RECOVERING CHURCHES THROUGH
BIBLICAL RENOVATION

A Thesis
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Doctor of Ministry

by
Eric James Bancroft
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APPROVAL SHEET

RECOVERING CHURCHES THROUGH
BIBLICAL RENOVATION

Eric James Bancroft

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To my love, Danelle.

Your sacrifice and support is a precious gift from the Lord that causes me to praise him and be thankful for you.

To my sons, the B-Boys.

It is a joy to be your father.

May your lives be committed to the King.
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ANNOTATED BIBLIOGRAPHY
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<th>Abbreviation</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<tr>
<td>ESV</td>
<td>English Standard Version</td>
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<tr>
<td>ISBE</td>
<td>The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia. edited by G. W. Bromily, 4 vols. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979-88)</td>
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<tr>
<td>NT</td>
<td>New Testament</td>
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<tr>
<td>OT</td>
<td>Old Testament</td>
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PREFACE

The church is the bride of Christ whom he loves. It is a privilege to pastor a local assembly of people who are a representation of that Bride. I would like to express my thankfulness to Castleview Baptist Church who took a step of faith in hiring me to be their pastor, someone who had never been a senior pastor before. They have been patient with me as we have all grown to know the Lord better and love him more as we have been amazed by the gospel. I would like to say a special word of thanks to the elders of Castleview Baptist Church. These men have loved the Lord and his church in sacrificial ways. For that they have shown me Christlikeness. Thank you.

I have been given the unique opportunity to have personal relationships with some very gifted men who have served as examples and counselors to me. I would like to thank John MacArthur because he has modeled for me pastoral ministry that I used to read about in books but had rarely seen before. I would like to thank Mark Dever who provided significant counsel and provided a substantial example of what it looked like to patiently pastor a church to become healthy in all the ways the Bible describes. I would also like to say thank you to my friend Albert Mohler. His example of courage, confessional integrity, and personal humility has been a model that decades of young men can see and aspire to in their own ministries.

I have been privileged to have good friends over the years whom share with me a similar passion for the purity of the Bride of Christ and faithfully pastor their local churches accordingly. I would like to say thank you to Kurt Gebhards and Daniel Gillespie, two men for whom I am indebted for the hours we have spent discussing the content of this thesis. Their insight, example, and encouragement have been gifts from the Lord. I am also thankful for my good friend, Dan Dumas. His creative mind,
tenacious spirit, generous hospitality, and loyal friendship have been a gift to God for me for years and will continue to be.

Eighteen years ago a young woman walked down an aisle and gave me her hand in marriage. Danelle Bancroft has been a dream come true for me in the wife she has been as a gift from the Lord. I cannot imagine a better helpmate in life and a partner in ministry. Her wisdom, support, laughter, and spontaneous spirit have made life fun and ministry endurable.

Eric James Bancroft

Louisville, Kentucky

January 2014
CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION

There are over 450,000 churches in the United States. Yet fidelity, vibrancy, and reproduction would not characterize many of them. Instead every year between 3,500 to 4,000 are closing their doors for good.¹ That means last Sunday alone was the final time seventy churches met to worship.

Many of those churches realize, after reflecting, they were missing a love for the Scriptures, qualified leadership, transparent relationships, and a lack of zeal for the gospel demonstrated by their lack of personal evangelism. What characterized many of these dying churches instead was a historic-preservation mindset, petty factionalism, and spiritual apathy. These dangerous ingredients are still seen in churches today, all of which combined makes for a dangerous cocktail for a soon-to-be extinct church. Nothing less then a full renovation is needed to bring back a vibrant gospel witness that many of these churches used to have.

This thesis seeks to identify why churches should be recovered and what the steps are to accomplish this goal. Pastors can easily identify the problems that characterize many of their dead or dying churches but they are less confident in their understanding and ability of what to do about it. The default instincts for many are to address a change of policies, programs, or personnel. While those are areas that likely need to be addressed in time, they will not provide the substance needed for a reformation in that local church.

¹Ed Stetzer, *Planting New Churches in a Postmodern Age* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2003), 10.
Thankfully the New Testament provides case studies where the challenges seen in local churches today were encountered and addressed then as well. Though the local churches were in their infancy, some of them were stunted by petty factionalism while others were ravaged by unqualified leadership which redirected the church from the Great Commission that had been entrusted to them by their Savior.

The good news is that churches that have plateaued, if not already in a state of decline, can once again become outposts of heaven where Christ is worshipped, the Word is taught, and the community of Christians demonstrate vibrant lives being lived out before a watching world so that they might believe in Christ.

**Familiarity with the Literature**

There are many works written on the church in general, both its identity and its practices seen in local assemblies. Due to the research demonstrating the growing wave of sick churches, new works are being written, addressing the problems with local churches, either with the intention to renovate the existing church or to learn lessons to be applied when planting new churches.

Tim Chester and Steve Timmis’ work, *Total Church: A Radical Reshaping Around Gospel and Community*, is a helpful contribution and published in response to the heightened interest of church planting in recent years. Many young men are interested in church planting as a reaction to what they have not seen in their current local churches. Yet many of them still cannot tell you what their new communities of faith, i.e. local churches, should look like. This book is a valuable resource to read in order to audit how a church should be described and what it sets for its goals. This work is helpful for the purposes of church revitalization as well because, philosophically speaking, churches should be described by the same basic theological commitments.

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The need for revitalization is not unique to today. Robert D. Dale shows in *To Dream Again*, written in 1981, that churches need to examine themselves honestly to find out where they are in the health of their church.\(^3\) Dale’s work still has relevancy to today’s situation with local churches. Dale establishes the life cycle of a local church (dream → beliefs → goals → structure → ministry → nostalgia → questioning → polarization → dropout) and then talks about what a church can do to get back to what it was first excited about. Dale believes that churches lose their purpose and then eventually move from distraction to disintegration. This can be remedied by planning and promoting accordingly. This book is helpful to see how the bell curve of organizational death is seen in a local church.

The need for revitalization is also not unique to evangelical churches. C. Kirk Hadaway and David A. Roozen’s work, *Rerouting the Protestant Mainstream*, addresses the issue that mainline protestant denominations have had for years, namely maintaining people in their churches.\(^4\) While evangelicals have theological explanations for this exodus, the mainline protestant leadership has provided other answers. This work is such an example. While I am not in agreement with the authors on various matters biblically, it is helpful to see the process Hadaway and Roozen go through to assess themselves and provide possible solutions to deal with their churches. This evaluation can helpfully cross over to do the same process in evangelical churches that have plateaued or declined.

Pastor of Sterling Park Baptist Church, Mike McKinley, wrote *Church Planting is for Wimps: How God Uses Messed-up People to Plant Ordinary Churches that do Extraordinary Things*.\(^5\) McKinley’s work is helpful to understand that


\(^5\) Mike McKinley, *Church Planting is for Wimps: How God Uses Messed-up People to Plant Ordinary Churches that do Extraordinary Things* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2010).
professionalism does not win the day when it comes to leading churches, whether that is planting or revitalizing. Writing as a pastor who revitalized a church in order to plant churches, McKinley seems familiar with the challenges that face many pastors when going through such difficult transitional times. This work is witty, wise, and easy to read as a primer to the topic. It is helpful as a resource as McKinley highlights the role of exposition, evangelism, and godly leadership over and against growing a larger church.

Harry L. Reeder III’s contribution to the subject of church renewal is helpful since he writes not as an academic theoretician, though he has taught in seminaries, but as one who has worked out his lessons in local church contexts. Writing with David Swavely, Reeder wrote *From Embers to a Flame: How God Can Revitalize Your Church*.

He presents ten strategies for revitalization. These can further summarized by three major principles to be implemented: remember, repent, and recover. There is a way to recognize a church’s past faithfulness without wanting to repeat its mistakes. If there has been wrongdoing or missing marks of faithful ministry, that should be repented of. Lastly, the gospel in all of its implications must be recovered for a vibrant future of ministry.

Another practitioner who offers helpful insight is Michael Ross. Originally written as a dissertation in 1997, Ross’ work titled, *Preaching for Revitalization: How to Revitalize Your Church Through Your Pulpit*, is the only work I am aware of that devotes itself entirely to the task of preaching for purpose of revitalization.

While demographics, contextualization, and communication are often emphasized in revitalization of local churches, Ross thankfully reminds today’s interested pastors that nothing can happen (at

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least of any lasting significance) without first bringing change to the pulpit. Ross demonstrates how the pulpit sets a trajectory by which the rest of the church life will follow. His counsel is pastorally informed as he gives the reader ideas on how to prepare the pulpit calendar with an eye to changing the church culture over the coming years. This is a helpful work because it emphasizes the value of expository preaching’s role in changing a dying church.

Historical perspective can be helpful when asking, “Has this happened before? If so, what did they do about it?” This is exactly what Lyle Schaller presents in his work *A Mainline Turnaround: Strategies for Congregations and Denominations*. Shaller’s contention is that churches were not designed for something that they are now encountering and therefore are falling. His proposed remedy includes churches reinventing themselves, redesigning their ministries, and redirecting their efforts to those born after 1960. While his intended audience is mainline denominations, his work is helpful for the purpose of diagnostics. Churches need to discern how they have maintained the same methodology to acquire the same results though their audience has changed. His solutions will stretch the boundaries of evangelical comfort because of his implicit view of the Word of God and the definition of Church.

While some professors and pastors write based on their personal research and practice, it is hard to get access to a large-scale representation of churches that have transitioned back to vibrancy. That is where Lifeway Research team and its authors come in. Lifeway Research has been a great resource for pastors for years in seeing the trends in ministry that might be missed in their local churches alone. Lifeway Research President, Ed Stetzer, has partnered with Mike Dodson in writing *Comeback Churches: How 300 Churches Turned Around and Yours Can Too*. This work summarizes the

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9 Ed Stetzer and Mike Dodson, *Comeback Churches: How 300 Churches Turned Around and*
findings of 300+ churches that were surveyed in how to revitalize/change their church’s direction. The problem that they identify is the increase in “unchurched” people and the decrease in the church’s ability to reach them. While there will be some points of theological disagreement with some churches surveyed, it is an interesting work to cover in order to see what questions churches are asking and what answers they are getting to their questions. This is a helpful book for the purpose of learning some of the criteria to possibly assess your church that needs to be “reinvigorated.”

Philip Towner’s work, The Letters to Timothy and Titus, is a helpful exposition of the text of the Pastoral Epistles. Not only does he provide sound exegesis of the text of 1 Timothy and Titus in particular, but he also provides the context in which the Apostle Paul was speaking into when instructing Timothy and Titus. This work has been helpful to read in order to gain a better understanding of what revitalization efforts looked like in the first century of the church, especially with the church of Ephesus.

Void in the Literature

Churches are closing their doors for good. This is true regardless of where they are found on the theological spectrum. This plight of churches is happening at such an alarming rate that some have taken up the study to determine how this happened and what can be done to turn back the tide of this ecclesiological crisis. Yet a majority of the works in print today either emphasizes one proposed remedy to the neglect of others or they provide entirely wrong diagnosis to bring about the needed renovation. Transformational Churches by Ed Stetzer and Thom Ranier provides compelling research to support the belief that there is a problem with declining churches but their proposed remedies are too generic. Other works such as Preaching for Revitalization by Yours Can Too (Nashville: B&H, 2007).

Michael Ross helpfully recovers the role of the pulpit in reforming a church yet does not include other essential components that need to be considered when bringing a local church back to a vibrant witness for Christ. In view of these observations, the gap in literature on revitalizing a local church is a work that is part sociological, part biblical, and part practical.

Thesis
Declining churches must be recovered from imminent ruin by reestablishing expository preaching, qualified leadership, and intentional discipleship. My work would contain sociological arguments for why they should be recovered, biblical arguments for how churches were recovered in the New Testament, and testimonies from churches around the country today that have moved from stagnation to multiplication due to the implementation of the recommended prescription. Each chapter would include the above features.

Outline of Chapters
Chapter Two: Declining Churches Must Be Recovered By Reestablishing Expository Preaching. Churches are local representations of God’s people. He will not bless their assemblies apart from their allegiance to his Word.

Chapter Three: Declining Churches Must Be Recovered By Reestablishing Qualified Leadership. God calls qualified and gifted men to lead his churches. Churches cannot reform with such leaders in place.

Chapter Four: Declining Churches Must Be Recovered By Intentional Discipleship. Movement and momentum should characterize churches faithful to the gospel witness entrusted to them. Church must take discipleship seriously as demonstrated in their relational communities and evangelistic instincts.
Chapter Five: Implications For Future Churches. Stagnation will tempt all churches in time. Being aware of that and acted early will help turn the tide on the next generation’s churches that are planted today but will be in decline tomorrow.
ANOTATED BIBLIOGRAPHY

Books


Originating from a letter from him to some friends, Mark Dever has written this book to present nine essentials for a biblically healthy church. Serving as a reference for a philosophy of ministry, this work is accessible for pastors and church members alike. It is helpful in assessing a local church’s current health.


This multiple-author work brings a candid assessment to the fact that many parts of society have become ethnically integrated but the church has not. They present an apologetic for why such unity should be seen in Christian worship and examples from history of how this has been done successfully. Though the thesis of the book is focused elsewhere, it is helpful to discern ways a church can work toward overall unity.


This commentary is an orthodox, conservative work written by a Scottish theologian in the 1800’s. It deals critically with the Greek text of Ephesians and deduces conclusions based on logical thought and sequencing. Its contribution was helpful in establishing what the Ephesians were taught before they later deteriorated as a church.


This work is based on the findings of 2,000 telephone surveys and an additional 200 face-to-face interviews. They found that racial discrimination appears to be entrenched within evangelicalism, specifically white evangelicalism. Their conclusion is that there has been no concerted effort to discontinue this ethnic divide and the emphasis on individualism has only made it worse. Lessons on community have taken a backseat to individuality. While the topic is different, it highlights case studies of the dangers of when people think individually, not corporately.

Michael Gleason writes out of a ten-year frustration of trying different methods in his local church to motivate the people to personal renewal and community outreach. His study took him to the pages of the Bible where he found encouraging lessons, specifically nine, that taught him of the biblical pathway to lead his church down. This book is helpful to see how another has exegeted the New Testament for the principles of teaching a church about discipleship and evangelism.


Churches have different goals for their future. Some want to be more personal. Others want to be larger. Often times these desires are based on their past experiences. Walden’s work tells the story of nine churches who have or are in the process of renewal. As illustrated by the theological spectrum that these churches represent, they do not all agree as to the goal. This work is helpful in presenting case studies of churches who has sought revitalization including ones that have aimed for the wrong goals.


One of the common topics that come up for discussion when evaluating a church is its present-day relevance. Contextualization is at the heart of this topic. If a local church has any history it is not uncommon if it is both aware of contextualization (though perhaps unknowingly as they did ministry without calling it that) and ignorant as they do not understand why their old methods of ministry do not work anymore. Tim Keller writes a provocative work that could be summarized as his manual for doing ministry in New York City over the last three decades. Keller is a strong advocate for both impacting the cities in society and for engaging the citizens in that society that shows the continued relevance of the gospel and the ministry that flows from it. This work seeks to give principles that should be considered in a local church’s ministry context to ask how it is making a difference in the community around it. This work is helpful when evaluating a church’s outreach instincts.


This work describes how 60 percent of today’s youth leave the church after graduating from high school. The authors’ explanation is that local churches have neglected to train their youth for the world that was waiting for them when they left their homes. Whether this is girding them up with truth or teaching them discernment about errors waiting to deceive them, many of the young people are gone. This is a helpful book to consider when investigating about church revitalization because one common denominator is the demographic crisis, that is no one left in the church of a younger generation to replace the ones who are due to die off sooner.

The Apostle Paul warned the Ephesian elders in Acts 20 about the dangers ahead for them as a local church. Unfortunately, they did not heed his counsel and several years later Timothy is sent back to revitalize the church. George Knight’s exegesis is sound and observations of the historical context are helpful. This work helps establishes the lessons that the Apostle Paul taught about how to renovate a local church.


Gordon MacDonald has been a pastor for over four decades in different parts of the United States and in different kinds of churches. In fiction-based characters, he spells out how a church moves from proactive in ministry to preservation in history. He provides some helpful anecdotes on how to pastor through a transition of returning to a fruitful, vibrant community of Christians.


Aubrey Malphurs seeks to bring years of experience of pastoring and teaching in academia to bear on diagnosing and prescribing remedies the local churches ails. This work has three sections: the Basics of Congregational Culture, Reading Congregational Culture, and Shaping Congregational Culture. After understanding the culture, the pastor should seek to lead the culture to be a Christ-honoring one. The final chapters were specifically helpful as they deal with how to revitalize an established church.


Churches plateau for a variety of reasons. One of those is the lack of clarity of the gospel and the corresponding communication of the gospel. Once such lessons are renewed there is still another obstacle to overcome – lack of relationships. Pathak and Runyon helpfully teach practical lessons on how to reach the people around you. The lessons are helpful as they show you in easy-to-follow lessons how to connect in relational ways that can be followed up with in gospel conversations, fruit from a church who is discipling.


Peter Obrien, a senior research fellow in New Testament at Moore Theological College in Sydney, Australia, provides sound exegesis that is technical and cultural in its expose of Ephesians. He shows how Pau’s purpose in Ephesians is to sum up God's glorious plan of salvation in Christ and detail how Christians should live today. This work is helpful in establishing the expectations of a local church.


Thom Ranier and Eric Geiger provide the findings from a study of 400 churches. The
findings are not support suspicions, namely churches are confused and distracted from what they should be doing. This work advocates for simplicity in mission for the sake of maximum effectiveness. The best contribution is its section on saying no to many good things for the purpose of saying yes to the right thing. This work is helpful in determining the ways churches get distracted.


A father/son combination has written a work based on 1200 interviews with the Millennials—those born between 1980 and 2000. With a desire for the church to engage this group with the gospel, they write about their findings on how family matters to this generation in consideration, they desire diversity, and how they have different attitudes towards their workplace, their money, the media, the environment, and religion. This work is helpful in providing sociological assessment of the shift in evangelicalism.


Alvin Reid, Professor of Evangelism at Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary, has a passion to see churches recover a vibrant and energetic witness for the gospel. He thinks this is the only way a church can be truly revitalized. This work is helpful in connecting the foundation of a church’s confidence in the gospel as the basis for its renewal to follow.


David A. Roozen and James R. Nieman have edited a significant work that studies eight denominations in the United States. This work considers their history, some old and some fairly new, and what their trajectory is based on their findings. These denominations have to consider their restructuring in light of the changing times. Some are doing so but still declining and this work seeks to identify why that is.


This work proposes that local churches should move beyond their walls and their programs and reach out to their communities. They propose partnering with community agencies, building new relationships, and demonstrating convincing compassion. While not ideas are embraced, the ideas set forth demonstrate how to turn a church from an inward default in time to an outward church once again.


Small churches are often described as large families, while large churches are described
as efficient organizations. Right in between are the middle sized churches. Schaller believes they are often characterized by a poor self-image. While he works out of a different theological reference point, it is insightful to read his anecdotal counsel on how medium size churches can address their default weaknesses and grow to be more effective.


This work focuses its efforts on assessing and instructing leaders of local churches. It presents the principle that plateaued churches will become dying churches if the right leaders do not turn them around. It serves as a resource for case studies of what different pastors have done to turn churches around.

**Articles**


Jonathan Leeman, editor for 9Marks Ministries, provides an ejournal with multiple authors that explores the reasons and methods behinds church revitalization. While they affirm the value of church planting, these authors believe that the testimony of the gospel is at stake as they seek to restore existing churches to their once vibrant witness.
VITA

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