

How to Revive Your Church

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Part 1

If your church has recently had to add an additional worship service, or has just built, or is planning to build a larger sanctuary, then God bless you, this broadcast isn't for you. If your biggest problem is how to spend the abundance of offerings you collect each week, then more power to you. We need more churches like yours.

On the other hand, if attendance at your church has been flat for several years and offerings just barely cover expenses, this message is for you. Reviving your church is simple—but it isn't easy.

Last summer there was a conference in Denver to address the church stagnation problem. The sessions were broadcast live on the Internet, so I watched a few of them. The main speaker was former pastor who currently holds an administrative position with the title, Director of Church Growth, in a major denomination. Ironically, membership in the last church he led went from 300 to 30 in three years. He joked that he was actually an expert on church decline rather than church growth. It was sadly true.

Most of his speech was devoted to all the programs he had tried when he was a pastor, and how they had all failed. They were the usual gimmicks, such as having the church take a spiritual gifts test, or breaking into small groups led by a deacon or elder, writing a mission statement, changing the order of service, or adopting some sort of project. Not one of those programs succeeded in reviving his church.

Finally, when the speaker was just about out of time, he got around to giving some advice about how to promote church growth. It can be summed up in one sentence: "Pray for the Holy Spirit."

That's true, as far as it goes; but it falls short. His was correct when he said that it is really the Holy Spirit who brings conviction, not us. He correctly stated that none of our programs will do any good unless the Holy Spirit is active in them. But he fell short when he advised the congregation to sit around and do nothing but pray until the Holy Spirit decides the time is right to bring about revival. While we are waiting for the Holy Spirit to get ready to do something, the Holy Spirit is waiting for us to get ready to do something.

Yes, we need to pray for the Holy Spirit to guide our evangelism; but we also need to listen for an answer to our prayer, and do what the Holy Spirit tells us to do. Instead of praying for the Holy Spirit to bring about revival in our church for us, we need to pray for the Holy Spirit to tell us what we need to do to revive our church. If we do that, the Holy Spirit will give us the power to do it.

But we tend not to pray for wisdom and power because we might get it; and if we do get it, we will have to use it. If we promise God that we will do whatever He wants us to do, there's no telling what He will ask us to do. It is much less frightening to ask God to pour out His Holy Spirit on everybody else.

Ironically, the title of the conference in Denver was, "Revival and Reformation." Implicit in the title is the recognition that revival is always the result of reformation. They always go together. It

was true in Old Testament times, New Testament times, the Dark Ages, the 16th century, the 17th century, and the 19th century. The church drifts away from God and adopts worldly values and customs, which results in spiritual decline, which lasts until a reformation revives the church. It is no different today. Many modern Christian denominations have adopted worldly values and customs, and, as a result, are spiritually dead. The Holy Spirit is not going to help a church grow if that church has turned its back on basic Christian principles and accepted secular theories.

The Holy Spirit will not revive a dead church unless that church rejects the worldly values and customs that have poisoned it, and allows the Holy Spirit to lead the church back to Biblical principles.

The solution is simple: stop compromising with the world. Unfortunately, that's easier said than done—but it is true! We can prove it from scripture and church history. Whenever a church accepts worldly values, it falls into decline. When it makes the necessary reforms, God pours out His blessing on that church.

Let's listen to Susan Pogge and JoAn Witzel play "To God Be the Glory", and then we will come back with scriptures and historical data that support our premise.

[music]

Part 2

In the first segment we said that when a church adopts worldly customs and values, it begins to die. The only way to revive a dying church is to reform. Get back to the pure religion of the Bible. God's not going to pour out His Spirit on a church that has turned her back on Him. In this segment we are going to look at scriptural and historical examples that show this to be true.

Biblical Examples

The Old Testament is filled with examples of times when God's people adopted worldly customs, so God left them to struggle on their own without Him. He refused to listen to their prayers until they repented. He was annoyed by their sacrifices. In Isaiah chapter 1, God said,

Hear the word of the LORD,
you rulers of Sodom;
listen to the law of our God,
you people of Gomorrah!
"The multitude of your sacrifices—
what are they to me?" says the LORD.
"I have more than enough of burnt offerings,
of rams and the fat of fattened animals;
I have no pleasure
in the blood of bulls and lambs and goats.
When you come to appear before me,
who has asked this of you,
this trampling of my courts?
Stop bringing meaningless offerings!

Your incense is detestable to me.
New Moons, Sabbaths and convocations—
I cannot bear your evil assemblies.
Your New Moon festivals and your appointed feasts
my soul hates.
They have become a burden to me;
I am weary of bearing them.
When you spread out your hands in prayer,
I will hide my eyes from you;
even if you offer many prayers,
I will not listen.
Your hands are full of blood;
wash and make yourselves clean.
Take your evil deeds
out of my sight!
Stop doing wrong,
learn to do right!
Seek justice,
encourage the oppressed.
Defend the cause of the fatherless,
plead the case of the widow. (Isaiah 1:10-14)

God said, “even if you offer many prayers, I will not listen. Your hands are full of blood; wash and make yourselves clean.” It is useless to pray for the Holy Spirit to revive your church if your church is polluted. God won’t listen until you “wash and make yourselves clean.”

On the other hand, 2 Chronicles chapters 29 and 30 tell about the revival in response to Hezekiah’s reformation. 2 Kings 22 tells about the revival in response to Josiah’s reformation. Those examples are a little bit too long to read on the air, so let us read 2 Chronicles 14, verses 2 through 6, which tell what happened when King Asa reformed Judah.

Asa did what was good and right in the eyes of the LORD his God. He removed the foreign altars and the high places, smashed the sacred stones and cut down the Asherah poles. He commanded Judah to seek the LORD, the God of their fathers, and to obey his laws and commands. He removed the high places and incense altars in every town in Judah, and the kingdom was at peace under him. He built up the fortified cities of Judah, since the land was at peace. No one was at war with him during those years, for the LORD gave him rest. (2 Chronicles 14:2-6)

We all remember that Jonah was swallowed by a big fish; but do you remember why? God wanted Jonah to tell the people of Nineveh to repent, and Jonah didn’t want to do it. When the people of Nineveh did repent, God blessed them (even though they weren’t Jews) for as long as they were faithful.

The Old Testament teaches the same lesson over and over. If you adopt worldly values and customs, you separate yourself from God’s blessing. But, if you follow God, even though it isn’t

popular, God will bless you. Maybe that's why some people don't like to read the Old Testament. It teaches that, although God's love is unconditional, His blessings are conditional. You have to obey the law to be blessed. Many people would like to believe that because God loves them He will bless them no matter how much they disobey. The Old Testament makes it clear that isn't true.

The New Testament is in complete agreement. Jesus wept over Jerusalem because the Jewish leaders had turned his temple into a "den of thieves." Jesus tried to reform the church, but the leaders killed Him instead. If the Jewish leaders had listened to Jesus, He no doubt would have blessed them as He did in the days of Josiah, Hezekiah, and Asa. Instead, He sent the Romans to completely destroy the Temple. He poured out his Holy Spirit on the Apostles, and they brought thousands of God-fearing people out from under the control of the priests to form a new church.

Paul saw that the Galatian church was starting to apostatize, so he wrote this to them:

I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting the one who called you by the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel—which is really no gospel at all. Evidently some people are throwing you into confusion and are trying to pervert the gospel of Christ. But even if we or an angel from heaven should preach a gospel other than the one we preached to you, let him be eternally condemned! As we have already said, so now I say again: If anybody is preaching to you a gospel other than what you accepted, let him be eternally condemned! (Galatians 1:6-9)

That "other gospel" Paul referred to was the notion that one could be saved through a religious ceremony, specifically joining the church through circumcision. Once one becomes a member of the church, it was said, one didn't have to worry about obeying God's law. One was freed from the requirements of the law. Paul told the Galatian church that true Christians will obey God's law through the power of the Holy Spirit. They don't need the law to tell them what to do because being led by the Holy Spirit they will naturally do what God commands.

So I say, live by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the sinful nature. For the sinful nature desires what is contrary to the Spirit, and the Spirit what is contrary to the sinful nature. They are in conflict with each other, so that you do not do what you want. But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under law. The acts of the sinful nature are obvious: sexual immorality, impurity and debauchery; idolatry and witchcraft; hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissensions, factions and envy; drunkenness, orgies, and the like. I warn you, as I did before, that those who live like this will not inherit the kingdom of God. But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. Against such things there is no law. Those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the sinful nature with its passions and desires. Since we live by the Spirit, let us keep in step with the Spirit. Let us not become conceited, provoking and envying each other. (Galatians 5:16-26)

Do not be deceived: God cannot be mocked. A man reaps what he sows. The one who sows to please his sinful nature, from that nature will reap destruction; the one who sows to please the Spirit, from the Spirit will reap eternal life. Let us not become

weary in doing good, for at the proper time we will reap a harvest if we do not give up. Therefore, as we have opportunity, let us do good to all people, especially to those who belong to the family of believers. (Galatians 6:7-10)

Historical Examples

The God of the New Testament is no different from the God of the Old Testament, and God is no different today. We can see this from church history.

If you are a member of a major Protestant denomination, let me ask you this simple question: “Why does your church exist?” No matter what denomination you belong to, the answer is the same. Your denomination came into existence because a few people were moved by the Holy Spirit to recognize that the established church had lost sight of an important Biblical truth. The Holy Spirit gave these few leaders both the wisdom and courage to stand up against the established church and reform it. That reformation sparked the revival that gave birth to your denomination.

The leaders who began your denomination were not popular. They were ridiculed and persecuted. But they recognized the church had compromised on some important principle, and fought to reestablish that principle.

You know this is true. There was something about your denomination that attracted people away from an established church. There was something about your denomination that attracted unbelievers. Your denomination, when it was first formed, was important and relevant.

Is your church still important and relevant? Would the founders of your denomination be proud of your congregation? Does your church still stand for the same principles they stood for? Do your friends and neighbors know what your church stands for?

If the answer to all these questions is, “Yes!” then I bet your church is alive and thriving. Praise God! But if the answer is, “No.” your church is probably struggling.

The founders of your denomination were threatened by their own church when they tried to reform it. They may have been imprisoned. The founders of some denominations were killed. Do your current leaders have the same courage? Are they facing the same trials? If not, why not?

Is there no persecution of your faith because the world has embraced Christianity? Certainly not! So, the next logical question is, “Is there no persecution of your faith because your church has embraced the world?” That’s an unsettling thought, isn’t it?

Twice Jesus taunted Satan by saying, “Have you considered my servant Job? There is no one on earth like him; he is blameless and upright, a man who fears God and shuns evil.” (He said that in Job 1:8 and Job 2:3) Do you think Jesus taunts Satan by pointing out the faithfulness of your congregation? Has your congregation kept a pure faith, or has it compromised with the world? What do worldly people do that your members don’t do? What do your members do that non-Christians don’t do? Would Jesus be able to tell who belongs to your church without looking at the membership list?

Is your congregation nothing more than a social club for people who want to be known as good people? Are your members like the New Testament Jews who went to the Temple to pray and then lived lives like everyone else? They went to the synagogue to be told they were God’s children, and

God loved them, and that satisfied them. Does your congregation strive for unity by accepting any and all doctrines and behaviors?

I don't know you, and I don't know your church, so I don't know if the shoe fits or not. I'm just asking you to try on the most common size loafer. If the shoe doesn't fit, you are probably a member of one of those churches that isn't in spiritual decline. But if your church is struggling to get along, and in desperate need of a revival, I'll bet that shoe fits perfectly.

Jesus ended His *Sermon on the Mount* with sobering words. He said that comparatively few people would be saved because false prophets will mislead people into thinking they are saved if simply they claim Jesus as their lord, but don't obey Him. Their faith is built on a foundation of sand. Here is exactly what He said, as recorded Matthew 7, verses 13 through 29.

“Enter through the narrow gate. For wide is the gate and broad is the road that leads to destruction, and many enter through it. But small is the gate and narrow the road that leads to life, and only a few find it.

“Watch out for false prophets. They come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly they are ferocious wolves. By their fruit you will recognize them. Do people pick grapes from thornbushes, or figs from thistles? Likewise every good tree bears good fruit, but a bad tree bears bad fruit. A good tree cannot bear bad fruit, and a bad tree cannot bear good fruit. Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. Thus, by their fruit you will recognize them.

“Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only he who does the will of my Father who is in heaven. Many will say to me on that day, ‘Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and in your name drive out demons and perform many miracles?’ Then I will tell them plainly, ‘I never knew you. Away from me, you evildoers!’

“Therefore everyone who hears these words of mine and puts them into practice is like a wise man who built his house on the rock. The rain came down, the streams rose, and the winds blew and beat against that house; yet it did not fall, because it had its foundation on the rock. But everyone who hears these words of mine and does not put them into practice is like a foolish man who built his house on sand. The rain came down, the streams rose, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell with a great crash.”

When Jesus had finished saying these things, the crowds were amazed at his teaching, because he taught as one who had authority, and not as their teachers of the law.
(Matthew 7:13-29)

Jesus said that many people will be lost, and only a few will be saved. Furthermore, many of the people who think they are going to be saved will be lost because they built their faith on sand instead of solid rock. He said that because the church had drifted away from God. They had the form of Godliness, but nothing more. Jesus tried to revive the church by reforming it. The

established church resisted the reformation, so the Holy Spirit was poured out instead on the Apostles, who formed a new church.

It is ironic that it is often the church leaders who stand in the way of reformation. The Apostles had to leave God's established church to reestablish the truth. The Protestant Reformers had to start new denominations because the leaders of the established church did not accept the rediscovered Biblical truths. But it doesn't always have to be that way. We saw earlier that Josiah, Hezekiah, and Asa all successfully led reformations. Courageous leaders can reform the church internally. Reformation need not lead to a revolution. Pray for your church leaders, and encourage them to stand firmly for God's rediscovered truths, no matter how long the church has neglected them, and how difficult they may be to accept. Study the Bible carefully and see which of your church doctrines come from man's ideas rather than God's word. Pray for the wisdom and courage to convince your church leaders to reject those doctrines that are not in harmony with the Bible.

Ellen White wrote about the opposition of church leaders to Jesus when He ignored their cherished customs in Chapter 42 of her book, Desire of Ages, titled *Tradition*. Here is a short excerpt from that chapter.

To the multitude, and afterward more fully to His disciples, Jesus explained that ... it is the evil deed, the evil word, the evil thought, the transgression of the law of God, not the neglect of external, man-made ceremonies, that defiles a man.

The disciples noted the rage of the spies as their false teaching was exposed. They saw the angry looks, and heard the half-muttered words of dissatisfaction and revenge. Forgetting how often Christ had given evidence that He read the heart as an open book, they told Him of the effect of His words. Hoping that He might compromise with the enraged officials, they said to Jesus, "Knowest Thou that the Pharisees were offended, after they heard this saying?"

He answered, "Every plant, which My heavenly Father hath not planted, shall be rooted up." The customs and traditions so highly valued by the rabbis were of this world, not from heaven. However great their authority with the people, they could not endure the testing of God. Every human invention that has been substituted for the commandments of God will be found worthless in that day when "God shall bring every work into judgment, with every secret thing, whether it be good, or whether it be evil." Eccl. 12:14.

The substitution of the precepts of men for the commandments of God has not ceased. Even among Christians are found institutions and usages that have no better foundation than the traditions of the fathers. Such institutions, resting upon mere human authority, have supplanted those of divine appointment. Men cling to their traditions, and revere their customs, and cherish hatred against those who seek to show them their error. In this day, when we are bidden to call attention to the commandments of God and the faith of Jesus, we see the same enmity as was manifested in the days of Christ. Of the remnant people of God it is written, "The dragon was wroth with the woman, and went to make war with the remnant of her seed, which keep the commandments of God, and have the testimony of Jesus Christ." Rev. 12:17.

But "every plant, which My heavenly Father hath not planted, shall be rooted up." In place of the authority of the so-called fathers of the church, God bids us accept the word of the eternal Father, the Lord of heaven and earth. Here alone is truth unmixed with error. David said, "I have more understanding than all my teachers: for Thy testimonies are my

meditation. I understand more than the ancients, because I keep Thy precepts." Ps. 119:99, 100. Let all who accept human authority, the customs of the church, or the traditions of the fathers, take heed to the warning conveyed in the words of Christ, "In vain they do worship Me, teaching for doctrines the commandments of men." ¹

How can you tell if your church has replaced God's words with human theories? We will examine that when we come back after listening to Becky Richardson sing, "Fill My Cup, Lord."

[music]

Part 3

Earlier in the broadcast I suggested that, if your church is stagnant or in decline, it might be because your church has compromised her principles and substituted worldly ideas for Biblical truth. This could have happened so gradually that you don't even realize it. Since the worldly ideas are so universally accepted, they might appear to be true. So, here is a self-assessment test to help you determine if your church has replaced God's word with secular philosophy.

Let's begin with sexual immorality. What does your church say about sex outside of marriage? Some public schools give out condoms because they think it is unreasonable to expect teenagers not to have sex. Texas requires young girls to get HPV vaccinations for the same reason. Living together before marriage, and not even bothering to get married, is common. What is your church's position? Does it condemn sex outside marriage? Is divorce a tragic situation to be avoided, or simply a convenient way to end an obligation once the thrill is gone? What about gay marriage? Is gay pride a virtuous sign of enlightenment, or an abomination? Does your church ever deal with the decay of sexual morals in America? If not, why not?

Is your church afraid of being too judgmental? Do you not want to appear to be "holier than thou?" Or is it because your church has come to accept the popular notion that there is no ultimate standard of right and wrong—that everyone must determine what is right for his or her situation. Does your church believe that Jesus nailed the law to the cross? Is that why the commandment against adultery no longer matters?

What about killing? Where does your church stand when it comes to abortion? Does a woman have the right to choose not to be inconvenienced with a child? Is pregnancy a disease that can be cured by a simple out-patient procedure that should be paid for by the government? Or, are children a blessing from the Lord who should be protected by their parents?

Did Jesus nail the prohibition against greed to the cross? Is it now OK to want things your neighbor has, and scheme to take them away from him?

Does the Sabbath still belong to God, or is it just another day for you to use however you please? And the tithe—is that God's money or yours?

What about drinking and recreational drugs? Does your church teach that your body is the Temple of the Holy Spirit, or is it just Satan's Saloon?

Jesus repeatedly warned of the coming judgment. Is your church sounding the warning that Jesus is coming again?

¹ White, *Desire of Ages*, Chapter 42, *Tradition*, <http://www.whiteestate.org/books/da/da42.html>

Does your church actively oppose the teaching of the theory of evolution in public schools, or does it silently disapprove? From a practical point of view, silent disapproval is no different from approval.

If you haven't heard compelling sermons about any of these topics lately in your church, maybe that's the problem. If your church doesn't take a stand on anything, and just presents a bland, non-offensive message that itching ears want to hear, you can't really expect the Holy Spirit to use your church to proclaim it, no matter how much you pray.

If your church is really doing the Lord's work, she will stand up against sin and stand up for righteousness, and Satan will respond with opposition to your church. Your church will suffer persecution; but don't be afraid of persecution. In Matthew 5, verses 10 through 20, Jesus said,

“Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

“Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me. Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.

“You are the salt of the earth. But if the salt loses its saltiness, how can it be made salty again? It is no longer good for anything, except to be thrown out and trampled by men.

“You are the light of the world. A city on a hill cannot be hidden. Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a bowl. Instead they put it on its stand, and it gives light to everyone in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before men, that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven.

“Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them. I tell you the truth, until heaven and earth disappear, not the smallest letter, not the least stroke of a pen, will by any means disappear from the Law until everything is accomplished. Anyone who breaks one of the least of these commandments and teaches others to do the same will be called least in the kingdom of heaven, but whoever practices and teaches these commands will be called great in the kingdom of heaven. For I tell you that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law, you will certainly not enter the kingdom of heaven. (Mt 5:10-20)

If your church is in decline and needs revival, then it needs reformation. Pray that the Holy Spirit will lead your study of the Bible to show you those areas where your church has compromised and lost its mission. Pray that God will give your church the courage to proclaim those lost truths inside and outside your church. God will give you wisdom and courage if you prayerfully study the Bible, and share what you learn with others.