

Dear Pastors/Leaders:

These past few months I've been in the process of writing a series of articles on the subject of church health/revitalization. We started out with *How does a church know if it needs revitalized?* I touched on eleven indicators of a church in need of an infusion of health/revitalization. Last month I addressed the *Essential Qualities of a Revitalization Pastor*. I identified 10 qualities that need to be present in all pastors, but especially in those that want to be used of God to revitalize a church. With this article, I want to clarify that *Church Decline is a Spiritual Issue*.

We often look at declining congregations as experiencing problems that are outside their control. Many times we look at the indicators of decline, such as, a changing community, refusal to change, an aging congregation, frequent pastoral turnover etc. as the reasons for decline. It is true that these and many others are contributors of decline. However, most of these indicators spring from a more significant problem – it's spiritual. I believe that church decline is primarily a spiritual issue. And if we don't address it foundationally as a spiritual problem, then we'll only treat the symptoms and not the disease.

The fact is, many of the practical changes and decisions that must be made in the church revitalization process have at their root spiritual causes. For example, often times in moving a church toward revitalization, musical style changes will need to be made in order for the church to better contextualize the gospel to its changing community. But often the spiritual problem behind the reluctance to address these changes is preference idolatry, i.e., putting preference over mission. The symptom may be practical, but the root cause is spiritual.

So what are some of the underlying spiritual issues that must be addressed if there's going to be biblical revitalization in our churches?

First, a significant spiritual issue in some churches is ***misplaced authority***. In an unhealthy church many times the authority does not rest with Jesus and His Word no matter how many claims to the contrary. What you find many times is that authority rests with a power broker, a certain family, or "the people". You often hear the phrase "My Church" indicating, in some cases, a rooted heart attitude that the church belongs to someone or some group other than Christ. The problem of misplaced authority is that it is subtle. Those who have assumed this authority would never say that Jesus isn't the Head of the church...they would never agree that they have taken authority that rightly only belongs to Him. However, their actions, control, and opposition tell the real story of where their hearts are actually. A church that wants to turn the corner on decline must repent of misplaced authority and reestablish Christ as King and His Word as final arbiter of all that is said and done.

Second, another spiritual indicator of decline is ***joyless*** church members. Joy is one of the best spiritual indicators for a church. Why? Because it is the highest marked distinction for the follower of Christ. The Psalmist says, "...in your presence there is fullness of joy; at your right hand are pleasures forevermore" (Ps. 16:11). An unhealthy church is one

where the presence of Christ is not felt and the joy of the Lord is not experienced. Joylessness is a sure sign that the church will eventually die. Why would God send people to a church that is not manifesting the foremost characteristic that distinguishes His people from the people of the world? A church that has turned their gaze off Christ and His mission and turned inward cannot maintain joy. You kill joy, you kill the church!

Third, disunity is another spiritual indicator of a declining church. Disunity manifests itself a couple of ways in an unhealthy church. One way is what we normally think of when it comes to disunity. That is, there is discord usually fought over different preferences, traditions, or battles for control. The church has not built its unity around Christ, His Word, and His mission. Sometimes that disunity is there but it never is manifested because the pastor and leadership never press the church to move forward on mission. Another form of this problem is generational disunity. Most dying churches (not all) are one generational churches...normally the older generation. But a healthy church should be displaying unity across generations. A one generational church is that way because she will not give up her preferences to accommodate other age groups – and this can be placed at the feet of both younger and older generations. There is beauty and life when unity is stretched over generational, as well as, racial, gender, and socio-economic boundaries.

Fourth, another spiritual marker of church decline is a lost focus on the **gospel**. Now this seems at first unbelievable. Many would protest and say, “We may lack many things, but one thing we don’t lack is a focus on the gospel – we give an invitation at the end of every service.” But the problem is the gospel is offered only to unbelievers, not believers...it is seen for only justification, but not for ongoing sanctification. So the problem with many declining churches is a gospel salvation message is preached for unbelievers (who are usually not in attendance) and moralistic behavioral modification is preached to the believers. The result is often performance driven legalism. Why? Because discipleship has been stripped of the gospel as the motivating and empowering factor. Discipleship is not to move on from the gospel, but to go more deeply into the gospel. And as the gospel seeps into every crack and crevice of our lives, we walk more and more in submission to Jesus, for our good and his glory.

Fifth, a significant spiritual marker is **sin tolerance** among confessing membership. In declining churches you find that they take the adage, “The church is a hospital for sinners not a museum for saints” to an unbiblical extreme. While it is true that there must be spiritual space in the church for messy people to grow in their sanctification, i.e., there should be an atmosphere created for authenticity – a place for broken people to regularly confess, repent, and apply the gospel to their sin struggles. However, often in declining churches there is no expectation for members to daily walk with God and no “Body Life” accountability when they have ongoing sin issues. Pastor Mark Dever recently said, “*A church that tolerates unholiness and unrepentant sin today will be a church that will not be sending any missionaries tomorrow.*” The sin we tolerate in our SBC churches is not normally blatant sexual immorality (although it certainly can be), but often it is the more subtle, but just as damaging sins of gossip, power grabs, deceit, lack of faithfulness to the church (manifested through their lack of attendance), etc.

Sixth, another spiritual issue with church decline is *idolatry*. Yes, idolatry is alive and well in even some churches that superficially confess that Jesus is Lord. Idolatry is simply anything that absorbs our hearts and imaginations more than God – anything we seek to give us only what God can give. The fact is, being part of a local church does not inoculate you from idolatry ... idolatry can run as rampant in a local Baptist church as it does in a Chicago nightclub! When Jesus is not our chief source of joy and satisfaction...when we think that if we could just have a certain thing or experience, then our lives would have meaning and significance - that is idolatry. In Baptist churches we have many preference idolaters, i.e., those whose loved music style, a preferred program, the church constitution, church décor, the past, etc. more than they love Jesus.

These are just some of the spiritual indicators of church decline, but they are some that I've seen as most prominent in Northwest Indiana. For any church in decline, the hope of revitalization begins with addressing the spiritual roots to our problems. I encourage you as pastors and leaders to pray for the spiritual discernment to determine how prevalent these issues are in your church. The first step to healing is to recognize the disease. Begin to address the issues with gentleness, wisdom, and courage through confronting with God's word and leading the way to repentance.

In His Service,

Wes Rankin
Director of Missions
Northwest Indiana Baptist Association
domnwiba@gmail.com
219-615-9774