

Why Revitalize?

By Matt Schmucker

I asked the young man sitting across from me at lunch, “Why did you decide to go to seminary?” He said, “I want to do great things for God!”

His answer made me shudder slightly. I wondered if he had ever read any biographies of men who had “done great things for God.” Did he know the sacrifice that comes with “greatness?”

Many of the great ones were reformers. They saw something broken, directionless, or distorted, and set about to change course—to re-make. Those great ones were actually pastors: they were students of the Word who took on the burden to proclaim. They worked like prophets, not through foretelling, but through forth-telling: being forthright about the present in light of what was written in the past.

That’s what a pastor does. He holds up God’s Word and calls men and women to renew their minds and reform their ways. If you don’t want to be a reformer, you don’t want to be a pastor.

MOTIVATIONS FOR REFORM

When you look at a small, broken, unhealthy, body of believers, what could drive you to begin the reforming work that’s necessary? Let me suggest six motivations:

1. For the Christian’s Sake

In John 21, we hear Jesus ask Simon Peter (three times), “Simon, son of John, do you love me?” Three times Simon Peter says, “Yes.” And three times Jesus says, “Feed my sheep.” In Luke 15, we read of Jesus valuing his own people so highly that if they were sheep he would “leave the ninety nine in the open country” to rescue the one lost. God loves his people. He wants them gathered, and he wants them fed.

In every church revitalization I’ve seen, there have been at least a few sheep present (often amidst wolves). They have been malnourished and even mistreated. But they have been adopted by Christ and are therefore deserving of care. Consider revitalizing a church for the benefit of the true believers who are there.

2. For the Nominal Christian’s Sake

Few things are more pitiable than the person who believes heaven is his reward when, in fact, his destination is hell. Many of our churches are full of this kind of person—the nominal “Christian.” Paul had this concern on his mind when he wrote, “Examine yourselves, to see whether you are in the faith. Test yourselves” ([2 Cor. 13:5](#)).

Since the fall, no one has escaped self-deception. We are easily fooled. And a loving pastor will labor to disabuse the self-deceived.

In the early 1990s at Capitol Hill Baptist Church, we worked hard to track down hundreds of our members who never attended services. As we found them, most didn’t want anything to do with us and our ideas of “meaningful membership.” But there were a few who, when presented with the gospel and God’s call to be a part of the body, repented and came to faith. One woman named Dorothy, an eighty-year-old who had not attended for over three decades, lived nearby. We shared the gospel with her, not wanting to presume anything. She said, “I don’t think I’ve ever understood this before.” Consider revitalizing a church for the benefit of the nominal “Christian.”

3. For the Neighbors’ Sake

In 1993, after four decades of decline and another failed pastor, Capitol Hill Baptist reached rock bottom—at least in my mind. I was on my way to the local market one evening and was following two neighbors on foot. I knew these men. They were a well-known homosexual couple who lived in the neighborhood of our church. That night, having heard what happened to our dismissed pastor, the two men were mocking my church with loud voices. What irony! Homosexual men mocking a gospel-minded church, but one that failed to live out that same gospel. To use an Old Testament term, we were a “byword” in our own neighborhood. We were a reverse witness in the very community where we should have been a model of holiness. Thankfully, as our church grew healthier, so did our witness.

Several years later, Mark Dever and I were on a walk, and one neighbor who had watched our church for twenty years stopped us and asked, “What’s different about your church?” Mark said, “Well, Matt’s been trying to get some painting done and has been cleaning up the yards.” The man said, “No, not that stuff. There’s something different about the people.”

I can report today that many in our neighborhood have come to Christ. In the process of revitalizing, we were able to take down one bad witness and replace it with a good one—that’s a two-for-one gospel deal. Consider revitalizing a broken church for the benefit of neighbors.

4. For the Sake of Resources

Billions of dollars, donated by faithful Christians over many decades, have been invested in land and buildings. Today, those buildings are too often underutilized or even empty—mere monuments to the past. Church planters often shun these resources and don’t think twice about pursuing the potentially life-consuming “mobile church” or “church on wheels” approach to ministry.

Why is this approach so consuming? Ask almost any planter. He’ll probably tell you how much effort it takes from his best people in the church to re-set every week, let alone to relocate when a school auditorium or hotel ballroom is lost. So consider moving into an old neighborhood, revitalizing a church, and reclaiming resources that were originally given for gospel purposes.

5. For the Sake of the Future

Shortly after we lost our previous pastor and I heard the two men mock our church, my church-owned home was broken into and ransacked. The front door was kicked in and valuables were stolen. My family stayed out of the city with my wife’s parents until I could get the house secured again.

The first night back, my wife asked a most pertinent question: “What are we doing here?” As we lay in bed that night, I wondered the same. I simply (and prayerfully) said, “I think we’re here for the people who will come.”

I must quickly admit I’m not normally so cheerfully optimistic about the future. But at the moment, it felt like Satan had overplayed his hand and we needed to hold on. By God’s grace we did hang on through some very difficult circumstances, and the future, as it turned out, was quite bright: We have been in a nearly two decade-long season of prosperity as a church. With each confession of faith, each baptism, each act of repentance, each mission trip, and each young man who commits to preparing for ministry, I quietly rejoice. Each of these events was at one point a part of our church’s future—a future I did not know, but God did.

Consider revitalizing for all the people who someday may pass through your doors and be helped in their walk with Jesus.

6. For the Sake of God’s Name

Are you jealous for God’s name to be honored in the world? What do you think of the church or pastor who uses God’s name and borrows traditions from Scripture but doesn’t follow the one, true God who reveals himself in the Bible?

Friend, God is jealous for his own name and praise!

For my name's sake I defer my anger, for the sake of my praise I restrain it for you, that I may not cut you off. Behold, I have refined you, but not as silver; I have tried you in the furnace of affliction. For my own sake, for my own sake, I do it, for how should my name be profaned? My glory I will not give to another. ([Isa. 48:9-11](#))

For the sake of God's name being rightly represented in the world, we need to be jealous for the witness of his church. Why? So that God's glory might be spread and magnified. His name is defamed when so-called Christian churches misrepresent him with tolerance of sin, their bad marriage practices, wrong views on sexuality, and a host of heresies from salvation to the authority of Scripture.

I pray against those churches that would defame God's name. I pray they would die or at least be invisible to the neighborhood.

I positively pray for those true churches in my neighborhood that proclaim truth, that rightly gather those who have been born again, and whose ultimate purpose is God's glory. Consider revitalizing for the sake of God's name.

CONCLUSION

I've seen faithful men in our days go into situations where unfaithfulness reigned and reform a people by pastoring them. You might have heard of some of their names, like John Piper or Mark Dever. You might not have heard of many others who I could name. But known or unknown, they are all faithful men who have used existing resources to revitalize a church for the sake of the Christians, the nominal "Christians," and the neighbors. Through all their many faithful days of blood, sweat, and tears, God had a lot of people in mind—in the future—who would eternally benefit. And God's name is being magnified!

Revitalizing a church is not easy—reformation never is. But there are hundreds of churches that need pastors who will make that daily sacrifice for the sake of the kingdom. So, to my young seminarian friend who wanted to "do great things for God," I had a suggestion: "Instead of doing great things for God," I said, "why don't you simply try to be faithful to a great God?"

I think this is what all the great reformers did and what even great pastors do today. Their greatness, if that's what you want to call it, comes not from a few heroic acts, but from the accumulation of many faithful days spent preaching, praying, and working for reform.

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