

A Biblical View of Church Revitalization

by MARSHALL FANT III

What comes to your mind when you hear the phrase “church revitalization”? Do you think of it as the next popular ministry? Or as a program replacing church planting? Or maybe you think of other “re” words like *refocus*, *realign*, *rebuild*, or *renew*. Perhaps it is better to ask, Why should we even be interested in church revitalization? Why not just let dying churches die and plant new ones? I propose to you that we should be interested in church revitalization because Jesus is.

Jesus’ Promise to Build His Church

Before we consider what the Bible says about church revitalization, we must first examine Jesus’ promise to build His church. Matthew 16:13–20 tells us that Jesus intentionally journeyed to Caesarea Philippi to give this promise. Caesarea Philippi is located about 30 miles north of the Sea of Galilee, where Jesus based His ministry. Caesarea Philippi was a Roman city with a pagan culture that worshiped the Greek god Pan. It would have been a striking location to make a promise about Christ’s church. Jesus intentionally took His disciples with Him.

The setting provided a teaching time for them. Others may have been with Jesus, but the passage emphasizes His disciples’ presence. Though these men had been with Jesus for about two and half years, they needed to grasp what was really important. Then Jesus intentionally asked, “Who do men say that I, the Son of Man, am?” (v. 13).

The first response was, “Some say John the Baptist, some Elijah, and others Jeremiah or one of the prophets” (v. 14). Jesus pressed them for their personal answers, not others’ opinions. Peter stepped up to His challenge and proclaimed, “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God” (v. 16). After two and half years of Jesus’ teaching, preaching, and living among these men, Peter got it. Peter passed the test. Jesus commended Peter for his answer: “Jesus answered and said to him, ‘Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jonah, for flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but My Father who is in heaven’” (v. 17). Jesus followed Peter’s answer with His promise to build His church: “And I also say to you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build My church, and the gates of Hades shall not prevail against it. And I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven” (vv. 18–19). Jesus promised that He Himself will build the church; He is not teaching that the church is built on Peter.

There are three acceptable interpretations of His statement

“on this rock I will build My church.” The first possibility is that He is teaching that the church would be built on Himself (1 Cor. 3:11). The second acceptable interpretation is that the church would be built on the apostles as a foundation, with Peter being one of the apostles (Eph. 2:19–20). The last possibility is that the church would be built on Peter’s testimony about Jesus’ deity. Whichever of these three interpretations you agree with, the fact remains that Jesus Christ promises to build His church. He is the builder. He is building His church. It is His church and “the gates of Hades shall not prevail against it.” At Caesarea Philippi water springs form a pool in a cave-like area. In Jesus’ day, people commonly thought this pool was the entrance to the underworld, Hades. The gates of Hades were right before the disciples as Jesus was promising, “I will build My church.” Jesus continues to build His church. *Revitalization* is one word that describes this process.

Jesus’ Great Commission to the Church

Jesus’ second key teaching about His church is found in Matthew 28:16–20:

Then the eleven disciples went away into Galilee, to the mountain which Jesus had appointed for them. When they saw Him, they worshiped Him; but some doubted. And Jesus came and spoke to them, saying, “All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth. Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age.” Amen.

Jesus states in verse 18 that all authority has been given to Him. This authority includes telling the church what to do. He orders the church to make disciples. Disciple-making is not a program; it is what a church does. Disciple-making is a nonnegotiable responsibility of every local church and every born-again believer. Jesus commands the church to fulfill His command to make disciples by going, baptizing, and teaching.

The church is to go. Two questions arise about going: Where are we to go? and Who is responsible to go? Acts 1:8 answers the first question: “But you shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be witnesses to Me in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth.” Disciple-making starts in your Jerusalem. Ephesians 4:11–12 answers the second question of who has this responsibility to go—the saints do. Disciple-making starts with the pastor-teacher discipling the people of his church to make disciples. Your Jerusalem is the community where God in His sovereignty placed you. You are to go to your community. You are to know your community. You are to pray for your community. You are to reach your community.

Matthew also teaches that we are also to make disciples by baptizing. Baptism is the believer’s public identification with Christ after a person’s profession of faith in Christ. Baptism is the result of effective evangelism as disciple-makers reach their families, friends, and coworkers in their Jerusalem. Teaching is then the third aspect of making disciples. Teaching is

accomplished through the public preaching of the Word in the church and personal discipleship taking place within the church (Acts 20:17–28). Teaching is one disciple investing his life in another disciple “to observe all things.” The result of teaching should be the multiplication of mature disciples that are going, baptizing, and teaching. Disciple-making is Jesus’ means to build His church. *A church is revitalized when it glorifies God by equipped disciples continually making disciples.*

Jesus’ Words to Seven Churches

Jesus’ third key teaching about the church is found in His letters to the seven churches in Revelation 2 and 3. In these letters, Jesus gave encouragement, correction, warnings, instructions, and promises.

Commendation

Jesus had words of encouragement and promise for only two of the seven churches: the church at Smyrna (Rev. 2:8–11) and the church at Philadelphia (Rev. 3:7–13). Smyrna is a model church on handling persecution. Jesus told this church that He knew all they had been through and would go through. He declared them to be rich in the midst of poverty. Jesus also encouraged them to be faithful when persecuted by Satan. The church at Philadelphia was a model church in keeping God’s Word. This small church made a huge impact for the cause of Christ. The reward for obedience was an open door of ministry that would not close.

Correction

While Jesus had only encouragement for the churches in Smyrna and Philadelphia, He told the other five churches that they must change. *They needed revitalization, the process of change which restores Biblical priorities to the church.* The word Jesus used to address these churches was another “re” word: *repentance*. The study of these five churches teaches that church revitalization is impossible without repentance.

The church in Ephesus

Jesus addressed the Ephesian church in Revelation 2:1–7 and commended them for their dedication. They labored and were patient in difficult ministry situations. They courageously accepted hardships, suffering, and loss. They did not do this for themselves but for His “name’s sake.” They also demonstrated discernment and did not tolerate those within the church who practiced “evil.” They tested the doctrine of people that came into the church. Jesus also commended them for detesting the “deeds of the Nicolaitans,” the wickedness associated with immorality.

Jesus also rebuked the Ephesian church. He called for them to repent in verses 4 and 5: “Nevertheless I have this against you, that you have left your first love. Remember therefore from where you have fallen; repent and do the first works.” “Remember” is a command. Jesus commanded this congregation to remember and continue remembering how far they had fallen away from where they had been. With this

remembering came the call for repentance that demanded change. The people of this church lost their love for Christ in just one generation. Without love, they could not be a light in their community. He warned the Ephesians at the end of verse 5 that He would extinguish their light unless they radically changed. Jesus declared that He did not approve of their current model of ministry. The Ephesian church needed revitalization.

The church in Pergamos

Jesus also confronted the church at Pergamos (Rev. 2:12–17). He first commended them for holding fast to His name in the midst of Satan worship. He encouraged the church that He knew the one from their church who was martyred. But this church also had problems, which are described in verses 14 and 15:

But I have a few things against you, because you have there those who hold the doctrine of Balaam, who taught Balak to put a stumbling block before the children of Israel, to eat things sacrificed to idols, and to commit sexual immorality. Thus you also have those who hold the doctrine of the Nicolaitans, which thing I hate.

Jesus calls for repentance in verse 16: “Repent, or else I will come to you quickly and will fight against them with the sword of My mouth.” This church needed revitalization. As in the church at Ephesus, revitalization could not take place without repentance.

The church in Thyatira

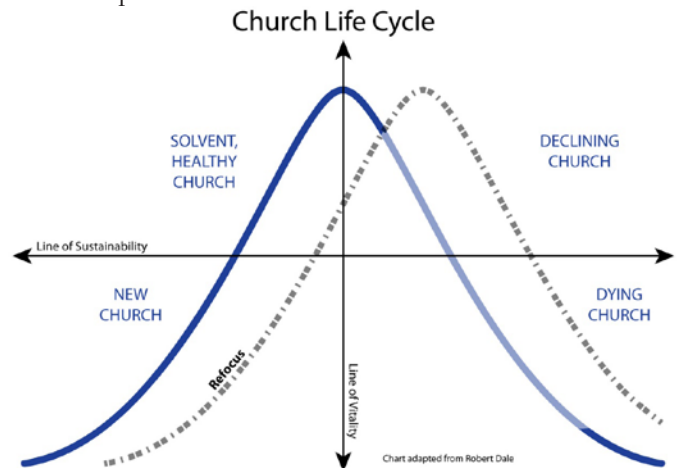
The third church where Jesus called for change is the church at Thyatira (Rev. 2:18–29). Jesus commended them for their deeds of love, faith, service, and patience. These are wonderful qualities that every local church should strive to have. But the church also had problems. They needed to change. They needed revitalization. Verse 20 described their sins of tolerating teaching that led people into sexual sins and the sin of eating meat offered to idols. In verse 21 Jesus stated that He gave them time to repent, but they did not. Jesus called for repentance. The church at Thyatira needed revitalization, but revitalization would not happen without repentance.

The church in Sardis

The fourth church is the church at Sardis (Rev. 3:1–6). Jesus called this church a dead church, “I know your works, that you have a name that you are alive, but you are dead” (v. 1). At one time this church had a name and reputation as a church that did the work of God. But they lived off the past and in the past. Jesus stated that they were now dead. At that point, with the current leadership and current congregation, they were not the church they used to be. Jesus called for their repentance in verse 3: “Remember therefore how you have received and heard; hold fast and repent.” The church at Sardis needed revitalization. They needed to minister in the present.

The church in Laodicea

The last of the five churches is the church at Laodicea (Rev. 3:14–22). This church was unique but not in a good way. This was the only church of the seven that Jesus did not commend in some manner. The believers in this church thought they were rich and did not need anything. Jesus told them they did not see themselves as they truly were. He described their true condition as wretched, miserable, poor, blind, and naked (v. 17). And just like the other four churches, they needed revitalization. Jesus calls for them to repent: “As many as I love, I rebuke and chasten. Therefore be zealous and repent” (v. 19). The church at Laodicea would not experience revitalization without repentance.



Jesus' Word to Churches Today: Repent

Churches today face situations similar to those of the seven churches. Churches today also have the same opportunity to repent and be revitalized. In Robert Dale's book *To Dream Again*, he uses a chart to help churches visualize where they are on a church's life cycle.

The solid line shows the typical life cycle of a church: beginning, becoming sustainable, growing, and then at some point declining. The dotted line shows how a church can extend its life cycle when the leadership takes action to address the needed changes. We can call this change by any of the “re” words: *refocus*, *revitalize*, *renew*, or *realign*. All those words describe change. But there is a word that demands change: *repentance*. It is the word Jesus used when He called for churches to change. It is the word we must be willing to use when we call for change in our churches. *True revitalization will not happen without repentance.* **B**

Marshall Fant III (DMin, Central Baptist Theological Seminary) has served as a pastor and church re-planter and currently serves as Director of Church Consulting and Strategic Planning for Gospel Fellowship Association Missions.