

REVITALIZE

BIBLICAL KEYS TO HELPING
YOUR CHURCH COME ALIVE AGAIN

ANDREW M. DAVIS



BakerBooks

a division of Baker Publishing Group
Grand Rapids, Michigan

Andrew M. Davis, *Revitalize*
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Published by Baker Books
a division of Baker Publishing Group
P.O. Box 6287, Grand Rapids, MI 49516-6287
www.bakerbooks.com

Printed in the United States of America

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data is on file at the Library of Congress, Washington, DC.

ISBN 978-0-8010-0750-7

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17 18 19 20 21 22 23 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

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To the faithful pastors who preceded me
and the godly brothers and sisters who prayed for FBC
to be revitalized long before I got here.

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Acknowledgments

I am grateful to Mark Dever for the sound guidance on healthy church life at the beginning of my ministry here at First Baptist Church of Durham. I am also thankful for the support of my wife, Christi, and the input from my co-laborer at FBC for seventeen years, Andy Winn, and from my fellow elders at FBC. I also want to acknowledge the help given by Anne Harford and Tom Knight in working to shape the final version of this book. I am grateful to God for all of you!

Foreword

I like this book. I like this book for a number of reasons. I like this book because it exalts God. Andy Davis is both ambitious and cautious—ambitious for what God might do and cautious of any talk of what we can do in our own strength. He is convinced that revitalizing a local church is not something he could do himself. He knows that such work is something that only God can do. And this book is clear on that.

I like this book because it is biblically and theologically sound and historically informed. And it's more than that. It is instructive. How many times does a pastor reach for a practical book and find the author is actually carefully and accurately instructing from the Bible? What a wonderful and, sadly, unusual find!

I like this book because the author understands both what the gospel is and what a church is. Those particular matters of theology that come to focus in the local church are clear in this book, and they are combined with lessons from the

author's own life. Which brings me to another reason I like this book.

I like this book because it is practical. Some books wrap a single idea or two in 150 or 200 pages. This book is the opposite. Each chapter is stuffed full of ideas that local pastors will understand and can actually use. You don't need to attend special "Andy Davis seminars" to know how to apply the wisdom in this book. Davis's humility and humor help the reader relate to the lessons he has learned and shares.

I like this book because I think it will help pastors. It joins a fairly elite group of books—like C. H. Spurgeon's *Lectures to My Students* and D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones's *Preaching and Preachers*—that combine theology and practice as only a learned and experienced pastor can. Reading this book may well be one of the chief means God uses to not only prevent you from being fired or quitting but also bring new life to your local church. I'm pretty sure Satan won't want you to read this book!

Finally, I like this book because I like Andy Davis. I've known Andy for more than thirty years and have never failed to appreciate his love for God and his confidence in God's Word. I know the story he recounts here to be true. I got the phone calls and letters and had numerous personal visits through the years he describes. And all that he shares here is what I saw and knew in those years. It is a story of real dependence on God and humility so profound it allowed Andy to speak God's Word in confidence even while his flesh was trembling. He shares soberly the challenges but never crosses over into being melodramatic or self-important.

So read this book. Use it as a diagnostic tool in regard to your own church and ministry. It is a Christ-exalting and

Foreword

pastor-encouraging read. Andy Davis's experience is marshalled to serve pastors. This is an important work on an important topic. It is a guidebook that may hold the secret to your own survival. Humility, wisdom, and love are all found in these pages, and you'll need all three to understand and apply the lessons in this book. God may use this book to answer your church's prayers for new life. I pray that is the case. Read and prosper, brother pastor. Read and prosper. And thanks, Andy, for living the life you describe here and for taking the time and effort to share it now with us.

Mark Dever
Pastor, Capitol Hill Baptist Church, Washington DC
Reformation Day (October 31, 2015)

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Eyes of Blazing Fire

*The Zeal of Christ
to Revitalize His Church*

In the first chapter of Revelation, the apostle John has an awesome vision of the resurrected Christ walking among seven golden lampstands with eyes like blazing fire and his feet like burnished bronze. Christ is dressed in a priestly robe reaching down to his feet, with a golden sash around his chest. Perhaps most striking of all, Christ has a sharp double-edged sword coming from his mouth, and his voice is like the sound of rushing waters. In his right hand he holds seven stars. The seven golden lampstands represent the seven churches in Asia Minor: Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamum, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia, and Laodicea. The seven stars in his right hand represent the “angels” of these seven churches.

In Revelation 2–3, Christ speaks to each of these seven churches through their respective angels. His messages are

powerful, personal, and specific, addressing the strengths and weaknesses of each local church and giving both warnings and encouragements about the future. These seven churches were real local churches that existed during John's time in Asia Minor, near the island of Patmos, where John was in exile. However, there is also a clear sense that they represent Christ's intimate knowledge of and concern for each local church around the world throughout every era of church history. That the churches are depicted as golden lampstands shows their immense worth coupled with their role as lights shining in a dark place. Christ's walking in the midst of these seven golden lampstands illustrates his active concern for the churches, as well as his vigilant and dynamic ministry among them. The seven angels in Christ's right hand illustrate his sovereign power over the pastors of these churches.¹

How awesome, then, to see the resurrected Christ moving actively through these seven lampstands—tending them, dealing with their pastors, speaking words of comfort or rebuke to them. I submit that this vision, as well as the subsequent letters to the seven churches, represents Christ's ongoing work of church reformation. To some, Christ speaks words of commendation for their tireless labor, doctrinal accuracy, faithfulness in persecution, discernment of error, and hatred of compromise. To others, Christ speaks words of rebuke for their forsaking of their first love, doctrinal compromise, toleration of sinning members, worldliness, spiritual deadness, self-confidence in wealth, and lukewarmness. To all, Christ gives words of exhortation to continue in courageous progress in the gospel, to look to the sweet eternal rewards, and to hear the words God speaks to the churches by the Spirit.

Careful study of the letters to the seven churches provides powerful insight into Christ's zeal for the ongoing revitalization of the church in every age. Revelation 1–3 clearly indicates that the slide of local churches from health toward death has been an ongoing issue for twenty centuries. The church at Ephesus had forsaken its first love, and the Lord threatened to remove its lampstand if they refused to repent (Rev. 2:4–5). The removal of the lampstand is Christ's judgment on any church that, through sin, slides from life to death; Christ sovereignly removes them from the community, and they are gone. He has done this consistently throughout church history. Indeed, history indicates that by the third century, the church at Ephesus had possibly been removed. In any case, it was certainly gone by the time Islam had come to dominate that region of the world in the seventh century. False teachers infiltrated the church at Pergamum, and Christ threatened to come and wage war against them with the sword of his mouth (Rev. 2:14–16). The church at Thyatira was guilty of tolerating sexual immorality, and Christ threatened to throw any who sinned in this way on a sickbed resulting in death (Rev. 2:20–23). The church at Sardis was clearly in need of revitalization. Christ said, "You have the reputation of being alive, but you are dead." And he warned them, "Wake up, and strengthen what remains and is about to die" (Rev. 3:1–2). Perhaps no church of the seven so clearly fits into the pattern of revitalization as that one. The church at Laodicea was lukewarm, and Christ threatened to spew them out of his mouth (Rev. 3:15–16). Local churches have stood in need of revitalization from the beginning of church history.

Truly in the matter of church reformation, the Father is always at his work, even to this very day, while Christ too is working.

Revitalization in Our Generation

The timeless message of Revelation 1–3 must be applied to churches in our generation. Every local church must listen carefully to what the Spirit says to *each* of these seven churches (Rev. 2:7, 11, 17, 29; 3:6, 13, 22). Christ is still walking among the seven golden lampstands with eyes of fire and a sword coming out of his mouth. His zeal for the holiness and fruitfulness of every local church is undiminished. This book is intended to be an instrument in his holy hands for the revitalization of churches all across America, and perhaps even around the world. My desire is to be an encouragement to brothers and sisters, and especially to elders (pastors), who are called to churches needing revitalization. I want to give them some of the insights and convictions the Lord has laid on my heart as I have traveled a journey of revitalization at First Baptist Church (FBC) in Durham, North Carolina. I yearn to root these insights and convictions in passages of Scripture. I also desire to illustrate them with real-life circumstances, both successes and failures, from my own experience. A clear connection between eternal Scripture and temporal circumstances can be a potent prescription for Christians who may be tempted to grow weary in their own journeys of revitalization.

The most powerful weapon in the hands of our Almighty Lord for the destruction of Satan’s dark kingdom is a healthy

local church. No one knows this better than Satan, and therefore it is expected that he will be vigorously active in fighting reform efforts made in specific local churches. The battle lines are drawn, the enemy is active, and the war is on! As I will discuss later, one of Satan's most powerful weapons is discouragement. He wants to deceive us into thinking that the slow descent of a local church into coldness, doctrinal error, lifeless fellowship, and nonexistent witness in the world is inevitable. He has planted his double agents in dying churches, and these wolves in sheep's clothing are some of the bitterest and most subtle enemies of the gospel. We must expect a fight and not grow weary as it becomes shockingly ugly. Christ is greater, and his Word is sufficient. The goal of a healthy, fruitful Great Commission church is well worth the suffering. This book is written from a deep yearning to equip you for that fight, strengthen your hearts with solid food from God's Word, and guide you with wisdom and clear strategies for victory.

The church scene of the West in the twenty-first century is not encouraging. Christianity is in a decaying orbit in its formerly positive relationship with surrounding culture. Christian views on salvation, the exclusivity of Christ, sexual morality, the sanctity of human life, the nature and permanence of marriage, and the like, are less and less accepted. The steep decline in the health and fruitfulness of many local churches is both a cause and an effect of this decaying orbit. Church health cannot be reduced to baptism, attendance, and budget statistics; however, such numbers can be important indicators of health or disease. The Barna Group has shown that, while the US adult population has grown 15 percent over the last fifteen years, the number of unchurched adults

has grown by 92 percent.² Mainline denominations (e.g., the United Methodist Church, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, the Presbyterian Church (USA), the Episcopal Church, the American Baptist Churches, the United Church of Christ, the Disciples of Christ, et al.) have been seriously in decline in these areas for decades—an aggregate picture of the death of many previously flourishing local churches. Even denominations that have many healthy local churches (like the one our church is affiliated with, the Southern Baptist Convention or SBC) still show a general decline in these areas, and many historically influential churches are in serious need of revitalization. Thom Rainer asserts that somewhere between eight thousand and ten thousand churches close every year.³ The only remedies to this trend are church planting and church revitalization.

Revitalization vs. Normal Pastoral Ministry

What is “revitalization”? How is it different from normal pastoral ministry in a healthy church? These are key questions. It is not true that every church needs revitalization, for if that were so, the word would lose its distinctive meaning and cease to be helpful. No church is perfect, and every church could grow in faithfulness to Christ. When later I list elements of a healthy church, every true believer in Christ will acknowledge that they long for growth in each of those elements in their local church. Conversely, when I list elements of a church that needs revitalization, it is possible that many healthy churches see some of these reflected in their church life. But there is a composite level of church decline discernible from

the elements enumerated below that indicates when a church is in need of revitalization.

One of the easiest ways to measure church vitality is by counting heads—membership and baptisms/conversions. If those numbers are flat (plateaued) or declining each year, that church may well be unhealthy, sliding toward eventual death. Ed Stetzer of LifeWay Research based his book on revitalization, *Comeback Churches*, on studies of three hundred churches that (1) had plateaued and/or declined for five years (worship attendance grew less than 10 percent in a five-year period); and (2) had followed that plateau/decline with significant numerical growth over two to five years, including a membership to baptism (conversion) ratio of 35:1 or lower each year and at least a 10 percent increase in attendance each year.⁴ Stetzer grounds the rest of his book on lessons learned by those three hundred churches. Much of the focus for the entire study centers around evangelistic fruit—what he calls being “missional.”

However, numerical growth alone cannot be a measure of spiritual health. Some of the unhealthiest churches in the nation are characterized by the false doctrine of the prosperity gospel, but they are huge and growing numerically.⁵ Conversely, some churches may be quite healthy in many respects and seeing steady fruit in evangelism but are actually shrinking in number because the godly leadership is culling bloated rolls of past members who, by their chronic failure to attend worship, are displaying in their lives that they most likely were not born again. Other churches might have a good number of people attending and might see some baptisms, but they are toxic in their daily life because of long-standing church politics and unhealthy attitudes and practices. Thus,

applying the term *revitalization* requires wisdom and an array of factors must be taken into consideration.

In this book, we will use the word *revitalization* to describe the effort to restore by biblical means a once healthy church from a present level of disease to a state of spiritual health, as defined by the Word of God. I will establish an array of characteristics that define both a healthy church and an unhealthy church, by which church leaders can evaluate their local church. Churches in need of revitalization differ from healthy churches that simply need maturing in that toxic forces are at work that will make ministry there a particular challenge, and if left unchecked, will finally result in the death of the church.

FBC: A Church in Need of Revitalization

One unforgettable Sunday morning at FBC—August 19, 2001—I began corporate worship by calling on the members of the church to repent. The church had elected a female deacon for the first time in its history, which would not be nearly as significant were it not for the fact that our polity at that time saw deacons as lay leaders with shepherding responsibility for the flock alongside the ministerial staff. Despite my church-wide teaching on the topic of gender and authority, and my efforts at the personal level to forestall this result, the church voted in a woman as a spiritual leader.

So I began worship by calling on all the people of FBC to repent—including myself. In the spirit of Daniel 9:7, I felt that all of us must take responsibility for FBC violating God's clear guidance that men should lead in a local church. My

call for repentance was an object of horror to many of the members of the church—they were outraged. In their minds, repentance is something you do only at the beginning of the Christian life and then never need to do again (a perversion of the “decisionism”/walk the aisle technique coupled with “once saved, always saved” doctrine). For them, it was as if I were saying, “Because you voted for a woman as a deacon, you are not Christians.” But I did not 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. For me, repentance is a daily, sometimes hourly necessity.

The journey that followed over the next ten years is the context in which the Lord taught me many lessons on church revitalization. FBC had entrenched power structures and unbiblical attitudes in many vital areas, including an unbiblical church government based on committees and democratic processes that resulted in unbiblical lay leadership for decades; a large number of influential members whose status as regenerate believers in Christ was at best suspect; a chronic pattern of running off godly pastors who had sought to minister well to the church; an unbiblical attitude toward money, with an unhealthy focus on the beauty of the building to the exclusion of missionary efforts; a poor discipleship program; a bad history of racism in dealing with the surrounding community; a clique of powerful lay leaders who considered it their responsibility to dominate church life in secular ways; and a large contingent of senior adults who had received little solid biblical training.

Despite all of that, FBC also had a remnant of extremely godly men and women who were praying and yearning for

the revitalization of their beloved church. Without them, I never would have survived the stormy years of war that would soon follow that call for repentance. This is as much their story as it is mine.

A church that stops reforming is dying. And a church that has been in that state for a long time will be rescued only by revitalization. As dangerous and painful as church revitalization can be, the far greater danger is *not* revitalizing. And FBC was a church very much in need of revitalization. In this book, I will seek to relate some of the lessons learned from FBC's journey from the toxic church I began pastoring in 1998 to the encouragingly healthy and fruitful church it is today. The lessons apply to pastors and church members who may be influential in moving their church toward spiritual vitality.

Fourteen Lessons in Revitalization

The lessons that follow will each be the focus of an entire chapter, supported with Scripture and experiential anecdotes. Here they are in summary:

Embrace Christ's ownership of the church. Christ is the only One who shed his blood for the church (Acts 20:28); it is his, for he bought it at a price. A common characteristic of dying churches is an unhealthy sense of ownership of the church by its members and/or leaders. Some feel that because of their financial contributions or hours of service, *This church is mine.* Hence the power struggles. Beyond this, a revitalizing pastor can get sucked into similarly unhealthy thought patterns as he suffers and makes sacrifices for the

church. We must embrace, by faith, that the local church is Christ's, and do all our ministry for his glory.

Be holy. Christ's eyes are blazing fire, and his garments are radiant with pure light, representing his perfect holiness. Likewise, the sword coming from his mouth represents his Word in its power to cut the tumor of sin from his church. Everyone committed to revitalization must seek total purity from sin in his life. He must submit his public and private life to the holy gaze of Christ and be humbled and convicted of sin, or he will be disqualified from leading the church toward vitality. Beyond this, he must lead the church to embrace sanctification—consistent growth in holiness by the power of the Spirit.

Rely on God, not on yourself. One of the greatest battles we face in life is learning to rely on God and not on ourselves. If we look toward the perilous journey ahead of us in church reform and then turn inwardly for the resources, we will think either we have what it takes or we do not. The first will result in arrogance; the second will result in despair. Arrogance and despair are two sides of the same coin: self-reliance. We must learn at every moment to look upward to God by faith and rely on his power to do the transformation.

Rely on God's Word, not on techniques. Church revitalization cannot be bought from a Christian bookstore. God's Word must be unleashed, not only weekly from the pulpit but also throughout every ministry and moment of church life. God's Word alone has the power to save souls and bring them to Christlike maturity.

Saturate the church in prayer. Prayer is essential to the revitalization of a dying church. Through prayer, we fully rely on God and acknowledge our powerlessness to effect the

many changes that will need to be made. Prayer changes us and also mysteriously changes things by the sovereign power of God. Pastors must personally become men of prayer more than ever before, and they must also call the godly together for fervent prayer, otherwise the church will not be revitalized.

Cast a clear vision. Leaders must make clear to the congregation what God wants the church to be—both in the big picture and in the details. This vision must come from Scripture and from the specific calling God places on that congregation. Leaders must powerfully cast this vision week after week to the church and lead the church toward it by the power of the Spirit and the ministry of the Word. Leaders must especially be effective in helping other key leaders see this biblical vision for the church.

Be humble toward opponents. “God opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble” (James 4:6). In the struggle to revitalize a local church, it is easy to demonize opponents and slander them privately. It is easy to play political battles and lower your ethical standards, all the while forgetting that you are every bit as sinful as they are apart from the sovereign grace of God in Christ. God commands that we be humble and loving toward all who oppose us and allow his Word to transform them as it is transforming us.

Be courageous. Satan will fight the revitalization every step of the way and will use people to attack any who are working for the transformation of the church. Fear of man is one of the biggest snares that Satan casts on our path. Learning how to conquer our fear and live only to please God is vital, for the road ahead takes courage. Courage comes from the Word of God and the power of the Spirit. God also uses the examples of suffering heroes from church history to give us

the ability to stand strong in our day of testing. While the previous lesson says we must resist the temptation to be arrogant toward opponents, this lesson says we must resist the opposite temptation to be cowardly. When the time comes to act boldly, we must act!

Be patient. The work of church revitalization is slow, requiring a great deal of patience. It is fascinating how many of Jesus's parables are agricultural, likening the work of the kingdom of God to plants growing from the earth. In James 5, the farmer has learned to be patient, waiting for God to give the growth. In the same way, we must give God time to work in people's hearts by the steady progress of his Word.

Be discerning. The previous two points—be courageous and be patient—seem to be contradictory. When do we move out boldly and when do we wait on the Lord? Discernment is needed. Additionally, churches have notoriously squabbled over an array of minor points. It is essential that godly leaders be discerning regarding what issues are worth drawing a line in the sand.

Wage war against discouragement. One of Satan's primary weapons against a work of revitalization is discouragement. He is constantly whispering in the ear of key leaders in the church that the changes desired will never come to fruition. We must constantly be of good courage and know that our final victory is guaranteed and that our labor in the Lord is not in vain (1 Cor. 15:58). A godly leader must be so filled with hope and confidence in God that he can inspire the same in others.

Develop and establish men as leaders. This practical and biblical step was a strategic key to the revitalization of FBC Durham. It is also vital to God's overall strategy for the church

in the world. God has entrusted the leadership of the church to men, and those men need to be identified, equipped, and empowered to lead. A single pastor, fighting on his own against the entrenched forces that have caused the church's decline, will almost certainly lose. As God raises up men to join him, the burdens of leadership and suffering become greatly lessened through sharing. Since God has ordained a plurality of elders to lead churches, even if that polity is not yet established, an early and provisional version of it during the revitalization phase is immeasurably helpful and a major step in the right direction.

Become supple on worship. Christ used a dual analogy of wineskins and patches of cloth (Matt. 9:16–17) to teach a clear lesson about the dynamic kingdom of God: stay supple, yield, stretch as God is making changes. Churches in need of revitalization are usually stuck in the past, in traditionalism, in “the way we’ve always done it around here.” This is especially true in worship style. But the church that refuses to stay connected with surrounding culture musically will usually cease to be appealing to younger believers and will tend to age upward. Church leaders need to make clear distinctions between what is timeless in church life (e.g., the gospel, biblical doctrines, etc.) and what is temporary (e.g., choirs, pipe organs, specific hymns sung a specific way, etc.).

Embrace the two journeys of disciple-making. Christ has left us on Earth to glorify God by making disciples. Disciple-making comes in two discernable ways: the internal journey of growth into Christlike maturity and the external journey of worldwide evangelism and missions. These two journeys must be held in balance. A church that never sees lost people converted, baptized, and taught to obey Christ's

commandments is a church that has died. Conversely, when revitalization starts taking hold, more and more members of the church will display a sacrificial heart for the lost in their prayers, conversations, and lives. This is a crowning element of all true works of revitalization. A pastor who yearns to see revitalization in a local church must make a steady appeal to God to work in him and the church a passion for the lost.

May God Strengthen You for This Work

Some who read this book will be in dwindling rural churches with senior adults who are hardly contentious but also hardly motivated to do much beyond the status quo. Some will be in larger urban churches that have virulent factions ready for war. Some will be in churches that have been in numerical decline for years, with no clear indication as to why. Some will be in suburban settings with relatively new facilities that are unpaid for and debt that is strangling the church. Some will be in churches whose previous pastors have all but killed the church with immorality or wretchedly bad leadership. Some will be in churches in communities that are economically depressed and have seen a great migration to other locales with better employment opportunities. Some will be in “family chapel” churches dominated by the political and financial power of a single family or a small cluster of families who desire control rather than numerical growth. The variety of case studies of church revitalizations over the last thirty years could be enumerated at length. No one book can speak to the specific strategies and detailed sequences

of actions that will inexorably lead to church revitalization in all of these individual cases.

However, it is my prayer that God will use this book to give you hope that he can do amazing work before your eyes. The revitalization of your church could end up being the most significant act of service you will ever render to Christ. The resurrected and glorified Christ is still moving through the golden lampstands of his churches, speaking words of counsel and rebuke, wisdom and encouragement to each one of his blood-bought churches. Though in his sovereign power he has the right to remove any of these lampstands, it may well be that he has raised you up for such a time as this—to be an instrument in his hand for the revitalization of a dying church to become a light shining radiantly in an incredibly dark world.