalization:

*Let's return and visit the brothers in every city where we proclaimed the Word of the Lord and see how they are ... He went through Syria and Cilicia 'strengthening' the churches ... So the churches were strengthened in the faith and they increased in numbers daily* (ESV).

The result of the second missionary journey is summed up in Acts 17 (ESV) as 'turning the world upside down'. This was the result of God's Providence leading the Apostolic team to do on the second missionary journey what they did on the first missionary journey—Gospel evangelism and disciple-making; Gospel church planting; Gospel deeds of love and mercy and developing Gospel leaders, except for one additive. On the second journey they introduced Gospel church revitalization as they 'strengthened the churches' planted on the first missionary journey.

In a word, by embracing the world-shaking Apostolic model local churches and denominations would not only have an intentional



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commitment to planting Gospel-healthy churches but will also be intentionally committed to the ministry of revitalizing churches. That would result in an increased number of church plants because, not only would we be closing fewer churches, we would now have more Gospel-healthy mother churches producing Gospel-healthy daughter churches instead of today's church planting, which in many cases is simply subdividing unhealthy churches. Enjoy the content in this book but even more importantly employ the content of this book and by God's grace we could once again hear ... 'these men who have turned the world upside down have come here also' (Acts 17:6 esv).

For Christ, the Gospel and His Church

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## Introduction

The numbers are staggering. Experts estimate that approximately 1,000 local churches close their doors every year. What is even more disheartening about this statistic is that number only reflects churches with the Southern Baptist Convention (SBC)—my denomination.<sup>1</sup> Imagine how that number grows if you added the number of closing local churches from other established denominations, which some assert are between 3,500 and 4,000 churches annually.<sup>2</sup> Needless to say, we have an epidemic on our hands. Although God continues in part to build His church through church planting, churches are not being planted and lasting near the rate of those that permanently shut their doors each year.

It is good and right to be burdened by the reality of the extinguishing of once thriving local churches that previously were gospel lights in their communities. Pastors are quitting. Beautiful,

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1. R. Albert Mohler Jr. (ed.), *Guide To Church Revitalization*. (Louisville: SBTS Press 2015), p. 13.
  2. Ed Stetzer and Mike Dodson, *Comeback Churches: How 300 Churches Turned Around and Yours Can Too* (Nashville: B&H 2007), p. 19.



historic church buildings are being auctioned to the highest bidder. No doubt the burden that many who love Christ's bride feel, is a burden we too should feel. The weight of this burden has resulted in an unprecedented movement to do something about these dying churches. Emerging in a variety of denominations, it has been labeled, 'Church Revitalization' and/or 'Church Replanting'.

Having engaged in my own pastoral work of church revitalization prior to the inception of this movement and having observed this movement during that time, I have noticed two commonly unhelpful approaches to this undertaking: the *Pragmatist* and the *Purist*.

### **The Pragmatist**

The pragmatist seeks to revive and grow a dying church through clever gimmicks and appealing programs that work to bring about specific, desired results. These results usually are numerically based, driven by robust evangelistic efforts that rely heavily on man's abilities and gifts. Although the Bible and God's Spirit are often given verbal acknowledgement and have a place in the mix, the desired physical and numeric results become the chief end and driving purpose of the work and the power of revitalization ultimately is found in the cleverness of man. Consequently, results and broad appeal become more important than faithfulness to a specific design God may have for His church that might not produce the same numeric results. To the pragmatist, the desired numeric result becomes the end that justifies embracing whatever means are necessary to accomplish it.

### **The Purist**

The purist approaches the task of church revitalization from a strict adherence to biblical principles based on the centrality of God's word. This frequently manifests itself in ways such as an extremely narrow view of biblical forms of worship. While we all must strive for a biblical approach, there is also a very subtle danger lurking in the background of this approach that can become a major pitfall, and it hides in the heart motives of the revitalizing pastor. If not careful, the pastor's convictions can almost imperceptibly shift from being a conviction about the centrality of God's word to become a conviction not to be like the pragmatist. Consequently, the purist celebrates being anti-appeal



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and anti-creative, and pridefully shuns anything that might appear as entertainment, or consumeristic and worldly. The purist perceives himself as firmly standing on the promises of the power of the word of God to breathe revitalizing life into a congregation. But in reality he is merely squatting on a rigid legalism, intentionally making the church somewhat unappealing in order to discern who indeed is committed to God, His word, His people, and His church.

### **A Biblical Approach**

There is a balanced, biblical approach to the work of revitalization that is both more effective as well as more faithful to God's design for the local church. This method rests its full weight on the truth that God's spirit working through His word is the only way to bring true lasting spiritual life to a local church. And yet it also values the truth that it is good and right for the bride of Christ to look beautiful and appealing to God's people and even to intrigue those who are hostile to Christ in the world. This approach incorporates both the deep conviction that God's power by His Spirit and word does the work and the fact that God also uses creativity, passion, unique gifts, and the zeal of His leaders and people to breathe life and build His church.

This biblical approach advocates that the local church *should* be appealing, but for specific scriptural reasons: passionate biblical preaching, loving sacrificial fellowship, practical gospel application, zealous soul care, intentional evangelism, and authentic Christ-likeness—to name a few. This method's goal is to see new life and growth come to a local church, but not at the expense of a faithful pursuit of God's design for the local church. Church health according to God's biblical design becomes the ultimate goal, not numbers. God's power is found in Him building His church the way He wants to build His church; it is not defined by any worldly success.

It is this more biblical approach that I wish to advocate in this book. The details of this method are described in three main sections: Church Revitalization being Defined, Diagnosed, and Done:

- **Defined:** This section explains this approach, highlighting why God's word through His Spirit is not only the power of God that brings revitalization, but is also our detailed



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guidebook to know how best to approach this difficult yet noble task as a pastor.

- **Diagnosed:** This section highlights five key biblical areas that consistently mark the core issues of most churches that need to be addressed to experience new life. All five areas are identified and evaluated, then viewed through a biblical lens to help a pastor know how to identify the dysfunction in these areas in his own church and consider biblical solutions.
- **Done:** This section shares the narrative of my ten year revitalization journey at my current church and the hard, painful lessons I learned in the process. This is meant to be a moving, redemptive story of God's power and grace in me and my church that happened as a result of applying the biblical approach that is advocated in this book.

My deep conviction for this method comes from engaging in this work of church revitalization for many years in several areas. First, working as a pastor for over twenty years. The church, of which I went to be the Senior Pastor in 2003, had experienced over three decades of conflict and decline and was approximately two to three years from closing its doors if nothing changed. All the gimmicks and clever methods had been tried and had failed. I knew I was not gifted enough to salvage this church in my own power. Only God could breathe life into something so far gone. By His sovereign grace, I watched Him do it.

Second, laboring as a trainer and mentor of pastors and aspiring ones. The most gifted and clever pastor is still too sinful, broken and weak to save a church under his own power. Men gifted for pastoral ministry need to be trained in a specific, unique way to be able to persevere in this difficult, unique, and noble work. This book is how I train and prepare men for this unique ministry who are in my local church, involved with Practical Shepherding<sup>3</sup>, as well as in the seminary where I serve.

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3. Practical Shepherding is an international non-profit ministry to serve pastors and church leaders who are laboring in the trenches of pastoral ministry. You can learn more about this ministry at [www.practicalshepherding.com](http://www.practicalshepherding.com).





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Third, serving as a consultant to hurting, dying churches. The methodology advocated in this book comes as a result of the undeniably consistent patterns of dysfunction in most every church I work with and what each church must experience to gain new life. God's design works and is the only way a dying, struggling church can experience lasting spiritual life.

Finally, passion for the gospel and Christ's church. It is the gospel that is the power of God unto salvation (Rom. 1:16). It is a stunning testimony of the power of God and the gospel when a healthy, vibrant local church with a spiritual life that is so present in God's people draws other followers of Jesus, and a hostile world looks with curiosity and wonder.

There is a unique and special power and testimony in not just a vibrant local church full of life, but an old historic one that had lost its way, was on life support, and into which God saw fit to breathe life once again. What better testimony that God is a God who raises the dead than watching it happen to dead churches all around the world? But make no mistake. God is the one who must do it. Only God's power is sufficient to accomplish it. Read this book and consider this biblical approach. Consider as the Holy Spirit balances God's mighty power at work in faithful, persistent, yet broken jars of clay to build His church and make Christ gloriously known.

