

What Makes a Church Reform Possible?

By John Folmar

Church planting seems to be the cutting-edge nowadays. But I would say that revitalizing existing churches is at least as important for the sake of the kingdom. In fact, revitalizing an unhealthy church gets you two-for-the-price-of-one. Not only do you establish a reformed, vibrant outpost for the gospel, but you also eliminate the poor witness that was there previously. Sickly churches are, as Mark Dever puts it, “terribly effective anti-missionary forces.” They announce to the community: This is what a Christian is like! This is what a Christian is like! Such false advertising maligns the gospel and actually impedes evangelism in the surrounding area. But when a church is transformed, the gospel surges forward as the community is confronted with a genuine corporate witness for Christ.

I’ve witnessed two church turnarounds, one in Louisville, Kentucky and one in Dubai, United Arab Emirates. In both cases the churches have been utterly transformed, from the preaching, to the corporate worship, to the church’s culture, to the evangelistic impact on surrounding neighborhoods. In both of these turnarounds, although I cannot claim credit for either one, I’ve enjoyed a front-row seat for observing the radical reform of a church.

What made these church reforms possible?

PREACHING

The driving force behind any true reform will be the Word of God. As the Word powers through a congregation, it softens up the hard ground and produces spiritual change. In Dubai there were faithful members who had been laboring away for years but to little effect; they weren’t being consistently supported by the weekly sermons. Valiant attempts were made to strengthen the community, but something was lacking. But when the preaching became consistently expositional and gospel-centered, it was as if someone dropped a burning match on gasoline. Ministry was multiplied. As the church began to turn around, one long-time member compared the preaching to a weekly artillery barrage. The steady pounding of the Word softened opposition and opened up avenues for more fruitful ministry to occur throughout the body.

The pulpit must lead a church reform effort, and this means preaching expositionally with gospel emphasis and judicious application to the life of the church, especially those areas that need reform. If the pulpit is not solidly behind the effort, reformers are probably wasting their time. It’s better to move on to a place where the Word is already being rightly preached and see how that ministry can be supported.

PROVIDENCE

Moribund churches will only be enlivened if God is at work there. Years ago in Louisville, I joined an old church whose ministry was dwindling for various reasons. Elderly people predominated in the church, many faithfully ministering but without pastoral leadership. The younger generations had long ago deserted the church, and I could understand why. Aside from family loyalty, there was not much to keep them there. The preaching consisted mainly of homespun stories without any serious scriptural exposition. The church was not so much theologically driven as it was culturally driven, and the contemporary culture had long since moved on.

But in God’s providence, there was another church nearby (meeting in a school) where the gospel was clearly proclaimed. This younger church enjoyed life and vibrancy and sound doctrine, but had no roots in the community and no building. The obvious solution was a merger of the two congregations. Initially the idea of a merger was rejected by the older, needy church. They were too different theologically, musically, culturally, and in every other way. But God began to sovereignly remove the opponents of this merger, and he gradually changed people’s hearts toward the new church coming in. Like night and day—from settled opposition to almost unanimous congregational approval—God providentially arranged for a new work to begin there in Louisville, a church that remains vibrant and unified to this day.

There are so many forces arrayed against the turnaround of a local church that it will never happen unless God brings it to pass. God's providential care is essential to church reform, which is why prayer is crucial.

PARTNERSHIP

Try to not do this alone. Church reform can be grueling, thankless, and discouraging. The timetable is not measured in months, but in years. And deep spiritual reform is usually not flashy. God uses the ordinary means of grace to grow and change his people. Fickle churches can become impatient, and during difficult times it helps to have friends.

When I began pastoring in Dubai, there was one like-minded elder who particularly encouraged me when the times were tough. He was a pro at identifying evidences of grace, even as I slogged through my own pastoral missteps and the inevitable setbacks that come with the territory of church reform. When crucial elements of the reform were in jeopardy, he was there to lend a hand at just the right time. If possible, partner with others before diving headlong into a reforming situation. Don't go it alone.

Place a premium on identifying men who are responding to the ministry, and build your life into theirs. Consider it a top priority to disciple men in the congregation who will one day be elders and partners in ministry.

PATIENCE

How many pastors have been fired because they foisted changes on the church before the church was ready? How many reform efforts have been jeopardized by the impatience of leaders who perhaps knew the right thing to do, but failed to spend the time teaching and praying and serving the people in order to earn their trust and persuade them on the points needing reform? Remember Paul's admonition to Timothy: "Reprove, rebuke, and exhort, with complete patience and teaching" (2 Tim. 4:2). Just because you know what the problems are doesn't mean they should all be fixed immediately.

When I began pastoring in Dubai, someone helpfully reminded me that it wasn't "my" church. In other words, the people there and their state of spiritual maturity were the fruit of another pastor's ministry, not mine. I could hardly go in and expect the church to immediately adopt my views of church life and ministry. This liberated me to serve people contentedly who did not always share my convictions about the Bible or the ministry. But after a few years, that picture began to change.

Take the long view when it comes to church reform. It helps to have a ten to twenty year time horizon. With a long-term perspective, we can more patiently prioritize the areas of church life that need to change. We can more contentedly operate in an imperfect ministry environment even as we ask people to forbear with our personal weaknesses as well.

There are, however, two things a pastor can begin changing immediately upon arriving at a new church: preaching and membership. On day one, you can uphold the authority of the Scriptures in the way you preach, deriving your points explicitly from the text itself and showing yourself to be governed by the text. Second, you can immediately begin interviewing new members as they come in. In this way, you can:

- ensure to the best of your ability that they are genuine believers,
- ensure that they know and can articulate the gospel,
- lay out your expectations for church membership,
- and begin to establish a pastoral relationship with the new members coming in, which over time will affect the complexion of the church as a whole.

FEW THINGS BEAT A FRONT-ROW VIEW OF CHURCH REFORM

In conclusion, there are few things that beat watching a church change from sickly and irrelevant to biblical and vibrant. The only way this will ever occur is if the Word of God is rightly preached. Even then, some reform efforts fail in spite of faithful pulpits; the Lord must be at work to turn the ship around. You will be more likely to succeed in the long haul if you have a few brothers who are laboring with you in the work. But even with all these things in place, you must take the long-term approach to church reform. "See how the farmer waits for

the precious fruit of the earth, being patient about it, until it receives the early and late rains. You also, be patient” ([Jas. 5:7-8](#)).

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