

Hello Pastors/Leaders:

As you know, I have been doing a series of articles on the subject of church health/revitalization. I began with *How does a church know if it needs revitalized?* In my second article I addressed the *Essential Qualities of a Revitalization Pastor*. In the third article, I focused on the fact that *Church Decline is a Spiritual Issue*. The fourth article dealt with the lack of biblical contextualization as I discussed the need of *Contextualization without Compromise*. With my fifth article I discussed church health as the root of church revitalization in an article entitled *Revitalization is a Church Health Issue*. Finally in my last article I covered the contentious issue of *Worship and Revitalization*. With this writing, I will speak to the critical role that preaching has in church health and revitalization. The article's title is *Preaching and Revitalization*.

Communicating God's word in a clear, biblically faithful, culturally relevant, and engaging manner is crucial for creating healthy revitalized churches. Great preachers are not necessary for revitalization, but good preaching is. A seminary degree is not required, but a heart to be a lifelong learner and to improve your preaching is mandatory to effect health and revitalization. It's not enough to be appreciated for being a loving shepherd. Pastors who want to see their churches revitalized and healthy must preach well prepared, text driven, gospel centered, missionally aimed, and contextually applied sermons.

Ultimately it is the Word of God alone that will bring true revitalization to a church. Why? Because essentially revitalization is transformation of human hearts that takes place through the Word of God, either through conversion or sanctification.¹ What kind of preaching effects revitalization? What are the essential elements that need to be incorporated in our approach to the preaching task? There is a sense in which all the following elements are important in any preaching context - but they are especially critical in a revitalization setting. The following are some ideas as it relates to preaching for revitalization.

First, preach the text exposionally. Although there are a variety of approaches to preaching, e.g., topical, thematic, narrative, etc. – research has shown that a majority of churches that experience revitalization tend to utilize verse-by-verse (expositional) style of preaching.² There are several advantages to preaching expositionally through books of the Bible, such as providing a better understanding of the word of God, protecting the preacher from riding certain hobbyhorses, forcing the preacher to address difficult passages and topics, mapping the preaching calendar for months in advance and many more. Most importantly, consecutive exposition seems to be especially helpful for churches in need of revitalization.

Second, preaching for revitalization requires contextualization. Another way to put this is *preach missionally*. You need to know your community before you preach to your

¹ Davis, Andrew M. *Revitalize: Biblical Keys to Helping Your Church Come Alive Again* (p. 79). Baker Publishing Group. Kindle Edition.

² Ed Stetzer and Mike Dobson, *Comeback Churches: How 300 Churches Turned Around and Yours Can Too* (Nashville: B & H Publishing Group, 2007), 91.

community. It's essential that we "preach the Word" but it does little good unless truth is presented in a way that can be received by the hearers. Paul was no compromising post modernist, but he understood that he had to frame his messages based upon the audience he was addressing. When he was in Pisidian Antioch (Acts 13:13-41) he framed his message by starting with the Old Testament history because he was addressing Jews in a synagogue. But when he was in Athens in Acts 17 speaking with the non-Jew philosopher/intellectual types, he starts at a completely different place – that they were very religious and he utilized their altar with the inscription "To the unknown god." The point is, in preaching start with the audience, not with the text – but bring the text to bear on the issues that are framed for your particular context.

Third, preach the gospel. This does not mean that you just preach an evangelistic message every Sunday morning. But it means that your preaching needs to be saturated with the gospel. That is, preaching for revitalization brings people back to the gospel as the center of their obedience, the impetus of their motivations, the foundation of their sanctification... it continues to remind them of who they are in Christ. Many churches that fall into the category of decline and in need of revitalization have substituted moralism for gospel-centered transformation. As Ed Stetzer observes:

*It is too easy for preachers to slip into becoming moral teachers—religious instructors who pass out rules for spiritual living without pulling back the curtain on God and ourselves; pulling back that curtain is what our people need the most!*³

Fourth, preach for personal and corporate application. It is commonly expected that the preacher press for personal application of the spiritual truths being presented. The faithful preacher will help his congregation steer their way toward personal application. But especially for a church revitalization situation, corporate application is also essential. A church in need of revitalization needs to see where they need to go and shown a vision of what they are to become. That requires that the preacher think about how the truths presented apply to the corporate body. His preaching needs to be laced with "we" and "us" wordage... "This is how this applies us..." "This is why we need to do this..." "This is what we need to be..." etc. A church in need of revitalization should know that they are a collective group heading to a destination. Corporate application of the preached word will allow them to see that communal responsibility.

Fifth, preach an objective scriptural vision for the church. Often times a church in need of revitalization has lost the biblical vision of what God has called them to be and what he has called them to do. The task of visionary preaching is to recast before the church God's vision for the local church as revealed in Scripture. In your preaching paint a picture of what a healthy church is supposed to look like. Some of the truths that your people need to see fresh again are: *The Supremacy of Christ over the Church, a vision for the glory of God through the local church, their part in God's redemptive plan for*

³ <https://edstetzer.com/2017/03/preaching-that-sticks/>

*history, the nature of a healthy church, the mission of the church etc.*⁴ An unhealthy church often gets caught up in the minutiae of week to week survival that they have forgotten God's vision for the local church. Preaching for revitalization is about resurrecting that vision so their eyes will be opened to where they are and where they need to go.

Sixth, preach well-prepared sermons. Churches in need of revitalization don't need lazy preachers who are throwing sermons together at the last moment and often reverting to their favorite topics Sunday after Sunday. Preaching is hard work and requires dedicated, serious, and diligent pastors who are willing to expend effort in delivering the whole counsel of God's word. A well-prepared sermon is going to vary depending on the pastor's other responsibilities - whether they are full or part time, the efficiency of their sermon preparation etc. However, whatever the particular context of the preacher, there is no excuse of coming to the pulpit without being prepared.

Seventh, preach for a resolution. Every sermon should present a problem – a spiritual dilemma to be addressed. In a church revitalization situation this is especially true where there are a multitude of individual and corporate sins to be confronted. However, with spiritual needs being expressed the preacher should give opportunity for resolution of the problem. That can be expressed in numerous methods – the “come forward” invitation, a time of personal reflection and application from the pew, an invitation to meet with the pastor/deacons/elders after the service etc. Whatever the method, it is important for the preacher to give his people an opportunity to respond to the message in a culturally appropriate way.

Eighth, preach for the discipleship of your people. Discipleship in too many of our SBC churches in the past has focused mainly on informational transference that you'd receive from taking a class or coming to Sunday school. Often, from the pulpit the objective was making decisions, not making disciples. Preaching is an essential ingredient in building a culture of discipleship in the church. Preaching toward discipleship means you take the long view of your preaching ministry – that you're preaching for depth rather than preaching for breadth, preaching to build the attenders rather than only preaching to build attendance.

These are just some of the principles involved in preaching for revitalization. Obviously, it only scratches the surface of this topic. However, the pressing point that must be heard is that there cannot be church revitalization unless a high value is placed on biblical preaching. Sermon preparation and delivery are not the only responsibility of the pastor, but it is his most important one.⁵ Faithful, biblical, and empowered preaching does not guarantee that a church will experience revitalization. Unhealthy congregations can decide to be resistant truth. But faithfulness to the preaching task, in season and out of season, is its own reward. The preacher's work is to “preach the Word” – a well prepared, biblically contextualized, personally and corporately applied, and discipleship focused

⁴ Davis, Andrew M., *Revitalize: Biblical Keys to Helping Your Church Come Alive Again* (p. 109). Baker Publishing Group. Kindle Edition.

⁵ Acts 6:1-4.

“Word” – and rest the results with God! The health of our churches begins with what is happening in our pulpits. May God help our pulpits be aflame with faithful and skilled proclaimers of God’s Word!

In His Service,

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